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Time Lost: The Event of Trauma¹

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*I love to see your joy depart,
When your demeanor is downcast;
When horror suffocates your heart;
When present time is torn apart
By dreadful shadows of the past.*

Charles Baudelaire²

In ‘*A Flor de Piel*,’ part of an exhibition entitled *The Materiality of Mourning*, hundreds of rose petals are delicately woven into a fragile shroud, sprawled on the ground in a vermillion hue and folded waves. The roses, chemically suspended, reside in a state between life and death, reflecting the ambiguity “between actions of damage and actions of healing.”³ Scrupulously woven together, each delicate petal is

¹ This is a draft of a chapter to a book with the working title: *Evil and Givenness: The Thanatonic Phenomenon*.

² Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal: The Flowers of Evil: The Complete Dual Language Edition* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, [1857] 2018), 102-3. The original French reads:

*Je t'aime surtout quand la joie
S'enfuit de ton front terrassé
Quand ton cœur dans l'horreur se noie;
Quand sur ton présent se déploie
Le nuage affreux du passé.*

The choice of translating “*Quand sur ton présent se déploie*” as “When present time is torn apart,” though staying thematically consistent with the text and making for a more satisfying rhetorical expression, causes “*se déploie*” to lose its sense of ‘unfolding’ or ‘spreading out.’ This more literal sense is also appropriate as we discuss how the *tearing apart* of time transpires from the *unfolding* of trauma.

³ Katherine Brinson, “The Muted Drum: Doris Salcedo’s Material Elegies,” in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. Julie Rodrigues; Grynstejn Widholm, Madeleine (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 211.

capable of tearing at the slightest touch.⁴ Salcedo's sculpture offers a response to the torture and dismemberment of a female nurse, one of many who 'disappeared' during the peak of Colombia's political killings.⁵ "In this summoning of the tortured body," *A Flor de Piel* provides "a material vessel capable of communicating some of the extra-linguistic condition of enduring extreme pain."⁶ Such loss is inaccessible, incomprehensible as trauma always is. Yet even trauma finds its material forms that express without comprehending. Reflecting upon her own work, Salcedo writes that "[t]he only possible response I can give in the face of irreparable absence is to produce images capable of conveying incompleteness, lack, and emptiness."⁷

We find ourselves carried along the unfolding of inimitable events whose excess resists comprehension. Nonetheless, like Salcedo's sculpture, these events do not leave us without recourse to some form of expression. The question that concerns us here, however, is whether a phenomenological formulation of the event remains consistent regardless of type or, instead, whether some events contradict the characteristic unfolding thusfar described.⁸ For example, the event of birth gives me to myself for the first time, making possible every event to follow. Do subsequent events recapitulate the logic of birth? Do they further *singularize* me by delivering to me a new time that exceeds my own? Doubtless such events do continue to happen. However, other events bring about a *counter-effect*, leading time to become lost and even 'torn apart.' Though correctly characterized as an event, delivering an excess beyond what any concept can contain, trauma unfolds its effects in a radically distinct manner, diminishing time and, consequently, leading to the withdrawal of possibilities.

⁴ The expression '*a flor de piel*' is an idiom indicating 'raw emotion' and 'sensitivity.' It conjures the experience of bringing the innermost 'skin' to the surface, such as the effusive love of a friend or a mother's grief upon losing a child. Perhaps the closest, though still crude, equivalent is "to wear one's heart on one's sleeve," which doesn't quite capture the bodily sense in Spanish.

⁵ Salcedo writes, "The genesis of *A Flor de Piel* arose when I began to wonder: how could I initiate even the slightest movement toward a tormented body, even if only to present a flower offering? At this point I began looking for the most fragile way of touching the untouchable...It was at the outer limits of the fragility that I encountered a vulnerable body." Doris Salcedo, "A Work of Mourning," in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Madeleine Grynsztejn (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 216.

⁶ Brinson, "The Muted Drum: Doris Salcedo's Material Elegies," 211.

⁷ Salcedo, "A Work of Mourning," 215.

⁸ See Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, [2001] 2002), 30-53.

Part 1: The Event in General

Barriers to The Event—Metaphysics & Media

A significant barrier to approaching the event in general, including trauma, is the standard conception of time, consisting of a linear chain of causes-and-effects. Causes are conferred more reality than the effects they produce, delivering to effects their right to be considered ‘reasonable’ and ‘legitimate.’ Causality requires objectivity to uncover such relations. The social sciences name this operationalization. Evidenced-based treatments exemplify it. The disorder and the intervention are extracted from their embeddedness within complex interconnected networks, rendering them amenable to measurement.

