

Chrétien on the Call that Wounds

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Only at the very end of Jean-Louis Chrétien's remarkable essay on prayer do we discover why he thinks of prayer as "wounded":

Why call it "wounded word"? It always has its origin in the wound of joy or distress, it is always a tearing that brings it about that the lips open. And it does so as it is still and otherwise wounded. Wounded by this hearing and this call that have always already preceded it, and that unveil it to itself, in a truth always in suffering, always agonic, struggling like Jacob all night in the dust to wrest God's blessing from him.ⁱ

It is striking to think of prayer in terms of "wounding." After all, prayer is so often depicted as a moment of peace and tranquility—we even sing (at least in many Protestant traditions) of the "Sweet Hour of Prayer." In the words of that treachy hymn, prayer is depicted as act in which consolation is found and, "I view my home and take my flight." On this model, prayer is anything but agonic in nature.

Yet Chrétien would have us think otherwise. Perhaps there is consolation, *too*, but that comes only in the midst—or perhaps at the end—of an agonic struggle. Is Chrétien right that prayer is "always agonic"? How we answer that question will have much to do with what we *mean* by the term "agonic." Much more striking, still, is the way in which this nature of wounding is so central to Chrétien's thought. One could argue, of course, wounding is the central metaphor of the essay on prayer and it again comes to the forefront in his text *Hand to Hand*. To be sure, Chrétien himself claims this wounding and its effect "are the locus of meditations at the heart of *Corps à corps*."ⁱⁱ But it is likewise to be found—even if not nearly as clearly or forcefully as in *Hand to Hand*—in his text *The Call and the Response*.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, one might argue something like this structure of "wounding" is at the heart not just of Chrétien's own "theological turn" but also of the theological turn in phenomenology in general.^{iv}

In this paper, though, I limit myself to considering the wound in *The Call and the Response*, "The Wounded Word," and *Hand to Hand*. Although the most obvious locus of the wound is in the encounter with the divine, it is clear Chrétien thinks all of our encounters with any others are wounding ones. We must consider exactly what kinds of "wounds" these are, as well as whether speaking of prayer and encounters with the other as "wounding" is the right language to use. In what follows, I trace the notion of the wound in terms of (1) the call that comes to us before we are even aware of it, (2) the agonic nature of the call and the response, and (3) the surprising way in which the English verb "to bless" ends up being related to the French term "*blessé*" (to wound). Although Chrétien does not simply *bless* "blesser," he patiently considers how they are so often entangled. Since he constantly uses the metaphor of struggle, it should not be surprising any engagement with his thought means one struggles alongside of him, with him, and with his thought. The end result is *not*

that all becomes clear. If anything, Chrétien's gift may well be that he has a brilliant ability to complexify what might be viewed in much simpler terms and also the sheer unwillingness to settle for those simpler terms or anything like a quick or neat resolution. In that respect, Chrétien's thought is much like the Socratic dialogues which so often result in no *conclusion* but simply end. The result is a struggle with an issue without feeling the need to reach a point of definite resolution.

Always Already

Central to Martin Heidegger's early phenomenology is that *Dasein* always finds itself *already* at home in the world, in the midst of language, and with tools ready to hand. The phrase "*immer schon*" (always already) is like a leitmotif in *Being and Time*, and it plays a similar role in Chrétien. After citing Heidegger's claim that we are able to speak only because we have "always already [*toujours déjà*], listened to speech,"^v Chrétien goes on to say: "We are entangled in speech as soon as we exist, before we have ever uttered a word, and in this sense, we have always already listened and obeyed."^{vi} Such is true of speech, but it is likewise true of the call (*l'appel*) in general, which is closely connected to speech itself: "We speak only for having been called, called by what there is to say, and yet we learn and hear what there is to say only in speech itself."^{vii}

