

THE SPECTER OF IRREVERSIBILITY, OR THE (IM)POSSIBLE DIALOGUE OF BENSUSAN AND A FRENCH PHILOSOPHER

Oliver Norman

THE IMPERTINENT QUESTION

The title of the present paper may seem rather impertinent. Firstly, Bensusan's spectral realism extends far beyond the scope of the author's expertise, even though they are not unacquainted with ner¹ works. Secondly, even though the current issue concerns the reading of a work by Bensusan, I will attempt to make this paper about a reading or a re-reading *from* the book. Such a step may be seen as an attempt to side-step *Memory Assemblages*. However, I'm quite sure the methodology of re-reading, of addition, of iterability, is at the heart of Bensusan's reading of Derrida and therefore justifies that I follow my own addition rather than a profound exegetical point on *Memory Assemblages*.² In this re-reading, I hope iterability will occur, that is what Kierkegaard called *Gjentagelsen* – repetition or rather reprisal, the advent of newness through repetition. My goal is to harken retrieval, to access an archive which, unseen, works through and in the text: "Iterability is a promise of retrieval. It is not semantic in the sense that it cannot deliver retrieval itself—it can only wait for it, enable its coming"³ Finally, impertinence also because to add an author, a philosopher to the work could be seen as a corrective to a lack, as a sign of incompleteness of the work. The

¹ Bensusan's preferred pronouns are ne, ner, nem.

² « Iterability is the syntactic feature that ensures textuality and that, as a consequence, makes semantics possible—semantics in the sense of readability, which amounts to the extraction of some content (if we can help ourselves to the language of content, which is itself dependent on the notion of a retention oblivious to retrieval). » Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, London, Bloomsbury, 2024, p. 34.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

incompletion of memory is also a focus of Bensusan's philosophy, but just as we will attempt to show here, in *Memory Assemblages*, incompleteness becomes the structure of memory itself not through a lacking past, from an opening towards the future, an *à venir* (to come) that can never be completed, created through a prospective recollection within retention itself: "memory (or, for that matter, any previous event or any beginning) is therefore always wanting, irreducibly incomplete because it is made for recollection"⁴ Memory is not only the retrieval and collection of the past in some historical exhibit of the mind, an antiquarian type of dusty shelf, it is *for* the *to come*, it opens the possibility of the future. This future is not only that of any event in its irreducible newness, but also the future of any singular piece of writing – including *Memory Assemblages* which is *qua* writing in itself a memory assemblage, open to the future, to future readings and re-readings, to iterability and to newness.

Founded upon this constitutive openness of *Memory Assemblages*, I propose an encounter with something exterior to the work but held within its tradition – both retrieved and retained.

We should press this impertinence a bit more to stress the issue at hand: to attempt to say that Bensusan never engages with French philosophy would be a deeply troubling avowal of a lack of reading on our part, the sort of which, would be unacceptable in any scholarly context. I am not saying, of course, that Bensusan does not interact with French philosophy, he does, extensively drawing from Malabou, Bergson, Deleuze, Derrida and Lévinas.⁵ I do not consider here the lack of French philosophy but the absence of a singular French philosopher. It is a non-lacking absence palpable in the intertwining of references and concepts that call out to this one singular, irreplaceable figure of my own philosophical tradition (to use Derrida's love of singularity): Vladimir Jankélévitch. Not only is Jankélévitch a philosopher of time and of memory (or at least some form of memory), I will attempt to show that some of Jankélévitch's insights find echoes in Bensusan's work, echoes that are at the same time added to – a reprisal of a problem rather than a mere repetition of textual occurrences.

The intersections of these philosophers is at once one of readings: Jankélévitch

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57, p. 69, p. 99 among many other examples.

was not only the philosopher of forgiveness he is known as in the English-speaking world⁶, but also one of the first and greatest commentators of Henri Bergson's works⁷ – a name we do find in *Memory assemblages*. He was also on Lévinas' doctoral committee, quoted Lévinas in *Philosophie première* and is quoted in turn in *Totality and Infinity...*⁸ To find his mentor and disciple and not him feels like it creates a possible dialogue. It opens the space through which reception can add to Bensusan's work. But at the same time this dialogue was, in many others ways, always impossible. Jankélévitch refused to engage with phenomenology and especially German philosophy after WWII – Heidegger is always absent whereas he is fully present in Bensusan's thought appearing over one hundred and fifty times in the book. Furthermore, his philosophy is almost non-existent in English, with a few exceptions – *Forgiveness*, *The Paradox of Morality* and *Music and the Ineffable*. His major contribution to French philosophy and especially the philosophy of time and memory is as of yet untranslated – *L'irréversible et la nostalgie*. And his legacy, albeit present in his native France has only started to be retrieved and inherited in the English-speaking world.⁹

Jankélévitch opens our eyes to some of Bensusan's most important – and sometimes not very insisted upon – insights, and in an economy of reception and repetition, this reading of Bensusan in turn forces us to re-read Jankélévitch, to review some of his theses and to see where the sticking points are. I contend that Jankélévitch brings to Bensusan an exploration of the irreversibility and the heart of her concept of addition and thereby of memory assemblages, and in return, Bensusan by attempting to place addition in a priority and prior relationship with time allows us to circumvent Jankélévitch's great rejection of space as a philosophical topic.