Consequently, causality demands a triple abstraction. First, causes are isolated from their effects. Second, causes and effects are deprived of all that does not conform to the demands of measurement, delivering a reproducible and predictable object. This necessitates a third abstraction whereby the particularities of the knower who performs the previous two abstractions must be suspended. Stripped of all uniqueness, what remains is the metaphysical subject—the one who exerts mastery and control over experience. This subject is held back from the possibility of being touched and upended by events. Instead, events become subordinate to it.⁹

Barriers to the event are not limited to theory but find expression in the barrage of so-called ‘events’ delivered by news and social media. This media typically displays a degraded experience rather than genuine events, resulting in a “sham novelty.”¹⁰ ‘Breaking news’ is, in fact, a recycled narrative that frames events, complemented by prescribed explanations and protracted commentaries that effectively neutralize any genuine novelty. Take for instance the latest mass shooting in the United States. The story’s unfolding was remarkably predictable. First, there was the affected disbelief by newscasters. Next, there was the number counting (‘how many dead?’). Then, there was the psychological analysis of the shooter (‘what was his family life like? Did they see it coming?’). Finally, not long after, there arose those recalcitrant and naïve debates over whether guns or mental illness were ‘the cause.’ This formulaic presentation of ‘events’ extends far and wide, including wars and pandemics. Even the outrage emerging from them form part of a prepackaged narrative. Neutralizing events further, journalistic accounts lack any individual

⁹ I mention this metaphysical subject here as it will become relevant once we address the self that emerges from the trauma, a self that bears a resemblance to this subject.

¹⁰ Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, [1998] 2009), 204. This analysis of journalism is drawn from this work in the section entitled “Journalistic Events as the Correlate of Degraded Ex-per-ience,” 201-09.

assignation. They are addressed to the ‘public’ of disengaged observers. This places events at a distance from us. The viewer is not addressed by the ‘event’ nor is selfhood put in play. The information strikes me but does not upend my world.

Journalistic accounts simulate a genuine upheaval by tending toward the spectacle rather than the event itself, delivering a simulacrum of experience. This effectively destroys the possibility of being affected by the event and having one’s own possibilities transformed by it. “The catastrophic ‘experience’ of information is catastrophic of the experience itself.”¹¹ Though ‘fake news’ is a term to be avoided in most circumstances due to its lack of precision, it would perhaps best be reserved for this diminution of events and their transformation into an impoverished shadow of ‘information.’ How, then, is a genuine event distinguished from this journalistic simulation as well as those metaphysical barriers that perhaps underlie it?

Phenomenology of the Event

Every phenomenon, saturated or not, has an event character to it. It determines the manner and mode of the phenomenon’s landing at it either arrives, comes upon me, or imposes itself.¹² When the event character of a phenomenon imposes itself in such a way as to decenter me and disallows any concept to comprehend it, then we have ventured into the event as saturated phenomenon. This event inaugurates a mode of temporality divergent from standard time. The past becomes an “uncontrollable past” that imposes itself upon me, containing a history that continuously exceeds memory.¹³ A fissure forms between past and present. As such, rather than be contained within time, the event temporalizes temporality, unfolding time as its prospective possibilities.

Whereas “innerworldly facts” unfold prior possibilities within a preexisting horizon, events break up my world, upending and reconfiguring its possibilities.¹⁴

¹¹ Romano, *Event and World*, 206.

¹² Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, [1997] 2002), § 13.

¹³ Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 32.

¹⁴ Romano, *Event and World*, 27-31. Romano distinguishes between innerworldly facts that may be described as events and *eventials* that are genuine events in that they inaugurate a radical transformation of our world. A reader of both Marion and Romano will note that I weave between both thinkers’ presentation of the event without making much distinction between the two. This is because I find the two to be more complementary than divergent on this concept. Indeed, Marion’s own account depends upon Romano’s, rather than it be merely one way influence from teacher to student, evidenced by Marion’s footnote praising Romano’s *Event and World*, especially concerning the analysis of birth. Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 42, fn10. For a divergent perspective on the matter see Shane Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess: Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), 35-36. I agree that,

Through this movement, the event delivers a “futurition” that produces possibilities thought impossible in view of the world that preceded it. This is the “secret of [the event’s] latency.” In metaphysics, possibility entails intelligibility, foreseeability, and calculability. The event disrupts this logic. Though not without antecedents, the event obeys its own “inner glow.”¹⁵ It transcends its own actualization, reconfiguring possibilities and infusing new meanings into my life. It cannot be predicted according to the world’s pre-existing possibilities. When the impossible does arrive, it contradicts these conditions, inaugurating a set of new *event-ualities* and carrying its “cargo of possibilities” into an undetermined future.¹⁶ It signals the advent of a new world and hence a new *advent-ure* for the one to whom the event is assigned. That *advent-ure* commences with birth itself, which makes possible the possibility of every event to follow.¹⁷

