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Sleep and Insomnia in Levinas and Shakespeare's Henry IV

Abstract

In his seminal Existence and Existents, Emmanuel Levinas linked the impersonal event of the il y a , the "there is" of inert, factical existence, to a condition of insomnia. His analysis of insomnia holds a unique place in his oeuvre where a thorough ambivalence toward 'being' manifests itself: to be-for-the-Other (before the self, or before all neglected Others) is the highest moment of existential and ethical transcendence, though to be 'awake' in order to encounter the Other is also to be pulled in a diametrically opposed direction, toward the factical and purely immanent experience of the world and of my own existence. In this essay I will read Shakespeare's Henry IV (Parts I and II) with an eye toward reading the relationship(s) between sleep, insomnia, and ethics anew. I will develop a Levinasian reading of Shakespeare: sleep as a transcendence of the factical, everyday situation is at the same time a passage toward the ethical situation.

Keywords: Levinas, Shakespeare, ethics, insomnia

In his seminal Existence and Existents, Emmanuel Levinas linked the impersonal event of the il y a , the "there is" of inert, factical existence, to a condition of insomnia. On the one hand, a state of seemingly-infinite wakefulness is a necessary pre-condition to the ethical call of the Other, since to be awake is to be responsible towards that which is in front of the subject, regarding it like so many object-faces in one's bedroom after one's eyes have adjusted to and brightened the surrounding dark. On the other hand, Levinas also regards insomnia as a particular kind of wakefulness that the subject must escape from. Shakespeare's plays (quite often praised by Levinas in his work) contain numerous meditations on insomnia, linked to a wide range of political, ethical, and

ontological topics, related most commonly in the literature to that condition on the edge of one's final sleep: death. However, in order to test the possibility of a Levinasian reading of Shakespeare on this subject, one should also think about the experience of insomnia on its own.

In this essay, I will first explore the relationship between sleep and the il y a in the work of Levinas, demonstrating that the experience of insomnia in its highest metaphysical dimension is an experience of horror, a claustrophobic and unfulfilling being-awake to empty, mute presence. Levinas's analysis of insomnia holds a unique place in his oeuvre where a thorough ambivalence toward "being" manifests itself: to be-for-the-Other (before the self, or before all neglected Others) is the highest moment of existential and ethical transcendence, though to be "awake" in order to encounter the Other is also to be pulled in a diametrically opposed direction, toward the factical and purely immanent experience of the world and of my own existence, or toward the meaninglessness of selfish desires and the concomitant guilt that diminishes my responsibility toward the Other.

However, the purpose of this brief analysis is primarily to set the phenomenological foundation (the first-person experience) of insomnia. Then, I will begin to read Shakespeare's Henry IV (Parts I and II) with an eye toward reading the relationship(s) between sleep, insomnia, and ethics anew. King Henry's speech in his nightgown (from Part 2), for instance, foregrounds (one potential version of) the ethical subject in its experience of insomnia, unable to sleep in proportion to his responsibility as a public figure. I will argue that the relationship between sleep and insomnia in the play is charged by an ethical, as opposed to (simply) an ontological, principle. It is to this end, and with recourse to the specificities of the text, that I will develop a Levinasian reading of Shakespeare: Sleep as a transcendence of the factical, everyday situation is at the same time a passage toward the ethical situation (though it does not necessarily get the subject all the way there). Ultimately, I want to suggest that Henry IV's ethics is reconcilable with the Levinasian picture, though a strong reading often requires modesty in the face of Shakespeare's tropological ambivalence toward either pole of the relation between waking life and its dark opposite.

Levinas and the Horror of Insomnia

Martin Heidegger attempted to resolve many of the philosophical tradition's intractable metaphysical problems by appealing to a notion of Dasein's being-in-the-world, its primordial openness to being, and its status as the site of being, a notion that the subject cannot be seen separate from and positioned against a world and its objects if its hands are constantly working on and with them (sitting, writing, hammering, swimming). Heidegger's account of the fracturing of this unity of Dasein and the world is given in the mood of anxiety, where one finds that one can no longer do anything with the world. For Levinas, something like this happens to the subject, but it is not a function of a mood or disposition; instead, Levinas introduced the concept of il y a or the "there is," an anonymous, impersonal, and neutral form of being that, contra Heidegger, is not "given" to Dasein but is, rather, what the subject must escape from. The "there is" is the event of being for Levinas, and it presents itself most acutely in the experience of insomnia.