6 Jankélévitch, V., *Forgiveness*, trans. A. Kelley, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

7 Jankélévitch, V., *Henri Bergson*, trans. N. F. Schott, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015.

8 Lévinas, E., *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979, p. 298 : « Jankélévitch is right to say that labor is not an expression » ; Jankélévitch, V., *Philosophie première*, Paris, PUF, 1953, p. 145.

9 Of note is an important forthcoming work curated by Andrew Kelley : Kelley, A. (ed.), *The Inimitable Philosophy of Vladimir Jankélévitch*, London, Bloomsbury, 2026.

IRREVERSIBILITY AND ADDITION

The central concept of Jankélévitch's work which I believe can be informed and called into question by a reading of *Memory Assemblages* is irreversibility. This may seem strange as irreversibility is not the heart of Bensusan's work, however I would argue this is not the case, the difficulty in linking these two philosophers will be the nature of irreversibility rather than its effects. I must however recognize that the word only appears a handful of times in *Memory Assemblages*: 5 times as an adjective and two as an adverb.¹⁰ Whereas Jankélévitch wrote an entire book on that concept – *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*. Let us remark from the get go the obvious link between memory in its nostalgic *Stimmung* or *tonalité affective* and irreversibility. Nostalgia is one of the affective relations to time made possible if and only if irreversibility is at the heart of what time is or what time does: "Nostalgia is a human melancholy made possible by consciousness, that is consciousness of something else, of an elsewhere, of a contrast between past and present, between present and future"¹¹

Whether this irreversibility takes place in a priority of addition – as it seems to be in Bensusan's work : "Once radio is added to life, the price of its removal is a public life lacking radio—this is what makes that addition irreversible"¹² – or whether it be the essence of time, the same results are yielded here. Time is irreversible, asymmetrical addition brings irreversibility into the fore: "Chemistry is full of additions, but they are of the type of addition I'm considering: irreversible, something other than juxtaposition and different from completion—call this, for simplicity, asymmetric addition."¹³ Meditating upon addition, we come to the importance of the character of irreversibility in those additions. *Statu quo ante* cannot be retrieved fully, it is always renewed in the process of retrieval itself. Recollection is always a second collection, maybe extremely similar to the first but always distinct through addition. If addition is at the heart of Bensusan's work then this means that either addition is reversible circumventing irreversibility and making every second instance into an exact replica of the first, or it is irreversible differentiating two instances even by their mere prior-posterior

¹⁰ Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 20, 21, 31, 52, 55, 87.

¹¹ Jankélévitch, V., *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, Paris, Flammarion, 1974, p. 346. Translation mine.

¹² Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

relationship. Even eternal recurrence would fall to the logic of addition for the second recurrence would always be second, always come after the first. Jankélévitch himself is highly critical of the idea of an eternal recurrence of the same – the same is not a temporal notion, nothing in irreversible time is the same, Heraclitus was right, even a river is not the same at two distinct points in time: “[Eternal recurrence] is a monster; a monstrous absurdity born of the exaltation of megalomaniac delirium. This is what happens when we cease to believe in positivity, in productive efficacy, in the spontaneity of time; we replace the eternity of irreversible progress with an eternity of repetition, of stuttering and by grandiose chatter”¹⁴

Irreversibility, in both cases, is not reducible to the causal link between two phenomena. In time two moments are always prior and posterior, this does not mean that memory cannot be retrieved nor that the specter of the future does not always haunt the past, it does not negate the out-of-jointedness of time in the Derridean and Bensusan’s accounts.¹⁵ Rather, irreversibility simply means that every iteration is inscribed within a prior-posterior order and every re-iteration is always posterior to a previous iteration, not in its content but in its facticity. My forgotten childhood may influence the person I am today and I may revert to a second childhood “sans eyes sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything” to quote Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. But that second childhood will always be second, and my childhood can only be forgotten and yet influential to my present if it is past opened up to a possible future retrieval. This leads Jankélévitch to postulate that “Irreversibility is not one characteristic of time among others, it *is* the very temporality of time; and the verb ‘is’ is hereby understood in an ‘ontological’ sense not a copulative one: that is that irreversibility defines the whole and the essence of time and of time alone”¹⁶ The ascription of irreversibility to time alone is the point we must, eventually, face and question, especially in regard to *Memory Assemblages*. Indeed, if asymmetrical addition is prior, it justifies this ordering of time itself, addition grants time irreversibility. To use the example of the vegan adafina in the first pages, the addition of too much salt would be irreversible, and any subsequent subtraction of salt or more commonly any attempt to conceal its