Birth

In being born, I am given to myself through an event for the first time. A self emerges to meet this event, appropriating its possibilities to form preliminary meanings that undergo further assimilations and accommodations for the remainder of life. As a paradigmatic case, birth displays every determination of the event. First, it is *unforseeable*.¹⁸ I was not present to witness its arrival, and all the anticipations, hopes, and expectations could not have foreseen the exact unfolding that has since

at the time of its publication, *Event and World* offered a much more developed hermeneutics of the event than Marion’s account. However, a convincing argument has not been made that this hermeneutics contradicts Marion’s phenomenology of the event, especially, in light of his more recent elaboration on the position of hermeneutics vis-à-vis givenness. See Jean-Luc Marion, “The Hermeneutics of Givenness,” in *The Enigma of Divine Revelation: Between Phenomenology and Comparative Theology*, ed. Jean-Luc; Jacobs-Vandegheer Marion, Christiaan (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2020). Where I believe they diverge most is that Romano’s account of the event demonstrates the differential effects of trauma from birth in a manner that not only has been not elaborated upon by Marion (despite his brief discussion of trauma in *Being Given*), but that may even contradict those invariant characteristics that have been attributed to the event, especially as formulated most recently. For example, see Jean-Luc Marion Jean-Luc Marion, “Thinking Elsewhere,” *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 1, no. 1 (2019).

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, [2010] 2015), 175.

¹⁶ Romano, *Event and World*, 42-43.

¹⁷ Romano plays on the etymology of these words (eventualities; adventure) as they connect with the event and advent.

¹⁸ The following four characteristics of the event are a rearticulation of what was presented in Marion’s *Being Given*, *In Excess*, *Negative Certainties*, and is also informed by Romano’s *Event and World*. The four mentioned here are not intended to be comprehensive but are considered necessary features of the event. Other terms are sometimes used (e.g., *fait accompli*, incident, unpredictable landing, etc.)

occurred nor what may continue to transpire. Its unforeseeability evokes *surprise*, converting me to the event's witness rather than its constitutor. Second, birth is *indetermined*. We can identify antecedents that partially explain it. Yet, precursors acquire their title as 'cause' only in the wake of the unfolding itself—a *post-hoc* analysis that, though useful from time to time, never would have surfaced had it not been for an original unfolding that empirically followed but phenomenologically preceded these antecedents. The event is always mother to the cause.

Third, despite its unforeseeability and indetermination, birth imposes an *irrevocable facticity*. Whereas the other two determinations address certain uncertainties of birth, irrevocable facticity concerns the event's indubitability. I cannot in good faith deny my birth. It designates a singular *fait accompli* that makes the event unrepeatable, leading to a fourth characteristic – its *unreproducibility*. A hallmark of objects, and the scientific method that studies them, is the ability to re-create a set of original conditions to produce an intended effect. Prediction and knowledge of causes are necessary to perform this feat. However, as the event imposes itself in a manner that surpasses any causes, the only means left is to simplify the event to a few manageable pieces of information, thereby producing an abstracted version of it. This is the object, an event reproduced through a process of extraction. Thus, reproduction pertains to objects and not to events.

Reproduction or Repetition

The ongoing appropriation and development of possibilities emerging from events are actualized through repetition. Repetition is distinct from reproduction in that it does not seek an impossible return to prior conditions, nor does it require the same temporal and spatial coordinates or materiality. Reproduction establishes a sameness whereas repetition introduces a necessary difference.¹⁹

Repetition is exemplified by the description of the gift.²⁰ Gifts are characterized by their eventamental quality as they must be unanticipated, indetermined, arrive with an irrevocable facticity, and be unreproducible. Failing to

¹⁹ This is a point made by Kierkegaard who argues that the only kind of repetition is the impossibility of repetition. See Søren Kierkegaard, "Repetition," in *Kierkegaard's Writings, Vol. VI*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1843] 1983). Lacan develops this Kierkegaardian notion of repetition to suggest that what is repeated is the original failure, and the failure is what inaugurates a compulsion to repeat. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II (1954-1955)*, trans. John Forrester and Sylvana Tomaselli (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991). This logic will be relevant when discussing repetition and the event of trauma.

²⁰ This analysis of the gift is indebted to the following: Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Book II. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

adhere to these characteristics diminishes the gift to an object and gift-giving to an economic exchange. However, the gift is always in a state of precarity, facing constant risk of degradation. Upon arriving, I assume the identity of owner, effacing the trace of its gift character. Now in my possession, the gift acquires a certain value and, according to justice, belongs to no one else apart from an equitable price. This transformation renders the gift into an object that now resides within the economy, circulating from hand-to-hand as specified by market forces. Here reproduction is possible, not as the original gift, but in its mode of appearing upon abstracting its gift character.

