

ART IN SPITE OF ITSELF



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Art in spite of itself. The ambiguity of art in the work of Emmanuel Levinas

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« L'ambiguïté est-elle toujours
un manque de rigueur dans la pensée
ou une intention de tromper? [...]
N'est-elle pas aussi une modalité du possible? »

— Emmanuel Levinas

Contents

Abstract	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Abbreviations	xiii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 – The Literary ‘Reduction’	11
1.1. Turgenev’s heroes	17
1.2. The poet and the painter	21
1.3. ‘Mon œuvre à faire’	30
1.4. Levinas the novelist	36
1.5. The play of art	56
Chapter 2 – The Ambiguities of Art	73
2.1. Silence and the dogmas of art	79
2.2. The inter- <i>esse</i> -ing image	103
2.3. Art’s (im)mortal coil	125
2.4. Commitment issues	150
2.5. A critical detour	165
Chapter 3 – The Sense of the <i>Essential</i>	215
Bibliography	269

Abstract

The present study explores the question of art in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, in an attempt to prove that, far from being dogmatic and marginal in the economy of the philosopher's work, art plays a crucial, even if unacknowledged, part in the realization of his philosophical project, deriving from its essential and exceptional ambiguity. An ambiguity through which art is felt and seen, without making itself heard; a spectral presence that, seldomly theorized, is nevertheless constant throughout Levinas's work, in which this study argues there is no "evolution" of the question of art, but a fundamental continuity whose fluctuations should be understood both from the natural progression of his overall project, and from the ambiguity that characterizes art all throughout his work. Hence the adoption of a broad, chronological approach, dividing this study into three chapters, each corresponding to a different period of the philosopher's work, and a specific moment of his theorization of art. Drawing heavily on Levinas's *Carnets de Captivité*, chapter 1 constitutes the "phenomenological moment," in which the literary question leads to a phenomenological analysis of the aesthetic event dated 1944. Delving into "La réalité et son ombre" (1948) and *Totalité et Infini* (1961) that bring to light the ontological significance of art, chapter 2 constitutes the "ontological moment." Finally, chapter 3 examines *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974) and Levinas's late essays on art and literary criticism, marking the moment where art and language meet, the "exeget(h)ical moment." Ultimately, this study presents itself as a possibility of understanding Levinas's philosophical project through the very question(ing) of art.

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Abbreviations

AE	<i>Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence</i>
AP	L'Autre dans Proust
AT	<i>Altérité et Transcendance</i>
DEE	<i>De l'Existence à l'Existant</i>
DL	<i>Difficile Liberté : Essais sur le judaïsme</i>
DMT	<i>Dieu, la Mort, et le Temps</i>
DO	<i>De l'oblitération : Entretien avec Françoise Armengaud à propos de l'œuvre de Sosno</i>
DQVI	<i>De Dieu qui vient à l'idée</i>
EDE	<i>En Découvrant l'Existence avec Husserl et Heidegger</i>
EI	<i>Étique et Infini</i>
EJ	<i>Être Juif</i>
EN	<i>Entre Nous : Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre</i>
HAH	<i>Humanisme de l'autre homme</i>
HS	<i>Hors Sujet</i>
IH	<i>Les Imprévus de l'Histoire</i>
JA	Jean Atlan et la tension de l'art
NP	<i>Noms Propres</i>
OC1	<i>Œuvres Complètes 1 : Carnets de captivité</i>
OC2	<i>Œuvres Complètes 2 : Parole et Silence</i>
OC3	<i>Œuvres Complètes 3 : Éros, Littérature et Philosophie</i>
PC	<i>Paul Celan : De l'être à l'autre</i>
PR	Poésie et résurrection. Notes sur Agnon
RO	La réalité et son ombre
SMB	<i>Sur Maurice Blanchot</i>
TA	<i>Le Temps et l'Autre</i>
TI	<i>Totalité et Infini : Essai sur l'extériorité</i>
TM	La transcendance des mots. À propos des biffures

Introduction

This study is animated by the desire to understand Levinas, perhaps not at his most difficult, but surely at his most obscure. Its subject matter, which is neither central nor ultimate in the philosopher's work, is *art*.

As anyone who has read and studied Levinas is no doubt aware, art is not amongst the main and most pressing of the philosopher's concerns. While he has, now and then, addressed the subject including, however briefly, in his two major works, *Totalité et Infini* (1961) and *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974), and although he has devoted a significant number of essays to the work of artists, writers, and poets, not one of the philosopher's nearly thirty published books deals exclusively, or even substantially, with art, aesthetics, literature or poetry, and only a handful touch on the matter whatsoever. One finds no such thing as an explicit comprehensive theory of art, a literary theory, nor what one could call, a Levinasian Aesthetics. And then there is "La réalité et son ombre."¹ A relatively unfamed, yet haunting article published three years after the end of World War II that at barely 20 pages-long is the closest thing we have to one, as it is also, or has been, the bedrock for the prevailing belief that Levinas nurtures a deep-seated antipathy toward art, refusing it any metaphysical access. Thus, not only would art appear to be an easily circumscribed and marginal subject in the economy of the philosopher's work but, worse, that it would be an eminently negative or, if you will, unethical one.

The present study sets out to show that it is neither, which is not to say that it intends to dispute the claim made earlier that art is neither the central nor the ultimate question for Levinas: it does not, for it is not. The hypothesis that it unfolds is, instead, that if as a theme, as an explicit and theorized problematic, art may very well be marginal in the economy of the philosopher's work, it is nonetheless very much present all throughout it, as an integrant part of Levinas's *Weltanschauung*, as already, *and always*, implicated in the Levinasian

1. Emmanuel Levinas, "La réalité et son ombre," in *Les Imprévus de l'Histoire* (Paris: LGF, 1994): 107-127. Orig. publ. in *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 38 (1948): 771-789.

intrigue, if not as its “unheard-of modality” [*modalité inouïe*]² — that even if, and when unsaid, unformulated, untheorized, art is there, somewhere, in-between the lines, in-between times, as an echo or a trace, which is precisely where, and *how*, the philosopher claims it signifies.³

Elusive, art is a sort of “excluded middle,” that does not enter into a theme, that gives itself while escaping, that means more (or less) than what it says and shows, that contradicts itself, contests itself — but that is how it ambiguously operates, and that is why Levinas often relies on such adverbs and locutions as “perhaps” [*peut-être*] and “as if” [*comme si*] to account for it and its “ways”: *art is essentially ambiguous*, of an ambiguity that Levinas not only proclaims but enacts; an ambiguity that transpires in his own discussions (and silences) about art — art that operates, behind the scenes, as it were, of his reasoning, of his discourse, either announcing, mirroring or jeopardizing his philosophical questionings, and constantly insinuating itself in his advances. Hence the title of this study — *Art in spite of itself* — which I believe conveys this implicit or spectral presence of art throughout Levinas’s work, much as it does its significance and demand, *in spite of* all the perceived faults and sins that the philosopher never refrained from imputing to art, and whose itinerary in his work this study sets out to trace and with it advance four hypotheses:

1) That Levinas neither rejects nor disparages art, but sees in it an essential and insurmountable ambiguity, from which his own ambivalence towards art derives, that persists throughout his work, whereby 2) there is no rupture, evolution nor reassessment of the question of art in itself at any point, but a fundamental coherence and continuity, whose existing oscillations derive from the natural progression of his philosophical project as a

2. In his essay on Paul Celan, in which Levinas addresses two of the poet’s proses, “Le méridien” and “Entretien dans la montagne,” in which Celan reflects about poetry, Levinas contemplates this possibility: “Does he not suggest poetry itself as an unheard-of modality of the *otherwise than being*? [Ne suggère-t-il pas la poésie elle-même comme une modalité inouïe de l’*autrement qu’être*?]” Levinas, *Paul Celan, de l’être à l’autre* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 2018), 35.

Apart from this being a remarkable and tantalizing contemplation, the term “*inouïe*” (whose standardized English translation is “unheard-of”) has the double meaning of, precisely, “unprecedented,” but also, without it being at all a contradiction, “extraordinary,” “fantastic;” fantastic which is how, in his captivity writings, Levinas defines art.