¹⁴ Jankélévitch, V., *L’irréversible et la nostalgie*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Jankélévitch, V., *L’irréversible et la nostalgie*, p. 7.

presence is an addition in itself:

“While cooking a vegan adafina, I place the vegetables in the hot oil with the already translucent onions and lightly cooked garlic and then throw in the chopped spinach, forgetting to add the chickpeas, which take a while to soften. I can surely add them afterwards, or maybe remove the spinach, which went in the pot prematurely. Both operations will leave their traces in the taste of the dish—and they could even improve the flavor. If I then add more ingredients to erase my mistake, I can succeed in making the vestiges of the initial ingredients fade. Similarly, when painting with watercolors, not mixing enough water with the pigment will make a difference in the image, even if the pigment is subsequently removed or water is added to the mix afterwards. Here also, I can blend in more water and more pigment such that the signs of the initial mixture will gradually disappear. These cases of performing manual operations show that we often deal in a type of addition that is not really reversible and is sensitive to the order of the addends. Addends build on other things, change the previous combinations, and eventually bury them into irrelevance.”¹⁷

The end of Bensusan’s quote does not destroy irreversibility, rather irrelevancy is only possible if and only if irreversibility is at the heart of addition. Something cannot become irrelevant without having been relevant, detectable – in this case by the tastebuds. In becoming irrelevant we concede the primacy of irreversibility rather than reversion. Vestiges may fade but they never disappear, they are conserved albeit in a covered up, dissimulated way. The tragedy of the home cook is that one extra minute irreversibly burns a genoise sponge, embitters a caramel, oversalts an adafina. And while we can attempt to restore the status quo, that restoration is never a return to the previous state, it is always a new situation, a new configuration that bears the mark of the attempt to deceive the unwitting diner. The excess of salt is covered up through the excess of other ingredients or diluted through an overall excess by transforming the dish from a three-person supper to a twenty-person feast. Dilution itself is addition not subtraction – adding water to cordial does not destroy the cordial but add to it, making it palatable but never diminishing its quantity – only its ratio. For Bensusan, addition comes first and orders time itself, irreversibility could not

¹⁷ Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 19.

occur if addition were not at work in the succession of temporal elements. That addition cannot be removed and thereby we have an irreversibility that is the effect of addition rather than time. Jankélévitch could perhaps accept this premise – it may even help to explain his intransigent definition. If irreversibility is the Ground of time and not *vice versa*, does this not mean that no non-irreversible time exists? Time is caught in a form of “futurition”¹⁸, a ceaseless becoming which never dissipates that which has become. This may also justify Jankélévitch’s flagrant disdain of science-fiction: even if we could travel backwards or forwards in time, we would still be held hostage by the logic of irreversibility or of addition, time would as it were still move forward, that is nothing would be subtracted only added generating the futurition Jankélévitch talks of at length. Science-fiction itself does not subtract, Wells’ time machine does not remove addends. Further, even if we could assume the logical impossibility of this subtraction, the return in time is not an inversion of time itself, addends start to add once we get to the past, time flows irreversibly forwards, not backwards. The time traveler ages, and experiences things one after the other, not one before the other. The same is true of fictions such as *Benjamin Button*, the newborn elderly man does not experience time backwards. His biology may indicate a “younging” instead of an ageing, but this becoming-younger is in itself tied to irreversibility and is experienced the same way we all experience ageing. In an ironic *tour de force*, Jankélévitch’s work on death states explicitly that:

“To vanquish gravity is at least conceivable; whereas the idea of reversible time is a contradiction and almost an absurdity, not only an unthinkable like a square circle, but an unlivable reality; furthermore a chronology lived backwards, like a melody played from end to start, could only be an unintelligible gibberish et unspeakable cacophony; this thaumaturgy of backwards time, this teratology of a becoming beginning from the last breath and ending with the first is an ‘impossible supposition’, a hyperbolic utopia in the style of Wells, ou an amusing sketch like Hindemith’s *Hin und Zurück*, even better, a nonsense and, literally, an antisense. Whoever thinks they are inverting the beginning and the end are reversing the order of series or sequences composing life itself – but inside each

18 Jankélévitch, V., L’irréversible et la nostalgie, p. 7.

phase, each block of *durée*, experiences remain upright.”¹⁹

We can place the first occurrence before or after the second if we like, we can place the end first and the beginning last, but this inversion is no pure reversion of time. Time is still lived in the same direction whether it starts with death and ends with birth or the other – natural – way around. Addition cannot be dissipated, reversing an order does not cancel out addition or magically transform addends into subtrahends.