Whereas reproduction necessitates ownership, repetition requires suspending possession for the gift to appear again. The repetition of the gift dispossesses me of the object by reenacting *the original giving act*. In this sense, repetition does not repeat the gift in a material form, nor does it necessarily include the same actors. Rather, it repeats *the act* that gave rise to the gift. To receive a gift *as a gift* requires that it not be possessed but be *returned to the originating current* of the giving act. Repetition facilitates a continuation of this current, flowing through a history of respective receivers-who-become-givers. As such, one does not so much receive the gift but rather welcomes the act of giving through repetition. This introduces a redundancy [*redondance*] between receiving and giving, constituting one-in-the-same act. Traditions are born of this redundancy and die in assuming this inheritance as a possession.²¹

Religious rituals are exemplary of this logic of repetition. The Eucharistic celebration, for instance, is a repetition and not reproduction of Christ's death and resurrection. In celebrating the Eucharistic feast, the Mass marks the site of the original event that, according to standard time, transpired two millennia ago. Like the gift in general, this is a continuation of the original event, rendering it no longer past but imminently present to each participant. It is made available to us today as it was to those present at its inception. This inaugurates a radically different kind of temporality. Here the past is made present while the present is transposed to the original event on Calvary, all while directing minds and hearts toward a future in the hope for the fulfillment of this event in the second coming.

At least two modes of repetition are expressed by this ritual. First, there is *sacrifice*, which does not signify destruction but a recognition through repetition. It entails the receiver of a gift recognizing the gift as such in repeating the originary act of giving. In the Eucharistic liturgy, one presents the gifts of bread and wine, symbols of the whole person whose life is the original gift being given again. The symbolism of this ritual does not remove the actual sacrifice, just as a wedding ring does not

²¹ This is the meaning of a coercive conservatism, which is not, as is often thought, a return to tradition per se but the hoarding of tradition in such a way as to assume dominion over it.

take away from the genuine commitment entailed. Nor is it a repayment or made with expectation of a return, both of which lower sacrifice to economic determinants. In sacrificing, one recognizes that what one is sacrificing does not primordially belong to the sacrificant but originates from *elsewhere*. Sacrifice is a recognition of this *elsewhere* that has arrived, unforeseen and unprovoked, in the form of my life.

Forgiveness offers a second mode of repetition, also embedded in the liturgical ritual. Whereas sacrifice is a repetition that transforms receiver into giver as the gift-act is re-enacted, forgiveness is a repetition of the gift given to a receiver who failed to convert into a giver and, thus, did not fully receive the gift itself. Such a failure presents the occasion for another redundancy of the gift, being given again to the same designated recipient, offering another occasion to receive it by converting into a giver.

Through sacrifice and forgiveness, repetition allows the event of the gift to fully accomplish itself. This repetition is never a reproduction of a prior event now complete. Rather, it is the unfolding of the original event itself as it seeks its own accomplishment. Does trauma unfold in this manner of repetition, or does it display distinct characteristics that map onto neither repetition nor reproduction? Before taking up this question, another kind of event must be considered.

Encountering Others

Birth is an event that inaugurates the possibility of other events, most notably the encounter with others. Such encounters, like all events, arrive unforeseen and unprovoked. They are not even cognized as events until well after the fact, if at all. In the early days of graduate school, I was invited to my advisor's home to meet with him and his other advisees. I knew the time and place. I even knew the names of those who would attend. I anticipated the kinds of conversations that would take place (the banal pleasantries of small talk). Yet, I could not foresee what would result in one of my most enduring and impactful friendships. I could not imagine such a possibility prior to its actualization, nor imagine how my own thoughts and ambitions would be shaped by that encounter. Only upon retrospection does an event appear as such. An encounter is not so much a "presentation" (of two people) as a *futurition*. It has meaning only through the possibilities it holds in reserve.²²

While such encounters vary in the intensity of their subsequent reconfiguration, perhaps the most impactful and what the above case exemplifies, is

²² Romano, *Event and World*, 124.

the *erotic event*.²³ This encounter necessarily entails a radical reconfiguration for it addresses what concerns me most – the possibility of being loved. This matters more than all other peripheral possibilities, be they professional or personal, possibilities that concern me only as derivative of the most fundamental question of whether I am loved or not. Indeed, it even rivals the possibility of being itself. ‘To be or not to be’ matters little if I am not loved. Love allows us to dissipate the indifference toward life. Thus, it can be considered as the flourishing of the inaugurating event of birth. As an event and like the gift, love cannot be manufactured for it will fail to achieve its status as love and degrade into a perverse imitation. Instead, I must take on the posture of hopeful expectation, lying in wait for the arrival of the lover who comes from elsewhere at her initiative and at a time of her choosing. This erotic horizon radically defines me, orienting me outside myself toward an *elsewhere* before and beyond me. In the erotic event, my flesh is awakened by another who delivers me to myself. I am born anew from the beloved who, in touching me, awakens and opens me to a time, space, and identity previously inaccessible.

Reception of the Event

The self that emerges from the event is one constituted by an original delay. My response is always already late in that what happened to me preceded and gave rise to me. As such, there is a radical passivity in the arrival of the event. Nonetheless, such passivity inaugurates the possibility of an activity that works to convert the given into manifestation by welcoming the surfeit of givenness and appropriating its possibilities.