3. “It belongs to the essence of art to signify in-between the lines – in-between times – like a trace that would precede the walk or like an echo that would precede the resounding of a voice. [Il appartient à l’essence de l’art de signifier entre les lignes – dans les intervalles du temps – entre temps – comme une trace qui serait antérieure à la marche ou comme un écho qui précéderait le retentissement d’une voix.]” Levinas, “Poésie et résurrection. Notes sur Agnon,” in *Noms Propres* (Paris: LGF – Livre de Poche, 1987), 12. Orig. publ. 1973 in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, no. 32.

whole, and from the ambiguous nature of art itself, owing to which 3) art plays a crucial (even if unacknowledged) part in the realization of Levinas's philosophical project, regarding which it is, thus, neither dogmatic nor marginal, but contributes eminently to all his main arguments and questionings, namely being, sensibility, knowledge, intentionality, temporality, language, truth and transcendence, among others, from which 4) the possibility of understanding Levinas's philosophical project through the very question(ing) of art.

These, then, are the hypotheses that guide this study, whose aim is less to ex-plicate art in Levinas's work, than it is to show its *implication* in it, whereby rather than trying to answer, or indeed to ask, "what is art for Levinas?," or still, of attempting to determine a place for art in his work (which in light of the foregoing remarks, would be frankly self-contradictory), this study aims instead to bring out the *how* of art through which we can, perhaps, better understand its sense, and its importance in Levinas's project, and by so doing, hopefully contribute to a discussion that is far from settled. And just as well.

The question of art in Levinas's work has been, for some time now, the scene of an impassioned interpretative quarrel leading to surprisingly disparate interpretations that bespeak how differently the author's words on the subject can and have been appraised. There is something deeply captivating, but also profoundly frustrating about what (little) Levinas says about art, and about what (much) he does not, and the profusion of essays and commentaries on the matter is as much proof of that as is the dearth of extensive or monographic studies about it. Among the few that do exist, I permit myself to highlight two that have had a positive influence on the present study: Raffaella di Castro's 1997, *Un'estetica implicita. Saggio su Levinas*,⁴ and David Gritz's 2004, *Levinas face au Beau*.⁵

Seeking to delineate a possible relation between aesthetics, ethics, and Judaism in Levinas's work, Di Castro challenges the presumed irreconcilability at a philosophical level between art and Judaism. Taking on from Levinas's perceived "ambiguity of hostility and seduction" toward aesthetics, stemming mostly from his anti-idolatrous concern, Di Castro, who refuses a chronological or systematic approach in favor of an interpretative and "aesthetic" reasoning that she terms, recovering an archaic and forgotten meaning,

4. Raffaella Di Castro, *Un'estetica implicita. Saggio su Levinas* (Milan: Guerini scientifica, 1997).

5. David Gritz, *Levinas Face au Beau* (Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 2004). A deeply inspired and beautifully written work, Gritz's master's thesis, posthumously published with a preface by Catherine Chalié, has been, from the outset, a constant source of insight and encouragement for my research, as it has been a constant reminder.

“*assaggio*” [lit. tasting], builds her argument around a logic of “chiasms and contacts,” in which she sees the possibility of healing the radical separation between aesthetics and ethics that she perceives in Levinas’s earlier writings, and thus of recovering their profound contact. Arguing that art plays an essential part in Levinas’s philosophy, the author contends that, without ever renouncing or watering down his interpretation of the biblical proscription of images which she claims to be an indispensable presupposition of ethics, Levinas ultimately acknowledges an ethical value to art, “not through direct reflection on *aesthetic problems*, but ... under the pressure of the ethical demands of his thought, precisely in the deepest *Hebrew root* that distinguishes them,” that is, through his ethical reflections on Judaism.⁶

For his part, Gritz’s study focuses on the question of beauty, the one aesthetic category that, according to him, was never re-evaluated throughout Levinas’s work, and in whose deconstruction he sees the technical essence of the work being brought to the fore. Arguing against the idea of an “evolution” of the question of art in the philosopher’s work to account for its variations and ambiguities, Gritz goes on to argue for the eminent connection of art to all the dynamics, complexities and meanders of Levinas’s philosophy in which, he claims, it achieves its own form of coherence, and through which it becomes possible to designate the “limits of a new space for the work, between ontology and pre-ethics,” one in which “the work achieves its own nobility.” Ultimately, he contends that the work of art presents itself in Levinas as providing “the occasion to think afresh about the relationship between being and technique.”⁷

Two thorough and deeply engaging studies that put forward two very different approaches toward a possible understanding of this intricate question that is art in Levinas’s work, to which ought to be added a vast number of shorter, but equally interesting studies, that I cannot unfortunately consider individually, but which I would like nonetheless to mention: Francesco-Paolo Ciglia, “L’essere, il sacro e l’arte negli esordi filosofici di E.L” (1983), Giorgio Frank, “Estetica e ontologia. Il problema dell’arte nel pensiero di E. Levinas” (1985), Françoise Armengaud, “Étique et esthétique: De l’ombre à l’oblitération” (1991) and “Faire ou ne pas faire images” (2000), Fabio Ciaramelli, “L’appel infini à l’interprétation” (1994), Guy Petitdemange, “L’art, ombre de l’être ou voix vers l’autre? Un regard sur l’art.

6. Di Castro, *Un’estetica implicita*, 11-12; 14; 61.

7. Gritz, *Levinas face au Beau*, 113; 114; 114.

Emmanuel Levinas” (1999), Annelise Schulte Nordholt, “Tentation esthétique et exigence éthique: Lévinas et l’œuvre littéraire” (1999), Daniel Charles, “Éthique et esthétique dans la pensée d’Emmanuel Levinas” (2000), Gerald Bruns, “The concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s writings” (2002), Jacques Taminiaux, “Art et destin. Le débat de Levinas avec la phénoménologie dans ‘La réalité et son ombre,’” and “Exotisme esthétique et ontologie” (2006) or Tanja Staehler, “Images and Shadows: Levinas and the ambiguity of the aesthetic.”⁸ Also of particular note are two edited books with contributions from a great many authors on varying aspects of the aesthetic, literary and exegetical questions in Levinas’s work: notably *Le Souci de l’Art chez Levinas* (2010),⁹ and more recently, *Levinas and Literature* (2020),¹⁰ which contribute greatly to the seemingly inexhaustible richness of this debate.

Now, within all this variety of perspectives, there is one predominant approach or thesis: that which upholds an “evolution” or “reassessment” of the question of art throughout Levinas’s work, namely, between his initial (negative) position, from the 40s and 50s, and his (more positive) stance in his later writings, namely from the 60s onwards. Indeed, some have sensed a “tenderness” in Levinas’s later pronouncements on art, having in mind, no doubt, his essays on Paul Celan, and Agnon,¹¹ his exhibition text on Jean Atlan,¹² and his dialogue with Françoise Armengaud on the work of Sacha Sosno.¹³ I will not deny that there is a *softening* of his discourse, but more than that, perhaps, a greater receptiveness toward art, or rather, toward *particular* works of art, *particular* artists, writers and poets, as if demanding of himself a greater *exegetical* effort that he always held to be essential to art, in detriment of a more generalized discourse about art; call it tenderness or what you will, that

8. Please refer to the Bibliography for the full citation of these studies.

9. Danielle Cohen-Levinas., ed., *Le Souci de l’Art chez Levinas* (Houilles, Éditions Manucius, 2010).

10. Michael Fagenblat, Arthur Cools, ed., *Levinas and Literature* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2010) [E-book edition].

11. See *supra* 2, n. 2, 3.

12. “Jean Atlan et la tension de l’art,” in *Cahiers de L’Herne. Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Catherine Chalier and Miguel Abensour (Paris: L’Herne, 1991): 509-510. First published 1986 in *Atlan, premières périodes 1940-1954* by Éditions Adam Biro.