THE STICKING POINT OF THIS READING: THE PROBLEM OF SPACE

Read thus, the two philosophies of Jankélévitch and Bensusan seem to resonate. However, the sticking points arise from the traditions in which our philosophers develop. Jankélévitch is, by essence, a Bergsonian philosopher, but one who goes beyond Bergson’s critique of the spatial representation of time, this Jankélévitch contends is not the heart of the distinction between space and time. It is not a distinction between duration and instantaneous time as in the debate between Bergson and Bachelard. Nor is space purely static and time purely dynamic. It is the movement of this dynamic itself that is of primary concern: for Jankélévitch space is reversible (the locus of no addition, rather of equation) whereas time is inherently irreversible. However, the opposition between space and time in the Jankélévitchian context seems much rather and less problematically to illustrate the opposition between what Bensusan calls asymmetrical and symmetrical addition, time being an emanation of the former, and for Jankélévitch but not for Bensusan, space being an emanation of the latter:

“Indifferent and complementing additions can be reverted, so they are commutative ($x + a = a + x$) and transitive (if $x + a_1 = A_1$ and $A_1 + a_2 = A_2$, then $x + (a_1+a_2) = A_2$). Within the domain of real numbers, additions are both indifferent ($12 + 5 - 5 + 7 - 7 = 12$) and complementing (12 exists as much as 5 and 7 before they are added together and thus 7 can be expressed as “ $12-5$ ”). These features make addition in real numbers symmetric. An asymmetric addition, in contrast, is one where the initial element x cannot be recuperated by removing the addends and the sum obtained is not anything pre-existing or prefigured.”²⁰

¹⁹ Jankélévitch, V., *La Mort*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, p. 293. Translation mine.

²⁰ Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 21.

Mathematics may, by virtue of its possibility of equation, make additions symmetrical. Addends dissipate in the abstraction of mathematic formulae. However, when faced with lived experience, and concrete existence – for Jankélévitch, when faced with the impetus of time – this symmetry is a feature we cannot accept.

In order to illustrate the opposition between an equation of space and the addend of time, Jankélévitch calls upon Homer's *Odyssey*. Our own re-reading of Jankélévitch and Bensusan is made possible by a re-reading of Homer... this re-reading itself, even though Jankélévitch cannot see it in this way, is an iteration, an addition. In *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie* he posits that:

“Temporal irreversibility casts a doubt on spatial reversibility that it both encompasses and permeates [...] If it had been a simple trip in space, Ulysses would never have been disappointed; it is not the leaving of the Homeland that is irremediable, it is having left this homeland twenty years prior. In exile, Ulysses does not only want to come back to [retrouver] his homeland, but the young man he himself was back then when he lived there. [...] Ulysses will come back to his Ithaca et he will even find it in the exact same place he left it – because in between time it hasn't changed location ; but the Ulysses he used to be when he left his island can never be brought back [retrouvera]: that Ulysses is dead and forever gone; Ulysses is now another Ulysses, coming back to another Penelope... And Ithaca is another island, in the same place, but not the same date; it is the homeland of another time.”²¹

Usually, this text is taken not only as a poetic reading of the *Odyssey*, which it is, but to say that travelling in space is reversible, we can come back to our starting point as if nothing happened, but that journey took time, and that time is always added, it never comes back to 0. The irreversibility of asymmetrical addition means that the return is always added to the departure, and that there is no opposite of becoming. Jankélévitch here plays on words: if you can come *venir* and come back *re-venir*, you can't become *devenir* and become back *dé-devenir* in the same way. But Bensusan's take on addition seems to me to better represent than Jankélévitch himself saw the claims of this passage, for space is not immune to time in a juxtaposition of metaphysical qualities contradistinct to one another.

²¹ Jankélévitch, V., *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, p. 370-371.

As Bensusan says, drawing on geology rather than geography: “The geological image of asymmetric addition conveniently ties together the space where the sediment falls and the time when that happens. Both the surface of the Earth—and indeed perhaps the surface of anything whatsoever—and the contemporary state of things are forged through addition. Both space and time exhibit interconnected memories of addition.”²²

Ithaca is no longer the same place, even if its cartographic delimitation may be represented along the same latitudes and longitudes, because addition has occurred. Irreversibility permeates space just as it permeates time, Ithaca itself becomes a memory assemblage that just as any other assemblage joins together the temporal and the spatial through an-archaeological addition of *Zusammengehörigkeit*. Ithaca is not the same homeland for if the homeland were the same, nostalgia would be null and void. The original homeland is irremediably lost not in oblivion but because it is encountered again in a retrieval which both brings back the past and the gap between occurrences of the assemblage. The trace of Ithaca has been reformed, retrieved as past in its presence, irreversibly other, irreversibly different, both lost and found at the same time.