Resistance marks the first active step of the self who ‘slows down’ the event enough to phenomenalize it.²⁴ This relation between the excess of events and the resistance of the self is not static but consists of a historical unfolding of assimilations and accommodations, with the former welcoming aspects of the event within a pre-established horizon and the later leading to modifications of that horizon that allows this self to resist more and better than before.

Yet, the self’s role involves more than what resistance implies. This active reception entails *responsibility* whereby the self converts the given from manifestation into action. Despite not being the event’s cause, I am responsible for the event because it uniquely calls me to respond. Selfhood as responsibility “is the capacity of holding myself open to what happens to me, so as to appropriate it as

²³ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, [2003] 2007).

²⁴ See Marion, Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 49-53.

such.”²⁵ This requires an active hermeneutics, indeed an infinite one, that performs the endless work of appropriating the latent possibilities of the event.²⁶

Another characteristic of this self is the *singularity* conferred by the event. The event of self is one-in-the-same as the event that precedes it, as a dimension of its unfolding and, for us, its most consequential one. Uniquely assigned, the self is exclusively born from the event that precedes and gives rise to it. Consequently, all anthropological determinations are maintained for this self because it no longer requires suspending them to reach the phenomena. Instead, they mark the very reception of the event as it unfurls itself.

Part 2: The Event of Trauma

Traumatism

Another feature of the event not yet addressed but fixed within the other characteristics is the violent shattering it delivers in imposing itself upon me. This is an inevitable consequence of an event defined by an excess of givenness that subverts concepts and horizons. *Traumatism* is a name given to this effect. However, this raises a potential difficulty when addressing the event of trauma. If every genuine event delivers a traumatism, then would it not be the case that ‘trauma’ is merely a variation of this general feature of the event?

In fact, traumatism was never “intended to articulate a sweeping phenomenology of trauma, or to suggest that the encounter with the other person is traumatic in all the ways that people are traumatized.”²⁷ Rather, traumatism designates a specific kind of ‘anarchic trauma,’ that traumatizes the complacent egoism in its relation to the other.²⁸ The ego is decentered, denuded, and denucleated as it ‘hemorrhages’ out in being-for-the-other. Traumatism is the “tearing away” of one’s bread to give to the other,²⁹ and the “reverting of the ego into a self, the de-posing or de-situating of the ego.”³⁰ I become divested of my ego and its “willful” and “imperialist” character.³¹ The ego is thereby wounded by a passivity

²⁵ Romano, *Event and World*, 97.

²⁶ Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 229.

²⁷ Eric Severson, “Unsettling of Perception: Levinas and the Anarchic Trauma,” in *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory*, ed. Eric Boynton and Peter Capretto (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 110.

²⁸ This analysis of traumatism is drawn from Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, [1974] 1998).

²⁹ Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 74.

³⁰ Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 50.

³¹ Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 112.

that prevents it from representing and thematizing, divesting it of its autarchy. Traumatism places the ego in the accusative and renders it guilty before the other. All this gives rise to the fundamentally productive dimension of traumatism. It is not an evil but, instead, a good that “offers salvation in an unsettling sense.”³²

Though not given the name of traumatism, every saturated phenomenon also delivers what might be called a ‘productive suffering.’ First, there is the suffering of the call. In being surprised and summoned, I suffer. The call must be endured due to its manner of arrival, in exerting its impact as an event, with all the determinations this entails. My gaze undergoes a radical passivity in bearing what it sees, leading it to suffer bedazzlement. The weight of this suffering is not principally induced by the phenomenon of evil but, instead, the phenomenon of truth. Just as the chained figure from Plato’s cave suffers from seeing the light upon being released, so must one endure the bedazzling excess of the saturated phenomenon. This productive suffering “uproots ourselves from custom” as it delivers a discrepancy between the intensity of the intuition and our capacity to receive it.³³ It overwhelms established horizons, which must undergo a radical accommodation to see more. Such accommodations may be in terms of knowledge and skill. The painter who creates is the one who bears the excess of the given just enough to make an invisible visible for the first time. In the case of moral truth, it requires confronting my moral failings and faults. “Bedazzled by a quasi-moral intensity of intuition,” Oedipus blinds himself for having seen his transgressions.³⁴ One must also suffer the decision to receive the call, whether to make good use of this suffering or to flee from it, thereby gaining “some relief in removing oneself from it.”³⁵

Every event delivers a traumatism and every saturated phenomenon has an ‘event character.’ Consequently, traumatism is broadened to the point of being an intrinsic character of every saturated phenomenon. What remains to be shown is whether the event of trauma is a variation of this traumatism of the event in general or rather displays its own set of distinct characteristics. As will be shown, the one shattered by trauma is not the ego but the gifted, a shattering that converts the gifted back into a quasi-ego.

³² Severson, “Unsettling of Perception: Levinas and the Anarchic Trauma,” 109.