13. This dialogue took place in Paris, on March 17, 1988, and was published two years later in *De l’oblitération. Entretien avec Françoise Armengaud à propos de l’œuvre de Sosno* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1990).

does not mean, *not at all*, that Levinas's stance in his later writings is *other* regarding his earlier ones, that he conceives differently the formal structure of the work of art, that his early ambivalence toward art, or the very ambiguity that, for him, characterized art, somehow vanish, either renounced or "magically" solved. Levinas was never very fond of magic, and that is perhaps what made him always wary of the "aesthetic miracle," of its bewitching powers, of its rhetoric and the emphasizing of its subject, of the exaltations in the *belles-lettres* and their (potential) deceptions, what always made him approach art and poetry with a premeditated and prudent *distance* — a distance, one might say, befitting the phenomenologist he always pride himself on being.

Beyond that, the available secondary literature echoes what I have come to taste firsthand for as one appraises Levinas's outputs on art, aesthetics, literature, poetry, one faces a double hazard: on the one hand, the temptation to dismiss it propelled by the philosopher's apparent (and often blunt) disaffection with the subject, that would appear to be consistent moreover with the primacy that the author himself always claimed behooves ethics. On the other hand, the terminological affinity between Levinas's aesthetic and ethical categories (namely, the "in-between times" [*l'entretemps*], "disengagement" [*dégagement*], "hither-side" [*en-deçà*], and even the "there is" [*il y a*]) may stir the belief that ethics and aesthetics somehow partake in the same ideal; from which a second pair of hypotheses unfolds: either that art is the "evil twin" of ethics, its counterfeit, or that "the aesthetic experience educates in the language of the '*otherwise than being*.'"¹⁴ As it happens, all these seemingly conflicting hypotheses stem from the exact same root: *the ambiguity of art in Levinas's work* which is precisely the argument I intend to make in this study.

A study whose argumentative dynamics lies in a chronological exposition of Emmanuel Levinas's works in which art is more or less explicitly theorized. This approach was deemed, at the outset of this study, as being the most suitable in view of one of the ambitions that drives it, that of providing a comprehensive reading of the question of art in Levinas by tracing its itinerary all throughout the philosopher's work; a decision that has, in hindsight, substantiated an initial and acute intuition: that, already mentioned, of the essential coherence and continuity of the philosopher's theorization of, and stance toward art throughout his work; which does not mean that there are no fluctuations whatsoever, there

14. As suggested by Pierre Hayat in "Épreuves de l'histoire. Exigences d'une pensée" (preface to *Les Imprévus de l'histoire*), [19].

are, but these neither qualify as a “reappraisal,” nor should they be interpreted in the sense of an “evolution,” insofar as these existing oscillations do not alter Levinas’s ambivalence towards art, nor his characterization of art as essentially ambiguous where lies precisely, so I argue, its invaluable part in the very realization of his philosophical project.

Before I go on to lay out the structure and outline of the chapters that make up this study, I would like to briefly raise an issue that might be perceived as troublesome in terms of its conception and progression, and that is the fact that the first chapter is devoted to literature which thus constitutes the initial step of this study’s inquiry; a perhaps questionable choice considering that the main “difficulty” of the question of art in Levinas would appear to lie in the aesthetic, whereby literature would, in theory, escape the philosopher’s criticism aimed mainly at the so-called plastic arts. But not only is that not entirely true, because, as we will see, particularly in our discussions, in chapter 2, of “La réalité et son ombre” and *Totalité et Infini*, the literary work does not escape the formal structure of the work of art as the philosopher perceives it, i.e., the transformation of words into images, its closed temporality, the absence of its author, and thus, the essential ambiguity that Levinas sees in the work of art, but above all, perhaps, and as I believe will become clear in the first chapter, it is through literature, through the appeal, procedures and the effects of the literary work that Levinas arrives at the properly aesthetic problematic.

Having said that, allow me to return to discussing the structure and contents of this study, where among the many works, texts, interviews, and commentaries by Levinas, some of them lesser-known, that I have traced down and carefully read and analyzed, and which I believe render this study both broad in time and rich in reference, I have singled out three works — *Carnets de captivité*, “La réalité et son ombre” and *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* — that best represent, without exhausting, the three essential “moments” of the philosopher’s theorization of art that I propose naming, respectively, the “phenomenological moment,” the “ontological moment,” and the “exeget(h)ical moment;” three moments that do not precisely cancel each other out, nor contradict one another, but rather characterize the progression of the Levinasian project in which art is, as I said above, deeply entangled, and which, finally, structure this study into the three following chapters — Chapter 1, “The Literary ‘Reduction,’” Chapter 2, “The Ambiguities of Art,” and Chapter 3, “The Sense of the *Essential*” — that I shall now introduce as concisely as possible.

Of a strongly biographical and reflective character, the first chapter of this study has literature as its protagonist. Literature whose unique appeal for Levinas I will be attempting to bring to light, through a careful analysis of his literary writings, notably his two novels drafted during the war, *Eros or Triste Opulence* and *La Dame de chez Wepler*, and aided by a series of notes from his *Carnets de Captivité*. I formulate the hypothesis that literature reveals itself at this stage of Levinas's work, not alongside philosophy, but somehow, in its place, as if the literary work reflected the phenomenological "reasoning," its inquiry, its aim to "return to the things themselves;" an inquiry that will bring us, first, to the concept of *Aufmachung*, the key concept of Levinas's unprecedented definition of cinema, which I will be examining in detail, but especially, to that which is, by all accounts, the philosopher's first aesthetic theorization which will be the subject of a thorough analysis in the last section, "The play of art." Dated 1944, Levinas's note "Problèmes d'Esthétique" describes the aesthetic event as a transcendental reduction, in which an époque of objectivity frees sensations from their objective meaning, by which they appear in their pure state, free from all conception, constituting the very "reality" of the work of art — hence my naming this instance of Levinas's aesthetic theorization as the "phenomenological moment."

By far the longest of this study, chapter 2 constitutes its central body, and what I have called the "ontological moment." Set in the post-war period, this chapter scrutinizes the inevitable "La réalité et son ombre," the sole properly philosophical text dealing exclusively with art, in which Levinas develops a body of aesthetic principles. From the question of the silence of art and the contemporary aesthetic dogmas, to the pivotal question of the image, the relation of art with the *il y a*, the issue of idolatry and beauty, to the closed or cyclic temporality of the work through which it is constituted as myth, or the issue of disengagement and the irresponsibility that Levinas ascribes to art and the aesthetic experience, up to the philosophical critique that he proposes as its salvation, the chapter ends with an analysis of *Totalité et Infini*, where art appears, on the contrary, not as a theme, but as an implicit and recurring problematic. Moving from an explicit discussion of art to its spectral presence in the philosopher's first major work, the aim of this second chapter is to bring out the essential ambiguity of art and its theoretical import, shedding light on the unparallel ontological significance, power, and value that Levinas acknowledges to art, as a possibility other for being, contemporaneous with its revelation, of not revealing itself.

Finally, chapter three, which also serves as this study's conclusion, is centered around Levinas's second major work, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, where I will attempt to show how, due to its essential ambiguity, art ultimately plays a decisive part in the possibility of articulating the otherwise than being. An hypothesis that will be advanced through constant interruptions, with insinuations of the discussions had in the previous chapters, and with Levinas's texts of art and literary criticism contemporary of *Autrement qu'être* on the work of Jean Atlan, Sacha Sosno, Maurice Blanchot or Paul Celan; a procedure that, having its rationale in the ambiguity, skepticism and the need for interpretation that characterizes language as such — language whose inspired essence, escaping thematization, I will try to show is laid bare in art, poetry and the interpretation they call for infinitely —, gives this study a conclusive sense that attests to the essential coherence of Levinas's understanding of art.

Ultimately, as I hope this study will make clear, art is neither a dogmatic nor a marginal issue in Levinas's thought, but an essential and intrinsic modality that enlightens the philosopher's work.