To say that Bensusan adds to Jankélévitch here is both true and false at once, and the insistence on addition and memory assemblages in space and time – together – must draw our attention back to Jankélévitch’s portrayal of Ithaca itself. For Jankélévitch does not fully discount space but rather ties nostalgia to a non-cartographic relation to space where time has started to cannibalize space itself. As Olivier Moser puts it: “A nostalgic person affectively polarizes space, sanctifying one place (as a form of remedy) at the expense of another”²³ Only in geometry is space neutralized and equation possible, to use geology as Bensusan does, insists only the addend structure of space when it is delivered from the abstraction of geometry. Jankélévitch would agree with this: “Geometry has nothing to do with nostalgia... Mathematicians see every place as equivalent to another; and for the nostalgic heart space exists as concrete and diverse,

²² Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 33.

²³ Moser, O., ‘La mémoire de l’inachevé : étude sur la réception du nostos d’Ulysse dans la phénoménologie de Vladimir Jankélévitch’ in E. Zunino & P. Gasparini, *Nostalgie. Conceptualisation d’une émotion*, Nancy, PUN – éditions universitaires de Lorraine, 2021, p. 115.

qualitatively heterogenous sites.”²⁴ Affective tonality depends on addends, becomes the addend which transforms space into the canvas of time. The main difference between Bensusan and Jankélévitch seems to be that there is no necessary *Zusammengehörigkeit* in *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*. Space can become the locus of a temporal affliction and affection but only for the nostalgic soul, only for one who relates to addends through the lens of a particular *Stimmung*. Does nostalgia therefore add to space or reveal its additive nature? In both cases addends would be inscribed in our thought, for discovery itself is an addend, an addition that irreversibly takes place. The *summum* of this would be the discovery of truth, always already there, for the prisoner of Plato's cave. He can return to the darkness of the cavern, attempt to drag others with him, but never can he *unsee* the light which bears him.

From addition comes affective tonality. Nostalgia is an affective disposition that can only be understood if time is the interplay of both addition and irreversibility – as one and the same – but also only if space, the lived world, is the interplay of space and time, of addition in all its glory. Contrary to the *Stimmung* of messianicity, nostalgia glues the past to the subject who just as in Henri Maldiney's description of melancholy sinks into a groundless abyss (an *Abgrund*, he takes the word from Schelling's *Freiheitschrift*).²⁵ Unable to open themselves up to the reconfigurations at work, to the future shining through the past, the nostalgic individual attempts to cancel out reconfiguration, to suppress addition, and suffers from this attempt... “Retention without retrieval”²⁶ is this not the wish of the melancholic nostalgic soul? That the past still be there identical to itself in an eternal immutable essence... This will for a retention without retrieval, an iteration without reiteration, repetition without reprisal, is exactly what Jankélévitch criticizes in conservative politics that fundamental misunderstand or do not wish to understand the irreversible nature of time or addition:

“Even for the doctrinaire reactionaries, who actually follow the doctrine of progressive retrogradation, the goal is not to bring Louis XIV back in person on

²⁴ Jankélévitch, V., *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, p. 341.

²⁵ Maldiney, H. & Kuhn, R., *Rencontre – Begegnung : Au péril d'exister, Briefwechsel / Correspondance, Français / Deutsch, 1953-2004*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2017.

²⁶ Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 133.

the throne in Versailles, nor to style the President's head with a powdered wig, but to restore the modern *equivalent* of monarchy. The political configuration Louis XVIII 'restored' in 1815 was not the *statu quo ante*, which was already past, it could no longer be the pre-revolutionary monarchy [...] calling himself the eighteenth of his name, the restorer of the monarchy, retrieving the past at the exact moment where his predecessor's execution had interrupted it, attempted to do away with everything that happened on between those moments, as if twenty five years were null and void..."²⁷

The past is not retained in its full content, as Bensusan shows extremely well in the book, rather it is a plastic trace that opens up the future through its possibility for retrieval, but the addition of unforeseen addends: "According to the spectral realism of addition, both thought and the world are composed of memory assemblages and no landscape is retained in its full content, irrespective of how it is retrieved"²⁸

Space ceases to be a problem when we posit the *Zusammengehörigkeit* of space and time within the logic of irreversibility or of addition. It is only for a geographic approach that space seems to be equivalent, that addition does not play a role. The nostalgic consciousness of Ulysses, that Jankélévitch beautifully comments on, does not negate the additive nature of space. Rather, it is through the tonality of nostalgia that we catch a glimpse at the truth of Bensusan's position.

THE ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ADDITION - IRREVOCABILITY

It seems to me that Jankélévitch was also attuned to this tonality but didn't take his thoughts in the same direction. Whereas Bensusan's work follows the route of addition to an ultra-metaphysical spectral realism, Jankélévitch takes a different route, redoubling irreversibility into a moral problem. This may be due to the different perspectives the two philosophers espouse, Jankélévitch falling into the lure of anthropocentric thinking. However, it seems to me that the moral aspect of the irreversible also exhibits (and perhaps even dramatizes) the facets of addition that are at the heart of the irreversible asymmetrical addition. It will also bring me to the perplexing finale of Jankélévitch's work on death and to the

²⁷ Jankélévitch, V., *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, p. 37.