³³ Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, [2008] 2012), 349, fn20.

³⁴ Marion, Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 204.

³⁵ Marion, Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, 117.

The Event of Trauma

Psychologically, trauma is commonly characterized by an exposure to the threat of death through injury or violence, leading to a constellation of symptomatic reactions that are intrusive, producing mental alterations such as avoidance, changes in affect and cognition, and reactivity. Psychoanalysis broadens the concept to include 'relational' and 'phantasmatic' traumas. Trauma may also form part of a collective experience, giving rise to the notion of 'intergenerational trauma.' It is not only the result of human intervention but also occurs through 'accidents of nature' – a vehicle collision, cancer diagnosis, etc. Complicating matters further, these categories of trauma are not readily separated. The moral-nature, personal-collective, and empirical-phantasmatic distinctions entail fuzzy boundaries. Regardless of variation or type, are there certain invariant phenomenological characteristics of trauma?

Addressing this question requires bracketing trauma's causes and classifications to arrive at what is given. Trauma's effects unfold like fallout from the epicenter of a blast radius, unraveling its deleterious effects *over time* and *upon time*. We search for the origin of a ship's wake only to find it not at the earliest point but *now* when the nascent wake is being formed by the vessel. As such, characterizing trauma as a past event that is described only upon retrospection would fail to account for trauma's distinct temporality, which is neither linear nor entirely consistent with the time of the event in general. Though, in conducting such a phenomenological analysis, characteristics of the event in general are discovered, trauma's expression of these characteristics diverges enough to justify the claim that it no longer conforms to the 'generative givenness' attributed to this saturated phenomenon.³⁶

First, trauma is *unforeseeable*. Even if one anticipates it, no one foresees the hour of its arrival. As unforeseen excess, it resists my resistances, penetrating my conceptual defenses, leaving me altered before having a chance to respond. Rather than surprise, however, this unforeseeability gives rise to *terror*. Surprise and terror both lead to a loss of consciousness and forbid grasping and knowing. However, whereas surprise deprives me of knowledge of the 'giver' of the call, terror deprives me of myself by overwhelming my capacity for resisting the phenomenon so to manifest it.

Such terror is not equivalent to the *angst* over death either, which exposes me to the possibility of impossibility.³⁷ *Angst* delivers me from my everydayness in

³⁶ I argue elsewhere that, in fact, trauma belongs to an entirely different mode of givenness that I am calling 'parasitic givenness.'

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, [1926] 2010).

undergoing an experience that discloses to me the strangeness of being. There is also a productive dimension to *angst*, as it inaugurates the call of conscience to authentically assume my possibilities rather than flee from them. With the terror of trauma however, there is no possibility of resoluteness. Though it shares with death the unknowability of the hour when it comes, unlike death, the terror of trauma is never anticipated. Furthermore, rather than deliver the possibility of impossibility in advance of what never arrives so long as I am, trauma is the arrival of the impossible *in the flesh*. It comes without herald, enveloping me with its sudden and absolute proximity. “[T]error becomes atmosphere.”³⁸ The smell of danger is everywhere. I am paralyzed before it, unable to muster a response and, thus, rendered an ‘irresponsible’ self.

Second, trauma is *indetermined*. For every mass shooting, analysts speak of antecedents: an abusive or neglectful parent, video games, access to weapons, mental illness, ideology, etc. Yet, each new instance arrives in its full unforeseeability, beyond imagination. It is for this reason books continue to be written, attempting to account for the Holocaust, which can and should never be proclaimed as understood. Its causes are overshadowed and exceeded by the extremity of the event itself, and it is from the event itself that any identified antecedents achieve their status.

However, unlike the encounter with the event in general, which when not reduced to information actively subverts causes, the encounter with trauma inevitably *provokes* causes. Indeed, the justice system is established as the arbiter of responsibility for such traumas, and a cause is almost always identified and persecuted. However, and without denying the proper place for accusation and conviction, the localization of responsibility to a *single cause*, though useful in delivering to the victim a semblance of justice, is not without its arbitrariness. Trauma does not mobilize a search for a comprehensive cause but necessitates the settling upon one, thereby failing to persecute the parade of enablers and systems that supported the actualization of a particular violence.³⁹

³⁸ Romano, *Event and World*, 110.

³⁹ The lack of identifiable cause is perhaps most evident in traumas of nature. The parent of a child dying of cancer may be able to limit the cause to the cancer itself. However, it is perhaps more often the case that a justified anger spreads to human actors – the incompetent doctors who could not cure the child or politicians refusing to enact changes to remove carcinogens from the environment. The greatest target for any trauma, but especially those of nature, is God. Theodicies may at times offer explanations for moral evil that satisfy those searching for answers. Yet, the gift of freedom that justifies the possibility of moral evil fails to account for so-called natural evil. Except for the most historically egregious cases of moral evil, none places God on trial more than natural evil, and no example of denying God’s existence is more powerful than when confronting the seemingly random suffering of a child at the hands of nature, especially when it leaves little room to accuse a human actor. It is where arguments based on ‘the consequence of freedom’ fall short. It is also this mode of iniquity that is addressed in the Book of Job.