CHAPTER 1

The Literary ‘Reduction’

« It is not the extraordinariness of the events that makes them suitable for the novel; it is their mystery. »*

— E. Levinas

Literature has long been known to occupy a privileged place in Emmanuel Levinas’s work. While not exempt from criticism,¹ literature, especially when compared to the visual arts, would appear not only to “escape” the philosopher’s professed distrust of art but, furthermore, to be a constant source of inspiration for his philosophical inquiries. Indeed, the French philosopher has often claimed literature to be a reservoir of pre-philosophical experiences upon which his philosophical thinking rests. And one can hardly fail to notice the handpicked literary quotes that at every corner color his prose, and that far from being dead letters one could well forgo, resonate, and excite the most profound and august of his thoughts — not borrowed figures of speech, but parts of his own. Would the sense of asymmetry and of election of the speaking subject in the principle of “responsibility-for-the-Other,” have echoed quite as well, had Levinas neglected that line from *The Brothers*

* “Ce n’est pas l’extraordinaire des événements qui les rend aptes au roman, mais leur mystère.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Œuvres Complètes 1: Carnets de captivité* (Paris: Grasset; IMEC, 2009), 147.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations throughout this study are my own

1. Notably in “La réalité et son ombre,” the literary work does not escape the philosopher’s summary characterization of art as plastic, likening it to a myth; he writes: “The events recounted form a *situation* – akin to a plastic ideal. That is what myth is: the plasticity of a history. [Les événements racontés forment une *situation* – s’apparentent à un idéal plastique. Le mythe — c’est cela: la plasticité d’une histoire.]” RO, 121-122.

Karamazov,² which either out of habit or sheer affection he once referred to as “my sentence by Dostoevsky”?³ Along with Dostoevsky, other eminent Russian (or otherwise Soviet) novelists, such as Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Chekov, Tolstoy, and Grossman, but also the western authors — Shakespeare, Racine, Cervantes, Proust, Celan and Blanchot — have crossed paths in a thought that found in literature the means to articulate into questions and problems the ineffable that are the traumas and tastes of life,⁴ and even to formulate solutions to the ethical anxieties and dilemmas; literature, as Levinas himself claims, was his “first philosophical temptation,”⁵ paving the way for his encounter with the philosophers by nurturing his gaze and concern of the world and of being. The sense of humanness in its nudity, in its concrete frailty and unrest, which literature conveys through its *inspired language*, rather than by the eloquence of its words is, for the French philosopher, literature’s true gift: neither a tool, a source of information, a *Zuhandenes*, nor, on the other hand, a sacred or solemn *Dichtung*: literature is rather “a modality of our being.”⁶

But whereas Levinas’s words strongly suggest a deep concern for literature, whereas his philosophical work is undeniably imbued with literary allusions, and even considering that

2. “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others.” This line from Book VI, II of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* that Levinas’s biographer, Marie-Anne Lescourret termed “sa citation fétiche,” [*Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 46-47], is quoted by Levinas in at least four of his texts: *Autrement qu’être* (186), “Dieu et la philosophie” (168), *Éthique et Infini* (95, 98) and *Entre Nous* (131, 196), as well as in a number of his interviews.

For a study about Levinas’s use of this quotation, see Alain Toumayan, “‘I More than the Others’: Dostoevsky and Levinas,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004), 55-66.

3. Emphasis added. In his interview with François Poirié that took place in April and May of 1986, Levinas claims: “en ce qui concerne la relation avec autrui, je reviens toujours à ma phrase de Dostoïevski.” François Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas: Essai et Entretiens*. 2nd Ed. (Arles: Actes Sud, 2006), 120. Orig. pub. in 1987.

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et Infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard, 2019), 11. Orig. pub. in 1984.

5. Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 70. In his interview with Myriam Anissimov, Levinas is quite more emphatic when he claims: “Le roman russe a été ma préparation à la philosophie.” Anissimov, “Portrait: Emmanuel Levinas se souvient ...,” *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 21, no. 82 (1985), 33.

6. EI, 12. Or as Levinas claims in an interview from January 1983: “Human being is not only in the world, not only *in-der-Welt-Sein* [being-in-the-world], but also *zum-Buch-Sein* [being-toward-the-book] in relation to the inspired Word, an ambiance as important for our existence as streets, houses, and clothing. [L’être humain n’est pas seulement au monde, pas seulement un *in-der-Welt-Sein*, mais aussi *zum-Buch-Sein* en relation à la Parole inspirée, ambiance aussi importante pour notre exister que les rues, les maisons et les vêtements.]” Levinas, “Philosophie, justice et amour” (interview with R. Fornet-Betancourt and A. Gomez-Müller). In *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 127. Orig. published in *Concordia. Revista Internacional de Filosofía*, no. 3 (1983) 59–73.

some of his writings qualify as pieces of literary criticism,⁷ one finds no such thing as an explicit levinasian theory of literature, or even an explicit thematization of literature. As Jean-Luc Nancy observes: “It is remarkable that we have noted and studied the literary character and the relations to literature of a philosophical work whose explicit relation to the literary thing remains thin if we consider it in its most manifest whole.”⁸ Indeed, unlike his contemporaries — Sartre, Barthes, Deleuze or Derrida — the need (or will) to theorize literature or the literary work, never came to Levinas; it was never a part of his plans. And precisely the absence of an explicit theorization of literature, coupled with the author’s less-enthusiastic remarks on it in the 1948 article have (mis)led some commentators to the conclusion that, for Levinas, literature was but a means of illustrating philosophical points. Fortunately, judging by the numerous studies that have lately been published on the matter, such a reading has no longer room in a debate that has moved well past the legitimacy of making literature “a question” in Levinas’s work, into the full appreciation of its relevance and influence in the field of literary theory.⁹ The question is now the stage for a host of more and less radical proposals: while some unveil and analyze an implicit theory of literature in the philosopher’s work,¹⁰ others put forward a reading of *Totalité et Infini* as a novel, claiming that Levinas’s intention was actually to write a drama.¹¹ As to what sparked this

7. Notably: “L’autre dans Proust” (1947), “La transcendance des mots. À propos des Biffures” (1949), his three essays on Maurice Blanchot — “Le regard du poète” (1956), “La servante et son maître” (1966), and “Exercices sur la folie du jour” (1975), his other three on Paul Claudel — “Personnes ou figures (À propos d’Emmaüs’ de Paul Claudel)” (1950), “Une voix sur Israël” (1951), “La poésie et l’impossible” (1969), “Roger Laporte et la voix de fin silence” (1966), “Paul Celan. De l’être à l’autre” (1972) and “Poésie et résurrection. Notes sur Agnon” (1973).

8. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Préface: L’intrigue littéraire de Levinas,” in Levinas, *Œuvres Complètes 3: Éros, Littérature et Philosophie* (Paris: Grasset; IMEC, 2013), 9.

9. Cf. Ann W. Astell & Justin A. Jackson, eds., *Levinas and Medieval Literature: The “difficult Reading” of English and Rabbinic Texts* (Duquesne University Press, 2009); Donald R. Wehrs & David P. Haney, eds., *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism through Realism and Levinas and Twentieth-Century Literature: Ethics and the Reconstitution of Subjectivity* (University of Delaware Press, 2009).

10. Eli Schonfeld, “Languages of the Universal: Levinas’ (scandalous) doctrine of Literature,” in *Levinas and Literature*, 77-92.

11. Simon Critchley, *The Problem of Levinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and following Critchley’s proposal: Michael Fagenblat “The Genesis of Totality and Infinity: The Secret Drama,” in *Levinas and Literature*, 93-116.

Though it was probably Jacques Derrida who, in his famous reply to Levinas’s 1961 work, “Violence et Métaphysique,” first recognized the literary potential of *Totalité et Infini* by suggesting that it was not a treatise but a work (of art? – the suggestion is obvious, but he does not actually spell it out); he writes: “the thematic

renewed and growing interest in Levinas's concern with literature, the answer is easy: the publication of the philosopher's *inédits*.¹²

The long-awaited release of Levinas's unpublished papers has come to fill a fundamental gap in the philosopher's oeuvre, between his pre and his postwar writings. But beyond that (and to return Howard Caygill's mindful appeal), the publication of the *inédits* "~~should serve~~ *has served* as a salutary shock to a reception of Levinas's thought that was in danger of lapsing into complacency,"¹³ for not only has it allowed us to corroborate and deepen our understanding of the questions, motivations, and references to which Levinas's "previous" works had already introduced us to, but perhaps the greatest gain from the launching of these writings was their *disruptiveness*, as they have allowed us "to be surprised by unexpected paths"¹⁴ — one of which being, precisely, literature.