In Heideggerian language, the 'there is' is not ontic: it is not a particular thing or an entity. Instead, it is the presence of nothing in particular; it is being itself as a mute, non-responding presence (a light that simply won't go out). What Robert Bernasconi, in his foreword to Existence and Existents, calls "the vigilance of insomnia" (Levinas xii) is described by Levinas as "[the] impossibility of rending the invading, inevitable, and anonymous rustling of existence" which "manifests itself particularly in certain times when sleep evades our appeal" (61). Almost as if Levinas, ahead of his time, was describing the postmodern experience of watching soul killing re-runs of horrible sitcoms on television late at night when one can't fall asleep, he says of the inertness of being and the il y a, "[one] watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful." The insomniac wants nothing more complicated than to turn off the light, to make the world go away, so that the "bare face of presence is oppressive," the simple fact that there are things in general in one's phenomenological field when there shouldn't be (which, to be contemporary again, is a much different experience than that of a daytime television viewer who wants to see what else is on, wants a better form of entertainment than she's currently getting, rather than desiring nothingness itself).

By conceptualizing the il y a, Levinas broke with a fundamental aspect of Husserlian phenomenology, in which consciousness must intend toward something, some object. Perhaps Husserl slept well at night; the insomniac "is detached from any object, any content, yet there is

presence." She does not experience nothingness itself (as Sartre's subjects, scanning cafes for people who were not actually there, were supposed to have done). Rather, if the existential subject is the site of being, the insomniac is specifically the site of anonymous being, and is thus herself anonymous, not quite a subject at all: "[for] an instant to be able to break into being, for this insomnia, which is like the very eternity of being, to come to a stop, a subject would have to be posited" (Levinas 62). Insomnia is a waking nightmare of sorts because it never stops – the insomniac is always on this side of a great divide in being, blocked from inter-personality and responsibility, desiring an escape from muteness and indifference and anxious about the feeling of permanence that pervades the inside of this state.

The relation between insomnia and responsibility, between wakefulness and ethics, is not nearly as simple as all this may suggest. First, if the insomniac is anonymous, then 'who' exactly is the ethical subject in this picture? To be sure, at least, the state of 'wakefulness' is an anonymous state:

> *It is not that there is my vigilance in the night; in insomnia it is the night itself that watches. It watches. In this anonymous nightwatch where I am completely exposed to being, all the thoughts which occupy my insomnia are suspended on nothing. They have no support. I am, one might say, the object rather than the subject of anonymous thought. To be sure, I have at least the experience of being an object, I still become aware of this anonymous vigilance; but I become aware of it in a movement in which the I is already detached from the anonymity, in which the limit of impersonal vigilance is reflected in the ebbing of a consciousness which abandons it. (Levinas 63)*

It is precisely because, in insomnia, objects dissipate that the subject herself dissipates along with them. Existence and Existents in its entirety can be read as a map of an ethical trajectory that begins with the il y a and ends with an ethics of the Other, but it is too simple (and rather incoherent) to say that this trajectory amounts to a move from a state of wakefulness to a state of a sleep of some kind. Instead, Levinas charts a path from a state of insomnia to a state of egoism (the "sleep" of purely personal concern) back to an alternative state of wakefulness, of the opening into a domain of the inter-personal, to a realm of actual response instead of muteness, and of alterity instead of nothingness.

The Sleepy and the Vigilant in Henry IV

Levinas references Shakespeare's Hamlet and Macbeth in Existence and Existents, though not specifically regarding the motifs of sleep and insomnia that both plays include. Sleep and its discontents figure quite prominently throughout Shakespeare's corpus, from the high tragedies to comedies like, quite obviously, A Midsummer Night's Dream. History plays like Henry IV and Henry V utilize the dialectic of sleep and wakefulness in subtle ways, and provide a useful platform from which to engage Levinas, since the more overtly political nature of the narrative grounds the subject's relation to the world and the Other in the realm of ethics and ethical responsibility.