Third, trauma achieves an *irrevocable facticity* through the suffering it delivers. Other than terror, the suffering flesh is where trauma is made most manifest.⁴⁰ However, this is not the productive suffering of other saturated phenomena (truth, the erotic, revelation, etc.). Whereas those cases are more adequately identified as modes of traumatism that give rise to a responsible, individualized self, the suffering of trauma induces a diminishment of this self. This diminishment is expressed as the alienation from one's own flesh through denegation and subsequent return. Repression is the same as the return of the repressed, being an unfolding of the trauma itself rather than its suppression. Others may deny me the right to say it happened to me. I might even seek to repress it myself. Yet, as Salcedo's sculpture teaches us, the body always remembers in its materiality, making manifest the invisible trauma that continues to rise to the surface of the skin. However, unlike the tasting of madeleines, it is not a remembrance of things past that evokes my flesh. Whereas the event more generally can deliver my flesh to me, trauma entails its receding. Thus, one knows of the excess of trauma by the absences it leaves in its wake and the remaining fragments of a shattered self that coalesces around these absences.

These absences and fragmentations are made most evident in speech. Speech is a revelation of the flesh, delivering us access to our own and to the other's through the word. As such, the denegation of the flesh is accomplished through the diminishment of speech. First, there is the silence produced in encountering the ineffable excess of the traumatic event that overwhelms words, leaving us speechless and incapacitated to deliver a name to what is unnamable. However, there is a second effect upon speech that leaves it aphasic. This aphasia – the loss of words to approach the event of trauma – is not the same as silence. One very well may continue to speak, but that speech is no longer capable of effective communication, instead expressing oneself in stereotypies, automatisms, and gibberish. In other words, the range of possibilities for speech has been severely restricted. Trauma not only resists meaning, but it interrupts and damages the very means for meaning-making by inducing this aphasic self whose horizons of understanding have been greatly compromised.⁴¹

The survivor of the extermination camp is offered as a case in which trauma induces a "saturated phenomenon of suffering."⁴² Such an event is "so intense, so durable, and so all-encompassing" that this suffering becomes "a world unto itself." In this sense, trauma can be said to deliver a new world. However, it not an expansive

⁴⁰ It is often the characteristic that leads trauma to be understood as an expression of evil.

⁴¹ As will be discussed later in this work, it is responsible for silencing God and love, replacing them with idols and empty speech.

⁴² Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 317.

world, opening us to a wider terrain. Rather, it forecloses upon “the shared world,” creating an “abyss” between my prior world and the one now inhabited.⁴³ Concurrently, there is a “denegation of the carnal” and receding “from the public space.”⁴⁴ Rather than give rise to and demand an infinite hermeneutic, this phenomenon remains thoroughly and invariantly “unsayable.”⁴⁵ It also remains unbearable by those who would be able to receive the flesh of the other through their discourse, further ensuring the loss of a shared world. As such, trauma moves in a counter-direction from the event of encounter with others. There is no *futurition*, no *compossibles*, no *co-naissance*⁴⁶—only a receding of the future as possibility fades in a diminishing hope that ultimately leads me to the indifference I thought I could evade through the possibility of love. Trauma begins in terror but ends in apathy.

Repetition Compulsion

Fourth, to the degree it can be considered an event, trauma is *unreproducible*. However, as already discussed, the unrepeatability of trauma must be distinguished from the concept of repetition. In doing so, we come to find that the time of trauma is not like that of the event in general.

The repetition of trauma, like the gift, manifests a continuation of the same event whose waves unfold and echo from the past into the present, teleporting me back to a living past. Despite these similarities, however, important differences emerge. The ‘future’ of a ‘past’ traumatic event is its repetition and imposition upon the ‘present.’ The one who encounters trauma, and thus lacks the capacity to receive it, is compelled to re-create this failure of reception across new situations. As such, there is an insistent return to ‘the scene of the crime’ by selecting and forcing a new space, new time, and new actors to meet the conditions of a prior event. This alienates present events from themselves, not to render them objects, but to turn them into empty vessels that play the role of another, *parasitic* event. This ‘living past’ of trauma, thus, functions more as a revenant that consumes the living to sustain itself. To better facilitate this repetition, particular actors and scenarios are selected for their metaphorical or metonymic relations to the trauma, offering a ready-made bridge for transfer. This activity is not produced by an actor but results from a receiver who has been diminished, restricted, and unable to welcome future events. The effect of trauma in imposing itself on the receiver is to render the receiver unable to phenomenalyze future events on their own terms. Instead, I am driven to

⁴³ Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 317.

⁴⁴ Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 318.

⁴⁵ Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 318.