Already profusely present in the series' inaugural volume — *Carnets de captivité* —, whether through literary quotations, thoughts and recollections on novels, on authors, on the creation, modality, procedures, and effects of the literary work, literature was however to have its own momentum upon the publication, in 2013, of the third and final volume of *Œuvres Complètes*. Edited by Danielle Cohen-Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Éros, Littérature et Philosophie* brought to us the much-anticipated Levinas's very own literary writings: poems and tales in Russian from his youth, but most importantly, sketches of two novels the philosopher had been working on during his period of captivity as a prisoner of

development is, in *Totality and Infinity*, neither purely descriptive nor purely deductive... It unfolds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, where, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself. By all these challenges to the commentator and the critic, *Totality and Infinity* is a work [*un'œuvre*] and not a treatise." Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 69, no. 3 (1964), 328, note 1.

12. Delayed for more than 15 years due to a family and legal dispute between Levinas's two children, Michaël Levinas and Simone Hansel, over the "moral rights" to the philosopher's work, following his death in 1995, the publication of Levinas's *inédits* only fell through in 2009. With the court's ruling in favor of Michaël, who had in the meantime entrusted his father's unpublished works to IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine), the three volumes of Levinas's *Œuvres Complètes* were published by IMEC in collaboration with Grasset, under the coordination of Jean-Luc Marion. But the long delay in the publication of these writings had dire consequences; as Olivier Corpet, the head of IMEC, said at the time, it "has deprived us of knowing the reaction of those who knew Levinas, such as Blanchot, Derrida and Paul Ricœur. They died without having been able to read them." Paul François Paoli and Jacques de Saint Victor, "Lévinas au cœur d'un drame mauriacien," *Le Figaro* (June 6, 2009).

13. Howard Caygill, "Levinas's prison notebooks," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 160 (2010), 35.

14. Jean-Luc Marion, "Les inédits de Levinas: la genèse d'une pensée," in Emmanuel Housset and Rodolphe Calin, eds., *Cahiers de philosophie de l'Université de Caen* 49, *Levinas au-delà du visible. Études sur les inédits de Levinas: des Carnets de captivité à Totalité et Infini* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2012), 9.

war which shed a new light on his philosophical work. More than dispelling any remaining doubts about the philosopher's theoretical interest in literature, the discloser of these writings has unveiled an added, unheard-of dimension of said interest, that of the philosopher's own literary practice, and through it, a new and surprising place for literature in his work. We now know Levinas to be not only a philosopher who, not unlike so many others, harbored a profound interest in literature, nor even one who has once nurtured literary ambitions, but someone who was "somewhat born into literature before entering philosophy;"¹⁵ someone for whom, one might (tentatively) say, *literature was another name for philosophy*.

The chapter that now begins is not, therefore, meant to answer, nor indeed to ask, 'what is literature (for Levinas)?' Not because it is an irrelevant or prosaic question, but because it is, I believe, ill-articulated and in so being its (potential) answer would be, at best, reductive. If literature is, as I have suggested above (though I acknowledge the radicality, or perhaps the naivety, of its proposition) another name for philosophy, ought we not, rather than to ask 'what is?' — to ask 'how?' Would not that question, that way of asking, of knowing, or at the very least, trying to, be more adequate? More precise? Because the 'how?' actually precedes the 'what?,' because the 'how?' does not let itself be duped by the 'what?' in which however it tends to lose itself, to be forgotten, or disdained, not unlike, I daresay, phenomenology which though preceding (fundamental) ontology tends to be suppressed by it. Now, for one thing, the *Carnets* are from their very first entry,¹⁶ I believe, the proof that Levinas does not engage in such oblivion, and that he was, *in fact*, and not only at heart, a phenomenologist; not a traditional phenomenologist, surely, but a radical one; one who, even as, and when, attempting to break with or surpass phenomenology, never ceased to be one. And the *how*, the "comment" of things which is precisely the phenomenological mode of questioning in its proceeding from the very low toward the high (as opposed to "von oben – herab")¹⁷ which allows the restitution of the concrete being to the horizon of its appearing,

15. Nancy, "L'intrigue," 19.

16. Sep. 8, 1937: "Phenomenology – science. Let us be precise. The psychological analyses that precede it of 'philonian' style: there is this in such an act, there is that in such a being. *Wie liegt es drin?* Not even considered. [Phénoménologie – science. Précisions. Les analyses psychologiques avant elle de style philonien: il y a de cela dans tel acte, il y a de ceci dans tel être. Comment? *Wie liegt es drin?* Pas même envisagé.] OC1, 51. Cf. 479 note 1, for the editors's explanation of the term "*Wie liegt es drin.*" Cf. Alain David, "Levinas et la phénoménologie: L'enjeu de la sainteté," *Les Temps Modernes* 664, no. 3 (2011): 94-118.

17. It is Levinas himself who recounts this profound teaching by Husserl through an episode in one of his classes: "he brought me a copy dedicated to me of his *Vorlesungen zur Phanomenologie des inneren*

forgotten in its ostension, echoes, I believe, the *marvel* of literature, of the literary work for Levinas which lies not in *what it is*, nor in *what* it says nor even in *what* it shows, but in its *how*: in *how* it says what it says, and *how* it shows what it shows; starting from the sensible, from the concrete and sensible dimension of the events, taken in the singularity of the instant of their appearing, the literary work “reveals” the event in its mystery, and mystery, as Levinas knows well, is more *marvelous*, more profound, and in a way, more lasting, than magic for which he has, moreover, little taste.

There is, thus, a sort of particular thread, as it were, between literature and phenomenology, as if the literary work somehow reflected the phenomenological “reasoning,” its inquiry, its spirit, in its aim to return to the things themselves, to the concreteness of things at the instant of their appearing and thus to the sensible dimension in which is deployed their “essential” *how*; hence the (perhaps abusive) title of this chapter in which I will be attempting to account for, precisely, this *appeal* of literature for Levinas, this *how* of the literary work; an inquiry that will bring us, in the final section, to the philosopher’s very first aesthetic theorization — an analysis of the aesthetic experience of the work of art based on a phenomenology of the sensible, and whose very first, and essential, gesture is a *transcendental reduction* which practiced, already, I believe, with a certain liberty with regard to Husserl (namely, avoiding the intellectualist character that Levinas had criticized in the Husserlian reduction)¹⁸ brings to light the radicalization of the latter’s distinction of sensation from perception that allows Levinas to deploy, and phenomenologically analyze, sensation as such, in its pure state, from which unfolds the dimension of non-objectifying intentionality that precisely characterizes the aesthetic event; a gesture that, I believe, is first drawn in and through literature: Levinas’s “birthplace.”

Zeitbewusstseins of 1905, that Heidegger – still a very faithfully Husserlian – had just edited. In a solemn tone – a little sententious – the master said a few words to me which underlined the importance, in philosophy, of the work which proceeds from the ‘very low’ to the high and the vanity of the enterprises which want to be ‘*von oben – herab*’. [il m’apportait un exemplaire dédié à mon intention de ses *Vorlesungen zur Phanomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* de 1905, que Heidegger – encore très fidèlement husserlien – venait d’éditer. D’un ton solennel – un peu sentencieux – le maître m’a dit quelques mots qui soulignaient l’importance, en philosophie, du travail qui procède en allant du ‘très bas’ vers le haut et la vanité des entreprises qui se veulent ‘*von oben – herab*.’” Levinas, “Séjour de jeunesse auprès d’Husserl 1928-1929,” *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 75 (Autumn 1989), 27.

18. “Philosophy begins with the reduction. This is an act in which we consider life in all its concreteness but no longer live it. [La philosophie commence avec la réduction; or voilà un acte où, certes, nous considérons la vie dans tout son aspect concret, mais où nous ne la vivons plus.]” Levinas, *La Théorie de l’Intuition dans la Phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1970), 219. Orig. pub. in 1930.