Whence comes this call? One could say it begins the moment "God said, 'Let there be light'" (Gen. 1:3). God speaks, and suddenly light comes into existence. The response, then, is the very appearance of the light itself. And these calls into existence continue throughout the creation narrative, in which the phrase "let there be" echoes over and over again. Yet are these truly the first calls? Might there not be ones that preceded even them? The clue that raises at least the possibility comes in the portion of the narrative in which humankind is brought into being. In a dramatic departure from the previous refrain of "let there be" we find a "let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness" (Gen. 1:26, italics added). Whether the use of "us" and "our" is itself truly an indication of the Trinity is less important than the doctrine itself. For, if God is not one but three, there is reason to think some sort of "call"—however it might be conceived—and "response" goes back and forth between these three persons. Moreover, if God is eternal, it makes little sense to speak of a "first" call. The relationship of the persons of the trinity has been eloquently described by the fourth-century Eastern fathers Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great in terms of *perichôresis* (pericw/rhsis, Latin *circum-incedere*), from which we get "circumincession," which means "to move around in." *Perichôresis* is the divine dance of the persons of the trinity in which they move around, with, and in each other. But surely *perichôresis* could likewise be conceptualized in terms of a call and response, not a divine dance but a divine discourse of ceaseless calls and responses reverberating and interpenetrating each other.^{viii} And, should we read the "let us" as simply God speaking of the celestial hierarchy (a common enough reading of this passage, even among Christians), we also find evidence of calls that precede that of the calls of creation. John speaks of the "four living creatures" in the heavenly realm who sing "day and night without ceasing": "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). This is truly a continual call: a call that continues throughout eternity. Moreover, John is echoing something already found in the Hebrew Bible: in responding to Job, God says "that the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). John does not tell us exactly what the "response" of God is to these calls. Perhaps it is already God's *existence* that is the response, let alone all the things he says. Of

course, there has been a call prior to those of the heavenly beings. As their creator, God had already called them into existence.

In either case, by the time the call reaches us, it is never the first call. Yet that feature of not being first also implies every call that comes forth is a composite of all the calls and responses that went before. Chrétien maintains “every voice, hearing without cease, bears many voices within itself because there is no first voice.”^x It is not coincidental—nor due to a stylistic feature so common in French writing—that Chrétien begins many sentences with the pronoun “we.” For both the call and the response are composed of multiple voices. Chrétien opens *The Call and the Response* with a quotation from Joseph Joubert: “In order for a voice to be beautiful, it must have in it many voices” (CR 1). When we speak, it is never simply “I” who speaks. Rudolf Bernet puts this quite beautifully when he writes: “Only somebody who must hold a lecture discovers that he or she is continually paraphrasing other authors and speaks as well in the name of colleagues and friends.”^x Having had Bernet as my doctoral advisor (or, to use the Flemish term, “*promotor*,” the meaning of which is self-explanatory), I have often found myself speaking in his name and paraphrasing from him.

Yet is not this always the case? Perhaps it is not “only somebody who must hold a lecture,” but all of us who reflect even a little on the nature of discourse discover we are constantly speaking by repeating, restating, and paraphrasing. All of language is a kind of improvisation upon that which has been said and re-said. We are always already caught up in the improvisatory movement that makes language possible. To speak is to be part of an ongoing conversation and also to be part of an ever-evolving hybridity of both speech and self (Chrétien speaks of an “altered voice,” CR 44). It is here questions of identity and ownership not merely arise but are stretched to their limits. What exactly of what I say is “mine”? How many times do I have to repeat something said by someone else before it becomes mine in some sense? And how long can I hold on to something as “mine” when it is being said in the mouths of others? We can hardly adjudicate such issues here, though they raise complex questions not just regarding intellectual property (which might be worked out in court) but ontological issues (for which there is neither court nor court of appeal). The “said” may have an identity and perhaps even an ownership, but it is hardly simple or fixed. As someone who speaks with many voices, *I* am not simply my own voice but a polyphony of voices. Thus, the *I* for Chrétien is no “self-contained” or “self-constituted” *I*; Instead, it is composed of multiple voices. But, if the *I* has the polyphonic character, it has always already been *wounded*. “Each new encounter shatters us and reconfigures us,” says Chrétien, citing Hugo von Hofmannsthal.^{xi} There is no way of receiving the call, of being open to the other, without not merely the possibility but always the probability we will be wounded—that is, changed or reoriented or perhaps rebuked. But one thing is certain: if we truly hear the call, we will not be the same as before we heard it. We will return to the way in which the *I* is wounded by the call in the following section, but it is important to note early on the call always has this quality.