²⁸ Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 151.

problem of oblivion. For the moral equivalent of irreversibility is what Jankélévitch calls the irrevocable. This irrevocable means that, quoting Shakespeare again “what is done cannot be undone”²⁹. This is not however the indelible mark of some content (what Jankélévitch calls in his non-phenomenological but rather scholastic language a *quid*), but rather the very fact that something happened, the impossibility to restore the *statu quo ante*, or here called a *quod*. These distinctions are drawn out in *La Mort*: “He knows the *quod*, but not the *quid* of this *quod*, just as he knows *that* without knowing *what*, he cannot answer the question of what”³⁰.

It is this troubling problem that Bensusan comes up against in cooking: “Nothing goes back to what it was”³¹. This disappearance of the past is never absolute because a future retrieval is always possible through addition. However, this is where, maybe, Jankélévitch and Bensusan fall away from each other once again. Jankélévitch studies the moral implications of irreversible time, and epitomizes them in the impossible search for justice and the quasi-magical act of forgiveness: “No human justice can give the past back to anyone”.³² If time is irreversible and always addition, then justice is always too late, always after the fact. Time has passed and that time can never be bought back even if compensatory damages attempt to equvalate the suffering... This is the tragedy of any justice and the torture of loss – be it of a person or of things. Even recovering the stolen items cannot give back stolen time. A person lost can never be retrieved through settlement. Each loss is a tragedy. This shines a light onto our own actions, a light it seems Bensusan does not discuss here: if time is irreversible and all actions obey by this temporal logic, then everything we do cannot be undone. Nothing is completely annihilated; nothing can be completely destroyed. Each action marks irrevocably the passage of time, and can only be added to: “Man is a half-creator: capable of doing, but not undoing the fact of having done”³³ He continues, expounding on this definition:

29 Jankélévitch, V., *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*, p. 292sq.

30 Jankélévitch, V., *La Mort*, p. 429.

31 Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 19.

32 Jankélévitch, V., *La Mort*, p. 335: “No human justice can give the past back to anyone ». If time is irreversible and always addition, then justice is always too late, always after the fact. Time has passed and that time can never be bought back even if compensatory damages attempt to equvalate the suffering...”

33 Jankélévitch, V., *La Mort*, p. 337.

“Man is free to want or not want, but the ‘*voluisse*’, as soon as he has chosen, is eternally inscribed in history as the indestructible component of his personal past; his decision, becomes irrevocable, creates destiny and takes mastery over its own master; or the master is made prisoner by his own prisoner; insofar as destiny is a human construct and starts on a given day at a given time by decree of the master, the master is the master; however, insofar as this destiny is destinal, that this became-necessary is necessary in turn, that the *fiat* is bogged down into the *res facta*, the master is a mere apprentice.”³⁴

The moment of decision adds to the continuum of life. Once decided, this addend can never be undecided, can never be taken back. Time is irreversible, it can't go backwards, it can only be added on to. Subtrahends cannot be. Therefore, every action we undertake must be eternally inscribed into the fabric of reality, retrievable but always recollected, never able to dissipate. Not even when our own lives cease. This is the condition of memory and of collective memory in particular: no future can be opened if our being is not retained and retrieved in some way. Through remembrance, we do not let the past slip away... *Lest we forget*. But even if forgetfulness happened, could an absence of retrieval mark the end of retaining? Or is retrieval always inscribed as a possibility, keeping the past alive far beyond any human memory and transforming the universe into a cosmic archive?

THE METAPHYSICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ADDITION-IRREVERSIBILITY

Beyond the ethical implications, lie metaphysical problems. If addition is irreversible and what is retained is only brought back through retrieval and thereby through an addend, there does seem to be something irremediably lost in that process, lost and regained at the same time, the singularity of that instantiation of the assemblage, of that assemblage of the assemblage itself which has to always be remodeled, restructured in the addition of an addend. Jankélévitch insists on this singularity reducing all that is in time to a *hapax*³⁵, to what he calls in his paradoxical use of the French language a *primultimate* (*primultimité*) – a first and last time. Displacing the problem of the beginning which