The central pair of Henry IV, Hal and Falstaff, maintain a relationship whose structure is repeated by other couples in the play, including Hotspur and Kate and Mortimer and his wife. Garrett Sullivan notes that in each case, "a figure associated with sleep and romance appears to derail the epic destiny of a young prince" (72). Throughout the play, wakefulness (and sometimes insomnia) is associated with political sovereignty, a correlation that reaches its apotheosis in King Henry's aforementioned nightgown speech. Thus, on one reading, a prince's "epic destiny" is fulfilled by a "waking up," and through a repression of his sleepy figure. However, it is not at first obvious where the ethical center of Shakespeare's play lies. Indeed, the vitality of Falstaff's character, for instance, presents a challenge to any easy preference for waking life over sleep. Further, the very notion of sovereignty is marked by ambivalence, as its concomitant repudiation of common bodily, rhythmic life is paid for by an excessive wakefulness, an il y a in political form, that carries its own negative consequences.

Sullivan names Falstaff the greatest of all of Shakespeare's sleepers, and indeed, as the central pair of the play, Falstaff and Hal are worthy of particular attention here. Their first appearance (together or otherwise) begins when Falstaff wakes from one of his slumbers:

> Falstaff: Now, Hal, what time of day is it lad?
>
> Prince: Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldest truly know. What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups

of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day. (I.I.ii.1-12)[1]

Hal draws an association here between sleep and drunkenness and general libertinism. His question to Falstaff plays upon the notion that clock time, the measure of one's public commitments, should be of no consequence to someone who sleeps "upon benches after noon," and whose life revolves around sleep, sack, and whores. Immediately, Hal affects an inner distance from Falstaff's merry world, disavowing the somnolence of the tavern he so often frequents:

Prince: I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humor of your idleness.
Yet herein I will imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wond'red at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapors that did seem to strangle him. (I.I.ii.199-207)

As Harold Bloom has likened Falstaff to figures like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, paragons of vitality and immoderation, obvious not only to the reader throughout both parts of Henry IV but to Hal and nearly everyone else in the world of the play, this immoderation is continuously "registered in terms of sleep" (Sullivan 84). With Falstaff asleep in Part I's Act II, "snorting like a horse" (I.II.iv.529), Hal and Peto find small, unpaid receipts in his pockets. These debts are used by Hal as the concrete universal, or stand-in, for larger ethical bankruptcies, a general or even ontological "debt" (the "debt [he] never promised") that is reflected in public balances and responsibilities. As Hal moves to reject Falstaff, the sleepy knight becomes the figure of sleep itself, the vulgar remainder that measures (as its opposition) one's commitment to honor and public service.

This rejection, at Hal's (now Henry's) coronation in Part II's Act V, also functions as an awakening:

Falstaff: My King! My Jove! I speak to thee, my heart!
King Henry V: I know thee not old man. Fall to thy prayers.
How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester.
I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane,
But being awaked I do despise my dream. (II.V.v.49-54)

Hal's awakening and coronation is, quite importantly, not a move from sleep to insomnia (it is his father and predecessor, Henry IV, who is the play's chief insomniac, as we will see). The awakening, rather, is (at least by Hal's own measure) a move from being in-itself to a subjectivity for-itself. "Presume not that I am the thing I was," he says, marking a transcendence of his former lethargy, the "bare life" in Giorgio Agamben's sense that Sullivan associates with Falstaff:

Sleep is associated with bare life because it answers to the logic of the inclusive exclusion. Sleep is that to which the vertical human opposes itself (and thus is excluded); at the same time, it is a biological process that man requires to stay alive and thus to be human (and so is included). However, insofar as sleep is abjected from the vertical human – and thus from epic – it is associated with what both epic and the vertical understand as a (bare) life lived as if one were dead. (75)

His naps and slumbers constantly likened to animal states, and as exhaustive extensions of his biological drives, Falstaff's amoral revelry is structured, in the life of Hal-Henry, like a dream, an unconscious comedy of errors that provides the immanent material for an ethical-political public transcendence of private phantasmagoria.

Of course, for Levinas, the ethical and the political (at least in the broad sense in which Hal conceives it, as concerned with sovereignty) do not necessarily overlap. And as Northrop Frye notes, the ethics that grounds Hal's choices at the end of Part I and beyond is Aristotelian (or an extension thereof), not an ethics grounded in the Other: "a virtue is a mean between extremes, and the virtue of courage is a mean between cowardice at one extreme and rashness or foolhardiness