Perhaps polyphony, though, is not quite the right word—or perhaps it is not *enough*. True, it brings out the nature of multiple voices, yet it also at least implies a kind of “blending” in which those voices produce a simply beautiful chorus. But, if we are to be true to the phenomena, we must challenge any such reading. John Milbank is almost right when he speaks of a community in which there is “an infinite differentiation that is also a harmony.”^{xii} In such a community, says Milbank, “the possibility of consonance is stretched to its limits, and yet the path of dissonance is not embarked upon.”^{xiii} Milbank’s work relies upon notions of harmony taken from Augustine’s *De musica*. Although he

grants such harmony may be stretched “to its limits,” harmony remains the dominant metaphor. For the ancient Greeks, “polufwnia” (*poluphōnia*) carried the idea of multiple tones and “polufwnos” (*poluphōnos*) the idea of multiple voices. The description of a community comprised of multiple voices is proper. Yet it does not go quite far enough. In juxtaposition to (that is, *in addition to*) the notion of polyphony, we need to set the notion of heterophony—both descriptively and prescriptively. First, whereas polyphony provides the aspect of a *multiplicity* of voices, heterophony emphasizes the *otherness* of those voices. If there is to be true otherness, we cannot—and should not—have a beautifully blended polyphony. Indeed, one can argue this lovely notion of polyphony is all too liberal and modern, for it wishes to smooth over the difficulties and the dissonance. Second, heterophony emphasizes the idea of differing voices that do not simply blend or produce a pleasing harmony but remain distinct and sometimes dissonant, sometimes precisely when we would rather they were not.^{xiv} This is not to say now dissonance takes center stage; rather, it is to say dissonance—sometimes eventually resolved and sometimes not—is simply part of that conversation. Only if there is true heterophony can there be the expression and existence of otherness. Without such openness to such dissonance, we would not have the late Beethoven quartets or Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Harmony may *arrive*, but that arrival may well have to do with a change in *us* as listeners, and perhaps a radical revision of what counts as “harmony” (as in the case of Peter’s vision, in which God says something new).^{xv}

All of this becomes even *more* complicated because for Chrétien the structure of the response is never simply that of answering the call. For one “also calls out in turn and appeals to other calls.”^{xvi} That structure of not simply returning but also furthering the call is for Chrétien simply part of the nature of speech. We are given the gift of speech and, in turn, we both give back and disseminate that speech. Hence arises the question of the gift. For Chrétien, though, the gift is not a problem to be worked out, but rather a phenomenon to be *lived* out. He assumes, in gift giving, there is a fundamental inequality of gifts that is precisely what makes giving possible. He insists, “no response will ever correspond. The perfection of the answer will lie forever in its deficiency, since what calls us in the call is from the start its very lack of measure, its incommensurability.”^{xvii} Of course, the logic here seems problematic. On the one hand, if gifts were unable to be measured, then the problem of gift exchange would not seem to arise—or at least not with the same force or degree. True, *that* gifts are exchanged would seem to set up a reciprocity. But it is a reciprocity that can never be worked out in terms of measurement, of gifts being equal or unequal to one another. On the other hand, if perfection of the response is found in insufficiency, must there not be some way of “measuring” gifts and thus declaring their insufficiency? While Chrétien does not explicitly work out this problem, what he says about nothingness would seem to provide a kind of answer. He asks: “Where does nothingness find these inexhaustible resources, if not in the fact of possessing nothing except the fact of possessing nothing, and in the fact that this very lack is given to by a request that transfers to it the open fault line of promise?”^{xviii} If the gift comes to my nothingness and I can never possess it—but only respond and pass it on—I can neither “possess” it nor measure it (since I have “nothing” to measure it *with*). And, if everyone else is in this same situation, the gift always remains incommensurable. We can now see how the gift exceeds us even though it cannot be measured. For if we possess only nothingness, anything that comes our way as a gift always already exceeds us.

How do we live out this gift giving? Chrétien responds it is by way of translation. The call always comes to us in need of translation, rather than having been translated in advance. Moreover, the call only is what it is *in* being translated. In other words, “the translation therefore does not refer back to

an original language given before it and outside of it. The original is given only in the translation itself.”^{xix} Translation is thus the possibility condition for the call to have its appeal. Of course, Chrétien realizes this immediately poses a problem, namely immediacy. If I must translate the call, it can only be accessed in a mediated form, which would seem to mean we relate to one another only in a mediated way in which there is distance between us. But here Chrétien counters by citing Fichte, who actually reinforces what we have already seen: “You and I are not separated. Your voice resonates within me and mine echoes it back within you.”^{xx} In other words, mediation only becomes a problem if we assume a self-contained *I*. If, instead, the self is always intertwined with the other (my call with the call of the other, or my call intermingled with multiple calls), selves are always already connected. It is not just the child who “is always already caught up in a speech that exceeds him,” but all of us (CR 80). To speak is to join in a conversation that has been going long before one and that is made possible precisely because my voice is never truly my own. Understandably, then, “other voices are at once the past and future of my own voice” (CR 81). Other voices make my voice possible and keep it sounding.