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

is no longer an absolute commencement but a reiterated decision, a kairic relationship to time rather than a chronological one, Jankélévitch insists on the metaphysical and psychological problem that thinking such a singularity causes: on the one hand irreversibility opens us up to newness, to the charm of the Instant as he calls it, playing on Bachelard's intuition of the Instant, but it also opens a tragic abyss of oblivion if we are not careful. For if retrieval cannot undo the primultimate nature of each singular assemblage, even when transforming them into exemplars through "struction"³⁶, then is not something forever gone? If retrieval is an iteration as I do believe it is, then is something not always irremediably in the past, called for only as a revenant, added to but also in a certain sense lost? That the past returns under a new form, added to by unforeseen and unforeseeable addends does open us up to encounters as the chapter on Althusser beautifully expresses: "there is always something coming from outside reshaping what there is by promoting encounters that cannot be foreseen"³⁷

However the *re-venant* is a second coming, a past retrieved, a past regained if we play on Proust. The first iteration is lost to the fable of the irrelevant beginning, but if each moment is first and last – and this is where the two are perhaps the most separate while also thinking of the same fundamental problem – then the content of that first-last time and last-first time that every iteration is, is in a way lost. If Jankélévitch is a theorist of singularity, and not as Derrida with his exemplary singularity of Abraham³⁸, but of the absolute temporal singularity of every single being in the world. That means that, according to Bensusan's account Jankélévitch would have to be a theorist of retention without retrieval, something is kept without any possibility or at least necessity of retrieval at all. My death circumscribes a singular event in the whole of time, because it is the only death of mine and even in the eternal recurrence of things, my death will always only be the only death of this singular assemblage that I am. Any other me is always posterior to the me that I was in that assemblage, is always added to. And as such the fact that I existed is retained beyond any hope of memory, even when everyone has forgotten about me, even when my papers are destroyed, the

36 Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 79.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 75sq.

38 Derrida, J., *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Willis, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

internet servers making my thought retrievable, something remains, or rather some almost-thing (for Jankélévitch is a philosopher of “almost”). I can be annihilated, my *content*, my *quid* can be destroyed, but the *quod*, the fact that I existed, is never destroyed, is kept in the universal archive, is retained... but is there any hope of retrieval?

This metaphysical position could be seen as a sort of stylistic excess in the end of Jankélévitch’s book on death, the last protestation of hope faced with the tragedy of irreversibility according to which no moment comes again... “The *Jam-non* is, indeed, no longer. But we couldn’t say *he is no longer* if he had never been. The difference between *he is no longer* and *he is not* is metaphysical: the *no longer* is forever distinct from pure and simple nothingness; he is saved for eternity from eternal inexistence.”³⁹

This is where the tradition discrepancy between the two philosophers makes it difficult to attempt a final and finalized answer: this *quod* that is retained in Jankélévitch, the fact I lived, the fact I have done something, is it a plastic reality? I would tend to say that for Jankélévitch the content is plastic, but the fact is not. The fact is a rigid trace whose content can be re-signified, metamorphosized; but the *fact* itself is irreducible, is not subject to disappearance metaphysically. Is this not what seems to be said in the analysis of Malabou quoted in the book: “plasticity is our way to retrieve what has been in retention in the memory of writing; it is not a ready-made content that has been there from the beginning.”⁴⁰ Form is malleable, plastic. Content is always subject to addition. But a plastic assemblage must pre-exist in order to be modified, reformed... This means two things: that the past is there but retrieval excavates the past reshaping it at the same time. The trace of the *quod* to mix Derrida and Jankélévitch indicates an inalienable fact but also a reconstructed past in the present: an example of this would be Jankélévitch’s analysis of music, a *da capo* repetition in music retains the memory of the first iteration all while reshaping it.⁴¹ The *quod* is an iteration of a

39 Jankélévitch, V., *La Mort*, p. 465.

40 Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 38.

41 Jankélévitch, V., *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. C. Abbate, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 24: “To re-expose a theme means lending it a new sense and new illumination exclusively because of the subsequent moment where the reappearance manifests itself. In the irreversibility of Becoming, every event—as much as it may be identical to its predecessors—takes over from them. The second time in a Rondo, even if it does not differ from the first time except by the ordinal number, nevertheless engenders

singular assemblage in time which is to be re-assembled and re-re-assembled again and again, be that in the space of an individual lifetime or on a cosmological scale. This *quod* seems to correspond to what is said about traces: “Traces in themselves have no properties, engage in no events, are in no state of affairs. There is no ontology of memory traces—they are not fully present, they harbor in them no fixed content. Further, there is not much sense in asking about the presence—or absence—of a trace, as memory can work precisely from absences, from marks that are missing, from empty spaces and blanks.”⁴² Jankélévitch never says that the *quod* is fully present, it is a *je-ne-sais-quoi* which is *Presque-rien*, almost nothing, but not nothing, some infinitesimal trace...