at the other. Falstaff represents one extreme and Hotspur the other, little as that statement does justice to the complexity of either" (71). And as is very quickly evident upon all but the least aware readings, Falstaff contains contradictions and multitudes (ethical and otherwise), aspects of what Terry Eagleton calls "reductive materialism and verbal license" that "belong to the carnivalesque, the satiric comedy of the people," while containing incongruities: "[social] order is subverted simultaneously from two opposed directions: by that which is purely and materially itself, the self-pleasuring body which refuses to be inscribed by social imperatives; and by that which is never at one with itself at all, the iconoclastic idiom of those who run verbal rings round their solemnly prosaic opponents" (16). Further, an obvious problem for any reading that draws a formal equivalence between Hal's transcendence of bare, sleepy life and Levinas's proposed move into an ethics of the Other is the ambiguity with which Shakespeare's text engages the ethics of sleep. The closest thing to "bare life" in Levinas's thought is not sleep but the state of insomnia, the il y a, in which presence as such is laid bare. Before comparing Hal's transformation (which is really an emptying out of his former self) and his wakened state to the insomnia of his predecessor, it is important to note exactly how Falstaff's alternative life in depicted for the reader, not just for Hal.

Falstaff's vitality, what Bloom articulates as the desire for "more life," is bolstered, not contradicted, by his critique of honor (the values in the name of which Hal-Henry casts off the sleeping knight)![2] He challenges the common ethics when, in defense of his playing dead on the fields of Shrewsbury, he says, "Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit: to die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man, who hath not the life of a man: but to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed" (I.V.iv.114-119). This, and his well-known claim that the man of honor is he "that died a-Wednesday," leads Sullivan to suggest a "chain of equivalence" constructed through Falstaff's character: "counterfeit death equals sleep equals life" (89). If the ethics of Henry IV is to choose "more life" (a forerunner to a Romantic ethics, found in the poetry of Shelley and Keats, based around the commitment to experience), then sleep as a symptom of bare life is no longer the debased, decadent state society and political discourse take it to be. Sleep, as the first move in an ethical turn to transcendence, is a source of freedom, as Bloom suggests of Falstaff's example:

What, then, are the teachings of the philosopher of Eastcheap? Eating, drinking, fornication, and other obvious indulgences are not the heart of Falstaffianism, though they certainly take up much of the knight's time. This does not matter, because Falstaff, as Hal first tells us, has nothing to do with the time of day. That which we are, that only can we teach; Falstaff, who is free, instructs us in freedom – not a freedom in society, but from society. (276)

Since, for Levinas, anonymous being is determined and unfree, its subject trapped in and oppressed by presence without purpose, sleep is a step toward freedom. However, for Shakespeare's insomniac, King Henry IV, this sleep can be nothing other than the big sleep, for his insomnia is a symptom of his kingship, and his kingship is only forfeited upon his death. Henry IV's experience is the truth of Henry V's ambitions; the crown is not the vehicle for true ethical subjectivity, but the bearer of a wakefulness that is only a degraded form of an infinite openness toward the Other.

Upon his deathbed, Henry IV, finally on the verge of purging his wretched insomnia, tells his son "to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels, that action hence borne out / May waste the memory of the foreign days" (II.IV.v.213-215). In the name of quelling rebellion and the political machinations of the nobles, the king's advice is precisely to dehumanize the Other, to draw a clear divide between "Us" and "Them," the English and the non-English, through the means of warfare (one notes that, at the beginning of Part I, his plan to avoid civil war was to start a crusade abroad). A constant vigilance toward one's enemies is a form of insomnia, not ethical consciousness, the rustling of backstabbers and crown-seekers and foreigners whose enmity is just now politically ripe like Levinas's "anonymous rustling of existence."

King Henry's aforementioned night speech offers both a weariness of insomnia, generated by his position of power, and envy toward his subjects' unselfconscious, restful repose. In his nightgown, alone after dismissing his page, Henry speaks in verse:

How many thousand of my poorest subjects
Are at this hour asleep! O sleep, O gentle sleep,
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,

That thou no more wilt weight my eyelids down
And steep my senses in forgetfulness? (II.III.i.4-8)

The answer to his question, the cause of his insomnia, is his position as king: “Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,” he states, in contrast to the “ship-boy,” who sleeps despite “the rude imperious surge” of the raging ocean around him. Sleep lies “in smoky cribs” rather than “the perfumed chambers of the great,” in “loathsome beds” and not on “the kingly couch,” and most importantly, in crows nests of common ships “in an hour so rude,” but not for the bodily representative of the English nation “in the calmest and most stillest night.”