But how does all this relate to wounding? As already noted, if one’s voice is indebted to all of the other voices, one is already “opened up” to those others. Chrétien puts it as follows: “Someone who takes up speech, by so doing, opens himself to more than himself and to others.”^{xxi} Yet the dimension of wounding goes considerably deeper than that since the call and response is always agonistic in nature.

Always Agonic

Here we need to return to certain key features of the citation with which this essay began. Chrétien tells us prayer has the effect of “wounding” in the sense of both “tearing” open and “suffering.” Moreover, prayer is “always agonistic,” and it will turn out the very structure of the call and response is agonistic. Each of these features needs to be considered in turn.

Chrétien begins “The Wounded Word” by saying: “Prayer is the religious phenomenon par excellence, for it is the sole human act that opens the religious dimension and never ceases to underwrite, to support, and to suffer this opening.”^{xxii} One might first wonder if this is not far too strong a statement—prayer as the *only* way to the “religious dimension”? Yet “prayer” for Chrétien covers a multitude of acts, not simply “prayer” in its narrowest definition. The same could be said for the “wounding” that “opens” and the sense of “suffer” Chrétien assumes. We naturally think of wounding and suffering as “bad” things to be avoided. And, of course, there are many sorts of wounding and suffering that truly *are* bad—not to mention *evil*—and worth avoiding at any cost. However, not all species of either phenomena are necessarily to be avoided if Chrétien is correct.

The wounding that takes place in prayer is essentially a kind of opening of the self to the other. Prayer “exposes him in every sense of the word *expose* and with nothing held back.”^{xxiii} To pray is to say, “here I am.” In this regard, it is remarkable how similar are the responses of Moses and Samuel to God’s call. God calls out from the burning bush, “Moses, Moses,” and Moses responds: “here I am” (Exod. 3:4). This “here I am” is to say “I am at your disposal.” And the formula Eli gives to Samuel is: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (I Sam. 3:9). What takes place in these exchanges is a crucial reversal, and Chrétien is certainly not the first to note it. Emmanuel Levinas puts it as follows:

“[H]ere I am (*me voici*)! The accusative here is remarkable: here I am, under your eyes, at your service, your obedient servant.”^{xxiv}

Opening oneself to the other is likewise connected to “suffering.” While we normally think of suffering in terms of pain or discomfort, the word “suffer” comes from the ancient French “*suffrir*,” the basic meaning of which is “to bear up.” So its primary meaning (and that of its modern equivalent in French “*souffrir*”) is “to submit to” or “to endure.”^{xxv} It is in *that* sense one “suffers” in prayer, for prayer is a kind of submission to God in which one becomes a “subject” before and to God. “All prayer confesses God as giver by dispossessing us of our egocentrism,” writes Chrétien.^{xxvi} In prayer, we recognize we are not our own; we are subjects in relation to God. Of course, we can find this same movement in Levinas, who thinks such takes place in the relation between myself and an other: I become a “subject” who is “subject” to the other. But this reversal—in which I am no longer at the center—causes suffering of the other sort. It is *painful* to think of myself as not being the center of the universe. Moreover, it is actually quite *difficult* to truly see one as subject to either the human other or to God, for it requires a change in *us*.

It is not surprising, then, in his later work Levinas resorts to increasingly more brutal sorts of metaphors—such as “trauma”—to describe how the other affects me. Given what Chrétien has already said regarding the call and its constitution of the self, the trauma is not so much to break through the shield of protection surrounding the self but the always already *having broken through*. Or, perhaps better yet, there is no need to break through precisely because there is always already an interconnection. In any case, Levinas is not alone in using such strong, even combative language. Chrétien speaks in a similar—if not even stronger—way regarding the call: “In order to constitute, the call destitutes. In order to give, it takes away. In order to create, it deletes all that would boast of self-sufficient being, prior to the call and independently of it.”^{xxvii} The call wounds us, causes us to suffer in multiple ways, and thoroughly upsets our neatly ordered world.