⁴⁶ See Romano, *Event and World*.

disregard the singular features arising from them so to redefine them by diminishing and restricting their phenomenality to fit within the parameters of the trauma.

The Traumatized Self: From Gifted to Ego?

The effects of trauma give rise to a self that is irremediably changed. I undergo an *un-revelation* in which prior capacities are withdrawn, leading to a receding of my world. Thus, what I receive is not nothing but *less than nothing* or the *augmentation of the nothing*. I witness trauma's impact, see it pass me by, and find myself (or what remains) in its wake. Trauma alienates and colonizes me, to the point that I can no longer recognize myself. My eyes are covered, and I am rendered invisible to myself. Trauma unravels the defining qualities of my selfhood, thereby immobilizing me.⁴⁷ As such, trauma is not merely an empirical and psychological phenomenon.⁴⁸ Nor is trauma a traumatism that would evoke the gifted. Rather, trauma, in its phenomenological determinations, suppresses the gifted in enabling the gifted to suppress itself through a self-denegation of the flesh. Such a response is, in fact, a freezing of responsibility, leaving only a "hardened" body prepared for "combat with the world."⁴⁹ Now armed with a conceptual weapons that may be wielded against all excess through repetition, which does not merely impose the parasitic event upon our lives but, in demanding a cause as well, seeks to repeat its suffering in others through a "logic of revenge"—to do unto another's flesh what was done onto one's own.⁵⁰ Thus, if traumatism converts the ego into the gifted, the event of trauma delivers a counter-effect, transforming the self from gifted into one who begins to more closely resembles the ego, despite being established *after* the event and apparently lacking its transcendental status.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Romano, *Event and World*, 109. Many of the phenomenological insights addressed in this section are drawn from Romano's analysis in *Event and World*, in the section 'Despair and Terror,' especially part (c) 'Terror and Traumatism', 109-14.

⁴⁸ This must be reiterated. I am not seeking to describe a 'psychological phenomenon,' but variation of the phenomenology of the event, one that does not confirm to the standard telling of its phenomenality and, as such, is leading us toward a parasitic mode of givenness that shared features with both saturated and denegative phenomena.

⁴⁹ Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 119.

⁵⁰ See chapter entitled 'Evil in Person,' in Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, [1986] 2002), 1-30.

⁵¹ Along with the other cases the thanatonic phenomenon (i.e. evil-eye, foreign-body, and the abject), we will discover even more ways the ego is 'produced' from phenomena rather than be conceptualized a merely a constitutor of them. This is building toward the suggestion that the transcendental ego is, in fact, a self born from the thanatonic phenomenon, giving rise to an '*a posteriori*' that assumes the mantle of an '*a priori*' principle.

Conclusion

Trauma “frees itself from the limits of this singular experience and invades our whole adventure through its incessant repetition in memory or dreams and, impossible to assimilate, becomes a genuine internal ‘foreign body.’”⁵² One of the features of trauma is its tendency to inaugurate an automaton within the self that reflexively seeks to recreate the original scene.⁵³ In this way, the past intrudes upon the present, reconfiguring its possibilities, refusing new horizons to be open and closing existing ones.

Such a conception of time is notably absent in most discussions of trauma. Undoubtedly, we already have a guide in Freud whose notions of repetition and retroaction begin to break through the standard notion of time and conceive of the traumatic in its distinct temporality. Avoiding philosophical questions as best he could, however, Freud never adequately reflected upon the nature of time itself and how its warping metamorphosis is possible in and through traumatic events. Even had he reflected upon it, Freud’s approach to time is not far removed from a long philosophical tradition that locates it within subjectivity. What we learn from trauma and other critical events such as birth and the erotic phenomenon is time’s *exteriority*. Time precedes and envelopes subjectivity rather than serving as a function of it. Through these three events (birth, other, trauma) we find ourselves subject to a time that is beyond the subjective conditions we bring to it. This is a time that finds its origin in events.

Yet, the time of trauma is not the same as the time of the event in general. Whereas birth and the other may deliver to us a new time, trauma tears apart our time. The loss of time gives rise to a diminishment of the self who is rendered aphasic—still emersed in language but unable to appropriate its possibilities for the sake of meaning-making.

What about the healing of trauma? Can we not also consider those *material acts of mourning* exemplified by *A Flor de Piel*? Indeed, there is recourse to ‘catharsis’ and ‘narrative understanding,’ which works to gradually reverse our aphasia. However, we shall not venture into such a response here as it would require departing from our phenomenological analysis. Description precedes and informs prescription, even as prescriptions direct us to new descriptions. We have still to consider perhaps the most ubiquitous form of trauma that, like the *icon*, delivers a counter-intentionality arriving from elsewhere but arrives as a “faceless otherness” that will be named ‘*the evil eye*.’

⁵² Romano, *Event and World*, 109.

⁵³ This will become especially relevant upon addressing the concept of the Foreign-Body.