“The implication” of Henry’s speech, Sullivan claims, “is that while the ‘happy low’ can sleep, that ability confirms their status as low, as incapable of a vigilance that can only be maintained by the monarch” (91). This marks a further value claim by the play’s sovereign, that insomnia is a symptom of rule, so that we should add to Sullivan’s account the ethical must (the ship-boy, perched in the crow’s nest of his ship, is presumably there to keep watch, like only a king truly can, not to sleep). Henry “turns sleeplessness into a virtue, a sign of his royal authority” (Sullivan 92), which is clearly at odds with Levinas’s account of insomnia, where the only authority is of pure presence against the subject’s freedom.

The interpretive problem of “bare life” in the play comes up again as we follow Henry IV’s rule to its end: sleeplessness has clearly sapped him of his vitality (which any comparison to Falstaff makes doubly clear). In Clarence’s words, “Th’incessant care and labor of his mind / Hath wrought the mure that should confine it in / So thin that life looks through and will break out” (II.IV.iv.118-120); his insomnia, his mind’s ceaseless labor, is a sickness as much as a beacon of royal responsibility. If to sleep is to give up one’s right to rule, Hal’s misinterpretation of his father’s condition (mistaking sleep for death) when he first puts the crown upon his head is politically premature but symbolically appropriate, as it “ensures the continuity of royal watchfulness in the face of the current king’s slumbers” (Sullivan 93). But it is also the beginning of a sickness, an internalization of some subtle disease, like a parasite at the beginning of its cycle with its host. This action marks the end of his relationship with Falstaff, and Hal/Henry V’s forsaking of “the true and perfect image of life indeed”

(I.V.iv.118-119) for “power, usurpation, rule, grand extortion, treachery, violence, hypocrisy, fake piety, the murder of prisoners and of those who surrender under truce” (Bloom 285).

Awaking for/to the Other

The “sickness” of insomnia can also be read, along with Harold Goddard’s reading of Henry IV, as “the nocturnal part of a man that receives what he puts behind his back or under his feet in the daytime” (Goddard 169). Thus, introducing a notion of the unconscious in Shakespeare’s play, and a return of the repressed, Goddard’s reading is premised upon the argument that the insomniac king “reveals the unrealized half of his soul” through his soliloquy’s attention to the distance he’s traveled from innocence and youth (a distance only understood through an act of imagination “that must be repressed before nature will permit one of her own creatures to be transformed into a worldling”). For Levinas, the unconscious is absolutely associated with the il y a, and it is the conscious subject that emerges out of its unconscious ground, as day emerges from night’s specters.

In evaluating whether the ethics of Henry IV is reconcilable with a Levinasian ethics of the Other, the terms conscious/unconscious, sleep/insomnia, and day/night become very problematic indeed in their distribution: it is simply not clear whether these two texts can share a coherent schema. For Levinas, consciousness

> *appears to stand out against the there is by its ability to forget and interrupt it, by its ability to sleep. Consciousness is a mode of being, but, in taking up being, it is a hesitation in being. It thus gives itself a dimension of retreat. In the Bible when Jonas, the hero of impossible escapes, invoker of nothingness and death, observes in the midst of the raging elements the failure of his flight and the fatality of his mission, he climbs down into the hold of his ship and goes to sleep. (64)*

Interestingly, the great Jonas is described like King Henry’s lowly ship-boy, this time shamelessly sleeping in the hold (and not even in the crow’s nest where the boy’s mission would be accomplished). Levinas paradoxically associates consciousness with sleep and the unconscious with insomnia, but perhaps if Goddard is right, so does Shakespeare.

For Levinas, the Other is beyond being, so that true engagement with the Other does not follow an ontological principle. Since sleep is the first move beyond the mute realm of the there is, of bare life as opposed to bare presence, it is also the first step toward ethical engagement (Bloom is perhaps helpful here in marking a break from the Aristotelian ethics that would hold Falstaff, the play's sleeper, in contempt: "As the Socrates of Eastcheap, Falstaff need not concern himself with teaching virtue, because the struggle between the usurper Henry IV and the rebels has no possible relation to ethics or to morality. Falstaff jests of the rebels that 'they offend only the virtuous,' who clearly are not to be found in the England of Henry IV (or of Henry V)" (275)). To be awake to the Other is to be awake to alterity, which is not the purview of the insomniac, who, like King Henry, is concerned solely with the self (the king's political responsibility is marked by his distance from his subjects; they are a faceless crowd of the low).