1.1 Turgenev's heroes

The eldest of three brothers, Levinas was born in 1906 (or 1905 according to the Julian calendar), into a second-generation bourgeoisie Jewish family for whom to study was the most important thing in life. The proximity to books ran in the family: his father, Yehiel Levyne, owned a bookshop, and his aunt (Yehiel's sister) was the keeper of the Russian library of the Lithuanian city of Kovno (now Kaunas), Levinas's hometown, where he lived a short childhood of which he holds very few memories. The German invasion the year after the outbreak of the war in August 1914, a war, Levinas will later say, that would never end, "as if order had been forever disturbed,"¹⁹ forced the family to take refuge in Kharkov, Ukraine, where in 1916, still under the tsarist regime, and to his parents' utter joy, young Emmanuel was accepted in the Russian *lyceum*, where he completed the first four years of his secondary education. Of his childhood under the tsarist regime, Levinas will claim "it was, and still is in memory, happy and harmonious,"²⁰ especially in comparison to the chaos and instability that engulfed Ukraine during the Revolution of 1917. The outbreak of a civil war between the Russian white army, the Bolsheviks, the Ukrainian nationalists, and the anarchists, among others, accompanied by anti-Jewish pogroms (mostly perpetrated by the Volunteer Army), prompted Levinas's parents to bring the family back to Kovno in 1920, in the wake of the restoration of Lithuania's independence. It is there, in his hometown, that Levinas completes the last two years of his secondary education, in a Russian-speaking Jewish Gymnasium,²¹ and prepares his *Certificat de maturité* before leaving for Strasbourg in 1923, at the age of 17.

19. Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 65. It is curious that Levinas hardly ever refers to war in terms of violence or death, but mainly in terms of loss; loss of order, of stability, of meaning: "War – Everything is lost – The perverse love of life – stronger than death." OC1, 97. Such an understanding of war is in fact at the very basis of Levinas's two novel sketches, *La Dame de chez Wepler* and *Eros ou Triste Opulence*, that shall be the object of detailed analysis, see *infra* 36 and ss.

20. Poirié, 64.

21. Levinas's first known writing dates from his last year of studies at the Kovno Jewish Gymnasium (1920-1921); it consists of an essay, written in Hebrew, about the poet Haïm Nahman Bialik. Translated to French it was published in the section "Écrits de jeunesse en langue russe" in OC3, 373-380.

And in the midst of all the political and social instability that surrounded his childhood and adolescence and made its upbringing unconventional, to say the least,²² there is a source of reference, an element of stability (of comfort, one might say) to which Levinas invariably returns when discussing his early years; a source that was to have an earnest and lasting impression on the course of his life and work: *Russian literature*.

Lithuania, at the beginning of the century, was an open and heterogenous society with a large Jewish population where not only the different currents of modern Judaism co-existed and mingled, but also the attraction to Russian culture, and the desire of assimilation cohabited with the attachment to the Jewish traditions — *le rythme de la vie juive* —, that paced the very rhythm of public life; as Salomon Malka sharply puts it:

One finds at work in it the temptation to assimilation and the nostalgia for tradition, the passion for study, the rise of Yiddishism and the revival of Hebrew, the aversion to the injustices of the Tsarist state and the attraction for Russian culture. All this is blended within a Jewish society traversed by different and often opposing sensibilities.²³

Although practicing Jews, the Levinas were not pious as their parents before them: they had, the philosopher recalls, “what we call modern views.”²⁴ And like most families of their generation in Lithuania at the time, they were notably assimilated to the Russian culture and language in which “they saw the future of the youth;”²⁵ so, even though they spoke Yiddish among themselves, and knew Hebrew well, they spoke Russian with their children. And because from Lithuania to Russia, there was unity of language and culture, it was only natural that Russian literature was read by children and adults alike; so much so that the news of Tolstoy’s death in 1910 (one of the most striking memories, of the rare few Levinas holds of his early childhood) was received with deep sorrow and his death mourned as a family loss. And even though said interest and admiration for the Russian culture and for its

22. That said, Levinas’s thin accounts of his early years create the strong impression of a very sheltered childhood, as in the soulful memoire to his mother in the *Carnets de Captivité*: “My mother, who saw each of my undertakings accompanied by the shadow of its particular catastrophe ... Paroxysm of protection ... living in a safe or in absorbent cotton, and here we live between life and death. Poor mother! [Ma mère qui voyait chacune de mes entreprises accompagnée de l’ombre de sa catastrophe particulière ... Paroxysme de la protection ... vivre dans un coffre-fort ou dans de l’ouate, et voici que l’on vit entre la vie et la mort. Pauvre mère!]” OC1, 140.

23. Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas. La vie et la trace* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2002), 29.

24. Anissimov, “Portrait,” 32.

25. Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 63.

national glories in no way meant the shedding of their religious observance, or as he puts it, “the abnegation or denial of Judaism,”²⁶ Levinas received a secular education: he never attended (to his later regret) neither a *chedar* nor a *yeshiva*, though Kovno was surrounded by them;²⁷ instead, at the age of six, and while attending the city school, he received private lessons of Hebrew from a tutor who visited him twice a week at the wish of his father. It was though, he claims, a Hebrew free from the “empire” of religious texts, a modern Hebrew, because although he learned it by reading the Bible (which his tutor translated and interpreted in Russian), only much later in life (after the Second World War) would Levinas become acquainted with the Midrashic commentaries: “Silence on the marvelous rabbinic commentaries – again, this was a tribute to modernity!”²⁸ All the while his mother, Dvora, read him Pushkin and introduced him to Turgenev, whose suffering young heroes, lost between desire and reality, between the egoistic self and a quixotic altruism, inspired the concern with the meaning of life, stirring a metaphysical inquietude that, according to Levinas, held the place of philosophy in the Lithuanian lyceum.

Whereas the available biographical information is insufficient to conclusively determine the weight of each tradition — Russian and Jewish — on Levinas’s upbringing, it does suggest, however, that intellectually, culturally, and I would even say ideologically, Russian and, to some extent, Western culture had more bearing than the Jewish tradition itself. Surely, religion occupied an important place in the everyday public life, not, Levinas recalls, as an imposition or as a consequence of any particular decision, rather as an unacquired, inherited way of living in society — “*le judaïsme se respirait avec l’air*,”²⁹ but given Levinas’s secular formal education, his being born and raised in the Russian language and culture, and the fact that only much later he were to truly engage with the biblical texts through the study of the Talmudic commentaries,³⁰ it is perhaps more accurate to understand

26. Malka, *La vie et la trace*, 27.

27. In his interview with Anissimov, Levinas confesses his sorrow for not having attended a yeshiva and admits: “I didn’t know that these riches were around me, and I appreciated them when I started to regret not having benefit from them. [Je ne savais pas que ces richesses étaient autour de moi, et je les ai appréciées lorsque j’ai commencé à regretter de ne pas en avoir bénéficié.]” Anissimov, “Portrait”, 31.

28. Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 67-68.

29. Anissimov, “Portrait,” 30.

30. And for Levinas, as we know, Judaism cannot be properly understood without the Talmudic commentaries: “Judaism is not the Bible, it is the Bible seen through the Talmud. [Le judaïsme, ce n’est pas la Bible, c’est la Bible vue à travers le Talmud.]” Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 156.

Judaism in Levinas's upbringing as no more than a social question, or rather, as a religion, and not (as it would later become), as a "category of being."³¹ These words are not meant as a depreciation of the significance of Levinas's Judean roots nor of the importance of religion in his upbringing, but rather as a suggestion that, at a time when the Jewish inquietude was still deaf, the metaphysical inquietude of the Russian novel was already appealing to Levinas. Thus, the keen curiosity in books that, according to the philosopher, is where the essential of spirituality lies, rather than in its "mystical modalities," definite beliefs or liturgical enthusiasms is, I feel, an understanding that, in Levinas, precedes the Talmudic study, precisely through literature:

I often say, even now, that books are more interior than interiority, which is not at all a paradox, but presupposes a perception of degrees of interiority and a distrust of innocent and uneducated deceptions. [Je dis très souvent, encore maintenant, que plus intérieurs que l'intériorité sont les livres, ce qui n'est pas du tout un paradoxe, mais suppose une perception de degrés dans l'intériorité et une méfiance à l'égard des supercheries innocentes et incultes.]³²

Should we not therefore ask whether the inquietudes and anxieties that first inspired Levinas were not found in the Russian novel before being found on the Bible? Whether the understanding of the book, not as a thing among things, nor as a tool among tools, but as something fragile, something that says more than it says, and as such *solicits* the reader to respond, to interpret, was not something Levinas discovered through Blok's mystical imagery, Tolstoy's singular time balance, Pushkin's prophetic consciousness, or Dostoevsky's torment of belief — before Rashi? For its all-absorbing intensity, for all the fundamental questions it poses, for the love-sentiment it yields, where "love reveals its dimensions of transcendence,"³³ the Russian novel has a human significance, it makes an appeal to the Other, an appeal to which Levinas was not indifferent.