For Chrétien, prayer is the ultimate agonistic struggle. One reason is prayer is a struggle (*combat*) for and “with the truth.”^{xxviii} Although speech is already a struggle for and with truth, the speech that addresses itself to God is all the more so; to speak to God is to speak to the author of truth, the ultimate *truth*. To depict that struggle, Chrétien turns to the admittedly strange and difficult passage in which Jacob struggles with a man/an angel/God. On the night before he was to meet with his brother Esau, after having sent his family and everyone away, Jacob curiously encounters someone with whom he struggles throughout the night. It is literally a night of hand-to-hand combat.^{xxix} Presumably, Jacob has the upper hand, for the person with whom he wrestles (first identified as a “man” and then identified by Jacob as “God,” though often taken to be an angel) finally asks him to let go, at which point Jacob asks for a blessing in return. We turn to that “blessing” in the following section, but here the concern is for the fact that Jacob’s encounter with God is not one of safety and security but *risk*. Moreover, it is a *violent* encounter, in which the striving continues on until daybreak. One could counter other exchanges between God and humankind in the Hebrew Bible are more benign, such as when Abraham welcomes the three strangers in Genesis 18. Yet, even that passage contains a kind of “struggle,” albeit in the guise of laughter: for Sarah laughs upon hearing she will bear a son at an advanced age. What ensues is an “argument” in which God mentions Sarah’s laughter, she denies it, and God asserts it again (“you did,” “no, I didn’t,” “yes, you did”). But the struggle is also that of whether God can overcome human expectations. As the text has it, “is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (Gen. 18:14)

Perhaps not all encounters with the divine are agonistic in nature, though it would seem all would have at least been preceded by an agonistic element. If prayer or even simply hearing the word of the Lord that a woman advanced in age can have a child requires that one recognize God is God, then a struggle has already taken place. One certainly doesn't *begin* thinking of oneself already as a de-centered self, willing and ready to recognize an obligation to an other—whether human or divine. Instead, one begins with a world in which oneself is always already the center. Or such is what one supposes. Yet, if Chrétien is right about the constitution of ourselves being so closely connected to the constitution by others, then it is really more of a question of how we *think* about ourselves than how we truly *are*. To think otherwise is always a struggle, though not the sort of struggle in which one finally *wins*, but rather the sort in which one continually *engages*. In that sense, all of our encounters with the other are struggles in which we are constantly *trying* to love God or our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, let alone to put the neighbor or God *first*. If Chrétien is right, there is a certain kind of violence that is not merely present but *necessary* in our encounters with the other. Unfortunately, the violence often has to be done *to* us, even done *by* us, precisely for the sake of the relationship with the other. The agonistic aspect of our relations to others, then, may not be the *only* aspect, but it is certainly one that must be present.

Not surprisingly, then, Chrétien does not see all violence as simply gratuitous and thus always to be avoided. In fact, he links the wound of the call with the giving of the gift. In his view, one cannot have one without the other. But, then, what exactly connects them?

Sometimes Amies

Every French teacher who works with English speakers knows one particularly dangerous set of *faux amies* (false friends) is the English verb “to bless” and the French verb *blessier* (to wound). But they turn out to be not just friends at times but even relations. “Blêtsian,” from which comes the verb “to bless,” was an Anglo-Saxon term that meant “to make ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ with blood.” When Christianity arrived in England, it was chosen as the word to translate both the Latin term *benicere* (to pronounce a benediction) and the Greek *euΔologeiv* (*eulogeô*, to bless, a word largely used to translate the Hebrew *barak*, which means both “to bless” and “to kneel”).^{xxx} But “blêtsian” is most likely also the source of the French *blessier*, which remains more clearly tied to its Anglo-Saxon origins than does the English “bless.”^{xxxi}