The importance of the face for Levinas marks the particularity of his conception of the Other. Existence and Existents provides only a germ (or, more accurately, a plethora of germs) for the development of this phenomenology-ethics.[3] But it is the essential poverty or vulnerability of the face, found in its expression rather than the mere physicality of its features and its status as a perceptual object, that betrays the Other's nakedness and exposure to injury and injustice. This vulnerability "calls" the subject either to violence or radical non-violence (the attack or the ethical mode) in the unique singularity of the face-to-face experience (and this singularity, one should note, produces the difficulty and guilt of the ethical mode, of the fact that each Other makes a demand on the subject despite the fact that one, as finite, can only attend to one debt at a time). Falstaff and Hal's role-playing in the tavern in Part I bears witness to the former's appeal (playing as the prince) to the worthiness of his own character on the basis of the vulnerability of his face and his "white hairs" (I.II.iv.468). Falstaff's later dialogue with Bardolph about the latter's face (and Falstaff's playful suggestion that he "amend" it) demonstrates the importance of the face in actual, attentive inter-personal engagement: "But thou art altogether given over, and wert indeed, but for the light in thy face, the son of utter darkness" (I.III.iii.36-38).

The major alternative to Levinas's concept of the Other is Jacques Lacan's concept of the (big) Other, which reconciles for the subject the fact that (symbolic, social) reality is incomplete. The big Other is faceless, is not a singularity but a symbolic authority to which the subject (often

unconsciously) appeals and, more importantly, is shaped by. If Falstaff, as its unofficial "sleeper," is the ethical center of Shakespeare's play (ethical, of course, in a non-traditional sense), it is certainly not as the upholder of symbolic reality as it is (as opposed to as it could be). Bloom's Falstaff is "the representative of imaginative freedom, of a liberty set against time, death, and the state, which is a condition that we crave for ourselves" (288). The aspect of the Other tied up in conventional language and interpellating institutions is the aspect of the subject's alienation in society's superegoic structures and its motivating obsession with power and honor (an obsession that generates real and figurative insomnias). A Levinasian ethics of the Other is an openness away from monotony, routine, the politics of honor and conquest, and the mere circulation of the social-material realm through sleep and toward something more than all of that, not just a state of perpetual wakefulness but a state of "having woken up" from a slumber. This event is the "beginning of a being" (Levinas 102), which is also the beginning of a life.

One of Levinas's major departures from Heideggerian phenomenology was in his desire to escape from an original, elemental domain, rather than return to it. The asymmetry of the subject's relationship to the Other, the experience of yielding fully to the Other and finding oneself responsible for someone much greater than oneself, leads to a state wholly transcendent of the il y a, of anonymous insomnia. This state is one of excess, its proportions Falstaffian and thus reliant upon both sleep (to break one from the opposite asymmetry, the belief that one is greater than all of one's subjects) and wakefulness (to return to life with a project for its enlargement, both in oneself and in others, just as Falstaff is "not only witty in [himself], but the cause that wit is in other men" (II.I.ii.9-10)). Falstaff, of course, is not of the solemn sort that one might associate with Levinas, and we have seen that many of the binaries established by Shakespeare and Levinas do not line up perfectly. Henry IV is certainly not a systematic ethical treatise, though it presents a clear departure from a certain repressive virtue ethics and an immoral politics. Rather than attempt to find Levinas in Shakespeare (as opposed to the reverse, which is far easier), one can profitably apply a Levinasian reading in order to understand the horrid surfaces of the insomniac experience, the rolling depths of sleep, and the path one must take to transcend the egoism inherent in both.

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[1] All parenthetical references to Shakespeare will refer to one of the two cited editions, edited by either Maynard Mack (Part I) or Peter Davison (Part II), depending upon which part is referenced. In-text citations include part, act, scene, and line(s).

[2] Frye notes, “In one of the plays in Shaw’s Back to Methusaleh, set in the future, a monument has been erected to Falstaff. It is explained that after a few experiences of warfare (even though this is early twentieth century, and before the atom bomb), it had been realized that cowardice was a major social virtue, and so a monument had been set up to the sage who discovered the fact” (74). Perhaps, then, it is not that Falstaff’s ethical character provides an alternative to Aristotle’s, but rather a perversion of it.

[3] It is only in Totality and Infinity, Bernasconi notes, “that transcendence is concretized in the ethical relation to the Other” (Levinas xiii).



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