This absence of content does however create a certain number of difficulties, especially in the way Jankélévitch uses them. That my existence is a *quod* retained for re-assembly at some point, could seem acceptable to a bensusan reading of irreversibility and irrevocability... but that is not where Jankélévitch goes with it. When talking about the *quod* he evokes moral problems which seem to always implicate some minimal content that can then be rearranged: *what is done cannot be undone*, but *what* is not *that*. It is both at the same time: does the fact *that* I did something not only have value morally if there is a *what* that I did that can be retrieved, reshaped, molded...? This could be the limit of the human perspective that Bensusan allows us to go beyond. For indeed, *Memory Assemblages* says “The idea that what is placed in retention does not have full content on its own but rather can only foreshadow what can be retrieved, in contrast, encourages the notion that less-than-full presences are part of the epistemic economy”⁴³ However, does not have *full* content is not *does not have any content*. Is there not always a residue of content that is re-assembled every time the trace is retrieved? Does this not mean that Jankélévitch has to abide by the explanation proposed in the chapter on Forgetting: “Under this understanding, there would be a complete realm of being that is constituted by what is in retention, filled not with

the anterior quality of the first in the midst of a context that always changes. Independent of any concrete memory, the pure fact of succession and the preterite, in other words the naked past-ness of the past, prevents the “same” from remaining exactly the same; this continuous conditioning, in the process of Becoming, assumes the form of a continuous alteration. This is why the *da capo* is a ravishing surprise, why a theme does not give up all that stirs us in its meaning until it is recognized once again.”

⁴² Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, p. 48.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

full contents but with what never lapses into nothingness”⁴⁴?

WHAT IS READ CANNOT BE UNREAD – THE GRATITUDE OF READING AND RE-READING

Reading Bensusan’s formidable work – in both French meanings of the word : *formidable* also meaning wonderful, tremendous in its true meaning of that which gives the shakes through an awe-inspiring mix of fear and wonder – did not therefore represent for me a groundbreaking discovery in realism. This is not because it is not one, but because I cannot measure the newness, lacking the past scope needed to ensure adequate vision. Lacking the memory to assemble into a new assemblage that can retrieve the past through the reading of the present work. However it did what rare books in philosophy do, it challenged me as a reader, it called into question my own archived memories of philosophy, forcing me to re-assemble almost *malgré moi* as the French say, in spite of myself, my previous readings of the philosophy of irreversibility, leaving me faced with open questions, with a need to re-interpret, to re-appropriate, to retrieve that which I though was merely retained.

The gratitude with which *Memory Assemblages* was received is measured not in the praise I could shower it with, but in the challenge that I have here attempted to present to it. Why in the theory of addition is irreversibility a taboo word? Does it open the horizon of the problem of entropy and thermodynamics? Memory assemblages being irrevocable traces could necessitate we call into question thermodynamics itself as a memory assemblage... Reinstating the primacy of addition in a scientific worldview where such a phenomenon seems counterintuitive.

Or should I thank Bensusan for not explicitly evoking irreversibility, for it is in that silence, in its pudor or refusal that I can experience the warning Jean-Louis Chrétien gives to all readers in his *Répondre* – beware of indexes!

“Henri Michaux, who as a poet knew what speaking means, wrote: ‘Critics examine the most frequent words in a book and count them! You should rather search for the words the author avoided, those they were closest to, or remarkably far from, those they found strange or exhibited modesty towards, whereas others

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

abounded.' Bad news for those who believe in indexes! We must learn to tune our ears so we can hear unsaid words."⁴⁵

oliver.norman01@univ-poitiers.fr

REFERENCES

- Bensusan, H., *Memory Assemblages*, London, Bloomsbury, 2024.
- Chrétien, J. -L., *Répondre. Figures de la réponse et de la responsabilité*, Paris, PUF, 2007.
- Derrida, J., *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Willis, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Jankélévitch, V., *Henri Bergson*, trans. N. F. Schott, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015.
- Jankélévitch, V., *Forgiveness*, trans. A. Kelley, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Jankélévitch, V., *La Mort*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977.
- Jankélévitch, V., *L'irréversible et la nostalgie*, Paris, Flammarion, 1974.
- Jankélévitch, V., *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. C. Abbate, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Jankélévitch, V., *Philosophie première*, Paris, PUF, 1953.
- Kelley, A. (ed.), *The Inimitable Philosophy of Vladimir Jankélévitch*, London, Bloomsbury, 2026.
- Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979.
- Maldiney, H. & Kuhn, R., *Rencontre – Begegnung : Au péril d'exister, Briefwechsel / Correspondance, Français / Deutsch, 1953-2004*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2017.
- Moser, O., 'La mémoire de l'inachevé : étude sur la réception du nostos d'Ulysse dans la phénoménologie de Vladimir Jankélévitch' in E. Zunino & P. Gasparini, *Nostalgie. Conceptualisation d'une émotion*, Nancy, PUN – éditions universitaires de Lorraine, 2021, pp. 111-126.

⁴⁵ Chrétien, J. -L., *Répondre. Figures de la réponse et de la responsabilité*, Paris, PUF, 2007, p. 24. Translation mine.