31. As Levinas will claim in *Difficile Liberté*: "Judaism is no longer just a teaching whose theses can be true or false; *Jewish existence ... itself is an essential event of being; Jewish existence is a category of being.* [le judaïsme n'est plus seulement un enseignement dont les thèses seraient vraies ou fausses, *l'existence juive . . . elle-même est un événement essentiel de l'être, l'existence juive est une catégorie de l'être.*]" Levinas, *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*. 3rd Ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 2010), 275. Orig. pub. 1963.

This understanding of Judaism as an ontological category is first formulated in two consecutive notes in the *Carnets de captivité*: "Partir du *Dasein* ou partir du J." and "J. comme catégorie." OC1, 75.

32. Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 66.

33. Poirié, 70.

1.2 The poet and the painter

In his last year as a student at the Kovno Gymnasium, Levinas met his first great influence in Dr. Moshe (Max) Schwabe (1886-1956), whom he would one day call his first master. Born in Halle, Germany, Dr. Schwabe completed his doctoral studies in classical philology in Berlin from where he left for Lithuania, where he taught German and served as principal in Levinas's high school. A fervent Zionist, Dr. Schwabe had, according to Levinas, "discovered Eastern European Judaism during the German occupation. He was moved by it and decided to devote himself to it."³⁴ Dr. Schwabe's German course, which Levinas recalls vividly, was the stage for impassioned lectures on Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea*, *Poetry and Truth* and *Faust* which ought to be read (so he would tell his students), "with the enthusiasm of forty degrees of fever."³⁵ And it was Dr. Schwabe — to whom many years later Levinas would pay a tribute with a short essay he called "*mitgenommen*" for the collective work *Honneur aux Maîtres*³⁶ —, who by introducing him to the German language and literature, that would prove invaluable to the beginning of his phenomenological adventure, opened the eyes of the young Lithuanian Jew to "all the power of culture, all the power of Goethe and Schiller, all the power of Europe;"³⁷ hence the words that, according to Salomon Malka, Levinas would dedicate to his former teacher in the epigraph of *De l'Existence à l'Existant* (1947): "I woke up one day and knew I was European."³⁸

Less than two years later, Levinas leaves for Europe. The "closeness" of Strasbourg to Lithuania, the prestige of the French language and "something unsympathetic about Germany at the time" (or as Lescourret claims, his rejection by the German universities for being a Jew)³⁹ led Levinas to this eastern border town of France, where he arrived in 1923;

34. Michaël de Saint Cheron, *Entretiens avec Emmanuel Levinas 1983-1994*. 2nd Ed. (Paris: Le Livre de Poche – Librairie Général Française, 2010), 57. Orig. pub. in 2006.

35. De Saint Cheron, 57.

36. Marguerite Léna, ed., *Honneur aux Maîtres* (Paris: Criterion, 1991).

37. Silvia Richter "'Il faut savoir passer d'un langage à l'autre'. Une des dernières interviews d'Emmanuel Levinas en 1992, avec Jacob Golomb et Ephraïm Meïr (inédite en français)," *Pardès*, 51, n. 1 (2012), 156.

38. Malka, *La vie*, 28.

39. Marie-Anne Lescourret, "Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995): un philosophe du XXe siècle", *Cités*, 25 (2006), 16. Also relevant is the fact that while still a student at the Kovno Gymnasium Levinas wrote his *curriculum vitae* in German. Cf. OC3, 371-372.

after enrolling at the University of Strasbourg he devoted his first year to the study of Latin, after which he began his studies in philosophy. And between Maurice Pradines's lessons on the relation between ethics and politics, Charles Blondel's anti-Freudian Bergsonian psychology, and learning French, Levinas carried on with his writing, that accompanied him all the way from Lithuania to France, until his departure for Fribourg in 1928.

Ranging from poems and fragments of poems to short stories and tales, Levinas's "Écrits de jeunesse en langue russe" feature more than 70 pieces whose influences vary from the Russian classics, mostly Dostoevsky, Lermontov, and Pushkin, to the symbolist Alexander Blok and the vanguardist Mayakovsky. It is from these last three, and particularly from Blok that Levinas draws much of the inspiration to compose his poems;⁴⁰ not only from the stormy lyric mysticism of his first phase, but also from the foggier, deeper symbolism of the next (where already lurks the presentiment of the coming revolution). From Blok's concern with time, wavering between the fleeting and the eternal, to the contrast between dream and reality, and between vision and reality, to his remarkable attentiveness to "the elusive sounds [*les sons insaisissables*],"⁴¹ Levinas's poems reveal a striking resemblance to the Blokian verse, not only at the thematic level, but also in terms of their experiential structure, as the attempt to recreate a certain mood from the singularity of experience. As Cecil Maurice Bowra writes in *The Heritage of Symbolism*, in Blok's poetry:

Everything that happens must be stated in metaphor and symbol; all that matters is the subtle recreation of a mood, an atmosphere... [the poems] create a feeling of an intimate and mysterious relation which cannot fully be understood. Even natural facts like the coming of spring become in them part of a ritual ... Nothing can be 'plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air' than this poetry... Valérie has said that a poet's task is simply to transfer to another his own state. That is what Blok does. Through his rhythms and the power of his words he conveys his own unique, extremely private state.⁴²

40. Blok's poem "The hours, days and years are fleeting" (1910) provides Levinas with the motif for composing, in 1923, "Les fils du télégraphe"; a poem that will undergo a revision in 1961, found on the back of the proofs for *Totalité et Infini*. (OC3, 297-298). In another poem from the same year, titled "Dans le charme criminel de la belle débauche...", Levinas alludes to Blok's *Verses About the Beautiful Lady* (1904) and refers directly to the poet: "*Sur le chemin montant je croiserai / Le Russe Alexandre Blok . . . Et Alexandre Blok apparut en rêve.*" OC3, 311-312.

41. "La musique", OC3, 261.

42. C. M. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 147.

But even more striking than the Blokian inspiration behind Levinas's poems is the presence of some of his primary philosophical motifs: the *face*, the *gaze*, *infinitude*, *eros*, *time*, and particularly the semantic motifs of the *night*, *insomnia*, and *obscurity* that along with the sensory dimension of cold, dark, and rustling silence, recount "the unspoken fear, the relationship to the frightening in the emptiness of the night with which, and against which, the whole of the Levinasian work will unfold"⁴³ — the *il y a*. The following excerpts from the poems "Moi", "La musique", "Le sommeil", and the poem "La nuit" — all dating between 1922 and 1923 —, depict with great precision the experience of horror and distress, that will, in *De l'existence à l'existant*, underlie the notion of "*il y a*" as distinct from anguish, and from the Heideggerian "*es gibt*," and whose place at the heart of subjectivity is here, I believe, made explicit.