While there is no reason to think Chrétien has this etymology in mind, there is good reason to think he sees the two words as being connected. In his “Retrospection,” he writes that *Hand to Hand* is concerned with “the fact that the wound [*la blessure*] can bless [*bénir*] and benediction can wound [*la bénédiction blessier*, which could just as easily be translated as “the blessing can wound].”^{xxxii} Yet how exactly can blessing and *blessier* be related? The reference in this quotation is—once again—to Jacob’s struggle. It is immediately after being wounded—when Jacob’s adversary puts his hip out of joint—that Jacob asks for a blessing. What he receives is a change of name: “Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed’” (Gen. 32:28). While the text goes on to say Jacob received a blessing, it is not clear this change of name *is* that blessing. In any case, Jacob could hardly have been expecting to get what he received. For what he is given by way of a name is in effect a new self, a different identity. Chrétien

writes “the meaning of call and response is radically transformed when the call actually creates the respondent.”^{xxxiii} Here we have a perfect example of that; Jacob simply asks for a blessing and instead he receives a new identity—Israel. For Chrétien, Jacob is the “eponym” for wounds that bless, for struggles that affect both the body and one’s identity. Such wounds “one must not heal, for they are the source of our loving intimacy.”^{xxxiv} Precisely in the *opening* of the wound one is further *opened* to another. While our natural tendency is to see wounds as necessarily bad and always to be avoided, Chrétien wants to insist the story is more complicated.

Yet this struggle raises a further question: “Who is the victor? Who is the vanquished?”^{xxxv} Chrétien realizes the interplay between these two figures is striking in many ways—and it also raises many complications. If the one with whom Jacob wrestles is truly God, who really “wins” in this case? God pleads with Jacob for him to let go and goes on to bless him. Who, then, has given in to whom? One can argue the case either way. But, then, that is precisely Chrétien’s point. It is far too simple to speak of “victor” and “vanquished.” Jacob receives a blessing and also a wound. God both inflicts himself upon Jacob—in every sense, God “sets him up” for the fight—but then allows Jacob to “win” the fight. It is here where Chrétien’s point becomes particularly uncomfortable. He claims “we are each new Jacobs, assaulted by God, and his perseverance should be for us a constant source of confidence.”^{xxxvi} “Assaulted by God”—and that is supposed to be good (let alone give us “confidence”)? If that were not enough, Chrétien goes on to say something even *more* difficult to hear:

To unfold its movements, love’s violence has as much need of the faraway as it does the close-up. Love lights up the proximate with the faraway to continue to be love; and love opens the faraway in the proximate to continue to be an approach, and the sudden shock of an approach, an everyday, common miracle.^{xxxvii}

“Love’s *violence*”? Could these words possibly be associated with one another, let alone said in the same breath? Anyone suspicious of theodicy—in which it would seem evil is often all too easily explained away or made too “good”—would be apt to read these words with the same suspicion. This suspicion is also engaged when reading James’s exhortation, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (Jas. 1:2) or especially “the Lord disciplines those whom he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts” (Heb. 12:6). Even if we are willing to agree with Paul that—somehow, in some way we cannot and, in many cases, *dare not* explain—“all things work together for good, for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28), those things *themselves* may not be good.

Yet here it must be remembered Chrétien is not giving a theodicy but a *phenomenology*. That is easy to forget, given how grounded his thought is in distinctly theological—and, more explicitly, *Christian*—sources. Chrétien tells us very clearly his is an attempt at thinking about

loss, wound, and passivity, as well as forgetting and fatigue, which are phenomena where the trace of the excessive shines through, outside of the idealistic and dialectical language of “negativity” in which everything is as if vanquished and surmounted in advance. There is no philosophical parousia.^{xxxviii}

Given this formulation, it would seem Chrétien is trying to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, there is the danger already considered of glossing over evil and loss as if there *were* a philosophical

parousia. Thinking through these experiences without thinking them away is what Chrétien attempts. As to exactly what a *theological* parousia would look like, that is a question Chrétien leaves unanswered. On the other hand, there is the danger of thinking of “loss, wound, and passivity, as well as forgetting and fatigue” as wholly unrecoupable, irredeemable, and gratuitous. Chrétien is unwilling to go in that direction precisely because he thinks it is *phenomenologically* incorrect. Thus, without simply embracing evil as good or loss as gain, he is willing to attend to the complexities of both. For, without a philosophical parousia, *neither* of these extremes can be embraced. *Either* to assert that all phenomena of loss and wound can be “justified” *or* to assert that they simply cannot be good in any sense would require a philosophical parousia.

