Creative

Ethics and Time: After the Anthropocene

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Abstract: This "treatise" on ethics and literary practice is a self-reflective piece that argues and enacts ethical criticism through poetic form as well as content. That is, I deliberately employ poetry not only as a literary genre but also as rhetorical arguments—investigative, demonstrative, and evidentiary—and as forms of ethical action. The two previously unpublished poems here are drawn from a larger, lyrical discourse sequence tentatively entitled "Heidegger, Ethics, and Time: After the Anthropocene." The "poetic arguments," then, concern the possible interrelations and effects of time and ethics within the philosophical context of post-human "being" collectively, and also of personal death as a shared event. There are a couple of famous theories of time and ethics that ebb and flow within the different formal abridgements of time in these two poems. One set of theories is expounded in Martin Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time*, as well as many of his other treatises on language, poetry, and ethics. Another set of theories is founded in Emmanuel Levinas' work on time and alterity. But unlike these philosophies, the two poems here deal in detail with (1) the potential particularities of lived sensation and feeling (2) as they might be experienced by sentient and non-sentient 'being' (3) that survive death—of our species (poem II) and/or individual death (poem III). However, rather than simply rehearsing philosophy or recasting it into poetic form, these two poems argue for and against the notion that time is a physical and thus materially moral absolute, necessary for any (conscious) life to exist at all; and these two poems also argue physically, through their structure and style. They argue that physical dimension of time is not only a material force that is "unkind to material things" (aging, decay), as articulated in the content of one poem for example, but also a moral force that is revealed and played against in the constricted temporal motion and music of the poems (i.e., their forms, and variations within). In addition to philosophical arguments that poetry by its nature deliberately leaves ambiguous (indeterminate, but also will-free), the aural, temporal forms of the poems themselves flow in or move through but also reshape time. A simple instance of this is the way meter and rhyme are activated by time, yet also transform time, pushing back against its otherwise unmarked inexorable ineffable . . . The temporal properties of poetic forms in conjunction with content therefore constitute "lyrical ethics" in literary practice. Thinking (and putting aside as well) Heidegger and Levinas, these poems as temporal forms may physically shift, even if only momentarily, the relation of the listener or reader to Being/Death, or Alterity/Other. For example, the enhanced villanelle and modified Spenserian stanza offered here each shapes time differently, and thus differently shapes the intuitive, affective, cognitive responses of readers. With its cyclical repetition of lines, usually over five tercets and a quatrain, the villanelle with every advancing stanza physically 'throws' time (the concept and the line) back on itself (or perhaps is "thrown forward" [*Geworfen*]). In contrast, the pattern of the Spenserian nine-line stanza allows time to hover around a still but outward-expanding point (like a partial mini-[uni]verse) before drifting to the next stanza (especially here, where the final rhyme at the end of each stanza is much delayed.). Within and without the context of Heidegger and Levinas, I assert that these structural features are ethical statements in literary practice. The choice of these traditional forms of poetry in itself is an ethical statement. Stylistically as well as thematically, these two poems argue "all sides" of ethical positions in relation to *the end of being human*. Perhaps more importantly, these two poems explore the inevitably *human* experience of philosophically different ethical positions on death "post anthropocentrically"—what might come in the rhetorical after we can never know except poetically.

II. The Ghosts of Objects
(A Villanelle for the End of the Anthropocene)

"[T]ime remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality. Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic."—Heidegger 1971c, p. 96.

Time is not kind to material things.
Eventually, all things are ravaged.
Only spirit can survive and not be.

Time can't be seen, but is heard in the ring
of a phone call that says you are average.
Time is not kind to material things.

Time is not a dimension, but the zing
of a force that bends, crumples you with age.
Only a ghost can survive and not be.

Time carries you forward in its quickening spring;
without time you might be frozen in space.
But time's not kind to material things.

Can objects survive physicality?
What about all the human alphabets of rage?
Only spirit can survive nonbeing.

(You may ask questions; you may wonder, why?
I will tell you we do not know the sage
for whom time is Open, forthcoming, sings.

Haggard, look me straight in the awful eye
and tell me we are not all savages.
Only a ghost can survive, not being.)

What will remain after the Anthropocene?
We can only hazard what catastrophes gather.
Can only spirit survive nonbeing?
Time is not kind to material things.

III. Time, Proust, Being, You
For Dr. Whitney Jordan Adams

"[L]anguage alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time. Where there is no language, as in the being of stone, plant, and animal, there is also no openness of what is, and consequently no openness either of that which is not and of the empty".—Heidegger 1971b, p. 73

Putting up books that went astray,
the house of eternity far away,
I came upon my Marcel Proust,

and could not help but think of you,
who loves his work so ardently
and took the time when in Paris
walking over all of France
to desist in the constant dance
to visit his temporal chez.

As always, resplendent,
to him you all a sudden
appear in time that moves
above him like a wave;
then slowly on and through his grave.
It feels like anxiety
on our skin, and joy
at the prospect of
something unseen, distant

a distant, final peace
when time has had enough to eat;
when time is like a memory,
slow, and kind, a holiday,
from ourselves; when time becomes
a companion, a lover, succumbs
to the still point of a mind,
as if balanced from some twine
unraveling from heaven, sleeps

life's continuous wings,
the wind-pendulum that swings
to which we desperately hang
on, precipitously, dan-
gle, as if on a thread
that becomes a thin bed,
then back again, until we become
utterly useless, numb,
an emotion that clings

to any everything around
on which we discover solid ground,
and rest from the motion
that constitutes us, our notion
of ourselves, who we are
in relation to reality, a star
in yet another galaxy,
another looked-for fallacy
that we may hear as pure sound.

O we all look for, and dread
the long night of the end,
the temporal crease,
the infinite surcease
of our entire existence,
and so push on the resistance
that we make ourselves deliberately,
hesitant, but inexorably,
and also have to fend

off as it moves under
and over and through us, sunders
our successes forward
from self-awareness toward
our own best selves, takes us
somewhere we don't discuss,
don't really want to go,
but inevitably must flow.
In the end, time renders

all. The dust awaits, shudders,
becomes us, becomes another.
Proust finds rest in rust,
his repose an eternal bust.
Time does not heal,
as if a pardon, or repeal
as is so often said, but
kills itself, and dies in us,
so oblivious,
         and Other

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