Lacking that, we are left in the phenomenological middle, in which there are complexities at every turn—good mingled with evil of various sorts and degrees; evil that somehow manages to produce good of various sorts and degrees and the problem of not always being sure which is truly good and which truly evil. This is why Chrétien insists we need both the “faraway” and “close-up” views to truly *see* the phenomena for what they are. The difficulty, to be sure, is that we are often faced with evil that is dressed up so beautifully, so seductively that we assume it cannot be anything but good. We are likewise faced with good that comes to us so unattractively, so bruised and broken, it hardly looks remotely good. And we are left with human to human, human to animal, and human to divine encounters that not merely range across a spectrum but also come so freighted with entanglements they are often hard to rate as simply “good” or “evil.” We all know the worn-out examples of what would seem to be truly unadulterated evil or else absolutely radiant good. But most of our lives consist of a struggle somewhere between these extremes in a much more complicated middle ground where goods compete with each other and loss, wounding, and pain are simply part of the package. Looking back, we can sometimes (though certainly not always) see what was perceived at the time as either good or bad turns out to be somewhat different than what we originally thought.

It is with a fitting—though somewhat surprising—twist Chrétien concludes his meditation upon Jacob’s struggle by turning to the struggle of the “nonbelieving painter” Eugène Delacroix.^{xxxix} Painting *Jacob Wrestling with an Angel* in the Church of Saint Sulpice was a constant battle that occupied him from 1854–1861. The painting has often been cited as emblematic of the very struggle that constitutes his life. He writes repeatedly of the difficulty of the task. Yet it becomes a labor of love. What Delacroix writes about his struggle is so striking it can only be left in his words:

To tell the truth, the painting badgers me and torments me in a thousand ways, like the most demanding mistress . . . what from a distance had seemed easy to surmount presents me with horrible and incessant difficulties. But how is it that this eternal combat, instead of killing me, lifts me up, and instead of discouraging me, consoles me and fills my hours when I have left it.^{xl}

Delacroix himself experiences the wound that blesses, which he calls the “torment” that “consoles.” Such an experience can only be known *through* experience. It cannot really be told or described—and certainly not “reduced” to an essence, any more than a painting can be reduced to a description. Moreover, Chrétien notes that Delacroix depicts Jacob as stripped to the waist and reads this as Jacob giving up his defenses and entering into the fray unarmed. It is, on Chrétien’s read, precisely this disarmament that enables one to be open to the other. In any case, Delacroix manages to capture the

delicate balance of two figures in battle without settling the question of who is the victor and who the vanquished.

Chrétien closes his essay abruptly by saying, “the imminence of a blessing is already a blessing. It is a violent imminence.”^{xli} Before such a thought, one can only *tremble*.^{xlii} As Chrétien speaks of the difficulty Delacroix has in painting these hands clasped—in battle and perhaps in love—he says, “let us leave these hands silently vibrating in the imminence of the word.”^{xliii} As much as one would like to bring such a discussion to a conclusion, one can only really bring it to an end, not an end that explains the final *telos* of suffering or struggling but simply a breaking off. One could hardly *conclude* a discussion on struggling and suffering, for it would be to go against the very nature of the phenomena themselves. Lacking a philosophical parousia, one simply continues the struggle.

Notes

ⁱ Jean-Louis Chrétien, “The Wounded Word,” in Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 174–75; hereafter cited as WW.

ⁱⁱ Jean-Louis Chrétien, “Retrospection,” in Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); hereafter cited as UU. 122. *Corps à corps* has been translated into English as *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004); hereafter cited as CR.

^{iv} In his introduction to *Phenomenology and Theology* (published in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*), Jean-François Courtine asserts the guiding question for the essays that comprise that text can be stated as follows: “Is there, in religious experience, a specific form of phenomenality, of appearance, or epiphanic arising, that can affect phenomenology itself in its project, its aim, its fundamental concepts, indeed its methods?” (*Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* 122). In effect, Emmanuel Levinas had already given the answer to that question: “*The absolute experience is not disclosure [dévoilement] but revelation [révélation]*” (*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979], 65–66. Revelation, of course, is what “breaks into” phenomenological intuition and so de-centers the transcendental ego. As such, it is the overturning of the phenomenological “as such.” Phenomenologically speaking, it would be hard to imagine more of a “wounding” experience. Not surprisingly, then, Janicaud zeros in on this quotation in his *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology (Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,”* 42). To trace the development of Chrétien’s thought in roughly this same direction, see his *La voix nue: phénoménologie de la promesse* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990).

^v Here Chrétien is citing the French translation of Heidegger’s *Unterwegs zur Sprache* [*On the Way to Language*] (*Acheminement vers la parole*, trans. Jean Beaufret, Wolfgang Brockmeier, and François Fédier [Paris: Gallimard, 1976], 241). Interestingly enough, whereas the French *toujours déjà* would translate as “always already,” Heidegger only uses *schon* (rather than *immer schon*) in this passage. However, the “*immer*” can be read as implied.

^{vi} Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 28.

^{vii} Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 1.

^{viii} Given that the call “provokes” and thus is part of an agonistic struggle, an immediate question would be whether there is or could be an agonistic dimension to the Trinity. Such a question would take us too far afield to be answered adequately here. Yet at least one possible example of such an agonistic aspect to their relationship would be Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives. “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done” (Lk. 22:42). One can hardly deny there is a struggle going on here. And yet it is heavily qualified. Jesus’ request is inscribed between two phrases in which he explicitly gives up any rights to assert his own will. What would our encounters with the other look like were we to inscribe our requests between deference to the other?

^{ix} Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 1.

^x Rudolf Bernet, “The Other in Myself,” in *Tradition and Renewal: The Centennial of Louvain’s Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 85.

^{xi} Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 156.

^{xii} John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 427.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 429. Milbank does go on to say the following: “To say (with Deleuze) that dissonance and atonality are here ‘held back’ or ‘not arrived at,’ would be a mistake of the same order as claiming that nihilism is evidently true in its disclosure of the impossibility of truth. Instead, one should say, it is always possible to place dissonance back in Baroque ‘suspense’; at every turn of a phrase, new, unexpected harmony may still arrive. Between the nihilistic promotion of dissonance, of differences that clash or only accord through conflict, and the Baroque risk of a harmony stretched to the limits—the openness to musical grace—there remains an undecidability.” Open discourses do not *simply* have a harmony “stretched to its limits.” They also have dissonances that may resist harmonization—or at least harmonization in the here and now. While “new, unexpected harmony may still arrive,” there must be the openness and even the promotion of creativity that creates dissonance. Without such openness to such dissonance, we would not have the late Beethoven quartets or Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Harmony may *arrive*, but that arrival may well have to do with a change in *us* as listeners, and perhaps a radical revision of what counts as “harmony” (as in the case of Peter’s vision).

^{xiv} David Cunningham rightly points out that “polyphony” and “harmony” are *not* synonymous, even though they are often taken to be such. Given that difference, he thinks the notion of polyphony is sufficient, since “polyphony could theoretically be either ‘harmonious’ or ‘dissonant.’” Yet it is precisely because I want to emphasize the existence of (and *need for*) dissonance and difference I think we need the notion of heterophony. See David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 128.

^{xv} See my “Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Heteronomy, and *Ekklesia*,” in *Resonant Witness*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven Guthrie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

^{xvi} Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 24.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 23.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 72.

^{xx} *Ibid.*

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 82.

^{xxii} Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 147.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 150

^{xxiv} Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 146. Chrétien likewise speaks of the “here I am,” when he says, “the gift to which one is opened without recourse, about being the only one who can say *Me voici*, here I am” (Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, 120).

^{xxv} Given that it also means “to support,” it is not surprising there is a connection with the office of “suffragan bishop,” who (in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches) is a subordinate to the main bishop and in effect “supports” the bishop.

^{xxvi} Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 153.

^{xxvii} Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 22.

^{xxviii} Chrétien, “Wounded Word,” 156.

^{xxix} Hand to hand is the English equivalent of the French “*corps à corps*” (literally, body to body), which is why the text in which Chrétien discusses Jacob’s struggle has been translated as *Hand to Hand*.

^{xxx} *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “bless.”

^{xxxi} Ernest Weekley notes, “*blésian*, in its etym. sense, would explain F. *blessier*, to wound, which has no Rom. cognates.” See Ernest Weekley, *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Dutton, 1921), s.v. “bless.”

^{xxxii} Chrétien, *Unforgettable and Unhoped For*, 122.

^{xxxiii} Chrétien, *Call and Response*, 16.

^{xxxiv} Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 2; hereafter cited as HH.

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, 4.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 5.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*.

^{xxxviii} UU, 126.

^{xxxix} HH6.

^{xl} UU, 9.

^{xli} HH16.

^{xlii} Here it would seem Chrétien has followed the injunction of Georges Bataille “to say everything to a point that makes people tremble.” See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille* (London: Verso, 2002), 479.

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