God stumbled against the wall. The chain fell,
 Shattered the crystal tomb
 Of the aimless slumbering Nothingness.
 And the Nothingness whispered: Me
 [Dieu trébucha contre le mur. La chaîne tomba,
 Se brisa le tombeau de cristal
 Du Néant sans but sommeillant.
 Et le Néant chuchota: Moi]

The murmur turned into a tremor and shiver
 [Le murmure se mua en tremblement et frémissement]

...
 The shiver of envy deeper than thought
 Penetrates to the depths of Being.
 In the lunar darkness of self-forgetfulness
 Resounds this old whisper: Me.
 [Le frémissement de l'envie plus profondément que la pensée
 Pénètre au fond de l'Être.
 Dans l'obscurité lunaire de l'oubli de soi
 Résonne ce vieux murmure: Moi.]⁴⁴

43. François Collin, "La peur. Emmanuel Levinas et Maurice Blanchot" in Catherine Chalié and Miguel Abensour, eds., *L'Herne. Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: L'Herne, 1991), 314. As Levinas writes in the preface of *De l'existence à l'existant*: "The there is ... goes back to one of those strange obsessions that we retain from childhood, and which reappear in insomnia when silence is resonating, and the void is filled. [L'*il y a* . . . remonte à l'une de ces étranges obsessions qu'on garde de l'enfance et qui reparaissent dans l'insomnie quand le silence résonne et le vide reste plein]." *De l'existence à l'existant*. 2nd Ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1963) 10-11; accordingly, in his dialogue with Philippe Nemo he claims: "My reflection on this subject starts with childhood memories. One sleeps alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as 'rumbling.' [Ma réflexion sur ce sujet part de souvenirs d'enfance. On dort seul, les grandes personnes continuent la vie ; l'enfant ressent le silence de sa chambre à coucher comme 'bruisant.']" EI, 37-38.

44. Excerpt from "Moi", OC3, 257.

In the still darkness I found myself at last.
I am nameless. I am the trembling of the end moments.
[Dans l'obscurité immobile je me suis enfin trouvé.
Je n'ai pas de nome. Je suis le tremblement des fins instants.]⁴⁵

The flakes of the shredded night
Lurking in the corner
Drowning and stirring things
Grew a new darkness
[Les flocons de la nuit déchiquetée
Cachés dans le coin
Noyant et remuant les choses
Ont fait pousser une nouvelle obscurité]

In this black void
I hear the distant humming
Of slow spinning tops
Stubborn and hopeless
[Dans ce vide noir
J'entends le ronflement lointain
De lentes toupies
Obstinées et sans espoir]

Do the winds blow across the square
Lifting the signs?
Or has the time come to turn
Around in vain?
You who reigned in the beginning
And will rule again in the end
We have killed thy name
The cold face
Your brow is eaten by lies
Your hands are powerless
You cannot muffle
That nauseating sound in your ears
[Les vents soufflent-ils sur la place
En soulevant les enseignes?
Ou est-il venu le temps de tourner
En vain autour de soi?
Toi qui régnaï au commencement
Et qui régnera à nouveau à la fin
Nous avons tu ton nom
Le visage froid
Ton front est dévoré de mensonges
Tes mains sont impuissantes
Tu ne peux étouffer

45. Excerpt from "La musique", OC3, 261.

Ce bruit nauséeux dans tes oreilles]⁴⁶

The sound of empty rooms – invention of insomnia –
Spread along the walls, fell silent on the ceiling.
I am – simple possibility – the louis d’or
Of an immense night in a black wallet.
[Le bruit des chambres vides – invention d’insomnies –
S’est répandu le long des murs, s’est tu au plafond.
Je suis – simple possibilité – le louis d’or
D’une nuit immense dans un portefeuille noire.]
...
Being without action; time without event
[Être sans action ; temps sans événement.]⁴⁷

Though devoid of philosophic footing, Levinas’s youthful poems are neither superficial nor inconsequential; on the contrary, they are revealing of an awakened, sensitive spirit, capable of generating evocative and effective imagery to describe the *phenomena* that are prior to reflection but are already intuited. An attentiveness to the subject, not only in its empirical dimension, but already existential, in its very *impossibility of not being*,⁴⁸ is acutely present in these poems that expose both a strong literary inspiration and a philosophical urge.

In addition to poetry, Levinas also wrote half a dozen short stories and tales between 1924 and 1925⁴⁹ which, however varied in form, substance, and inspiration, may all very well be classed as morality tales. “Deux Sages”, “Les trois degrés de la connaissance”, “Les hommes qui connurent Dieu” and “Il ne descendra jamais. . .” (titled, I assume, after Genesis 6:3) are based upon biblical motifs; “La fin du conte” draws on Russian folklore, specifically the familiar characters of Prince Ivan (or Ivan Tsarevitch) and the sorceress Baba Yaga, whereas “Charles Mullen” reads as an apparently fictional romantic episode. It is, at last, the tale “La beauté,” dating from September 1925, that for the pertinence of its subject matter and the ingenuity of its composition most warrants a minute’s thought.

46. “La nuit”, OC3, 263.

47. Excerpt from “Le sommeil”, OC3, 264.

48. In *Le Temps et l’autre* Levinas turns to Shakespeare to expose this impossibility: “This is why Hamlet is beyond tragedy. He understands that the ‘not to be’ is perhaps impossible ... The notion of irremissible being, without exit, constitutes the fundamental absurdity of being. [C’est pour cela que Hamlet est au-delà de la tragédie. Il comprend que le ‘ne pas être’ est peut-être impossible ... La notion de l’être irrémisissable et sans issue, constitue l’absurdité foncière de l’être.]” Levinas, *Le Temps et l’autre*. 11th Ed. (Paris: PUF, 2014), 29.

49. “Écrits de jeunesse en langue russe” (2. Textes en prose), in OC3, 275 – 295.

The longest and, to my mind, most accomplished of Levinas's short stories, written at the tender age of 19, "La beauté" touches on such issues as *creation, mystery, immortality, beauty, sacrifice, idolatry*⁵⁰ and the *sacred*, some of which will play a crucial role in Levinas's later reflections on art.

Set in Florence, "La beauté" tells the story of a painter who sacrifices himself to live in immortality through his creation — a painting of the Virgin; a painting that Levinas depicts not by its narrative content or formal qualities, but by the painter's sacrifices who: first gave the Virgin his eyes, and his became "darkened like two nests forgotten by the birds that had taken flight;" then he gave the Virgin his divine curls, "dark and shining like the black marble of the tombs of the dead kings," whilst his turned gray; at last, *he gave the Virgin his heart*, and thus:

When the image of the Virgin was finished, the painter felt that he had to die. He had given her everything he had. He had poured all his life into it, he had physically transferred it like liquid, he had transfused it like blood, and he sensed as though he felt and existed through the canvas that had come to life, how his life had been poured onto this created thing. It was immortality. . . He understood that immortality was not the word or the rant of a poet – immortality is an organic sensation. Immortality is as real as pain. [Quand l'image de la Vierge fut achevée, le peintre sentit qu'il devait mourir. Il lui avait donné tout ce qu'il possédait. Il avait versé en elle toute sa vie, il l'avait transvasée physiquement comme un liquide, il l'avait transfusée comme du sang et il ressentit comment il sentait et existait à travers la toile qui avait pris vie, comment sa vie s'était répandue sur cette chose créée. C'était l'immortalité. . . Il comprit que l'immortalité n'était pas le mot ou la divagation d'un poète – l'immortalité est une sensation organique. L'immortalité est réelle comme la douleur.]⁵¹

As soon as the crowds came to see the picture of the Virgin they shuddered, and falling on their knees, they wept with joy thinking "they were witnessing the appearance of beauty or of God;" and over the following years, and the following centuries, people from all over the world came to look at the painting; and generation after generation, they wept their best tears before it, without understanding why, and without realizing, they too gave the picture a part

50. The issue of idolatry is raised by Levinas in a number of his poems, most notably in "Le silence" of 1923: "Before the marble of paganism / I bow again / But the eyes of the idols are gazeless / And without answer the stern mouth ... But through this hardness / Impenetrable, absolute / Shines, as through troubled glass / Death, with the miraculous brilliance of the beyond. [Devant le marbre du paganisme / Je m'incline à nouveau / Mais les yeux des idoles sont sans regard / Et sans réponse la bouche sévère ... Mais à travers cette dureté / Impénétrable, absolue / Brille, comme à travers du verre trouble / La mort, de l'éclat miraculeux de l'au-delà.]" OC3, 270.

51. OC3, 285.

of their own soul and life, for their tears became embodied in the painting; “and the immortality of the painter grew, and his living soul came into contact with other souls and gave birth through tears to new forms of beauty,” and the people crying before the painting still believed it was beauty they saw, that it was beauty the reason why they cried, but in reality, it was because “through this painting they touched a mystery.” And the painting became an icon adored by everyone who ever laid eyes on it. Until one day, a child came to see the painting and did not bow to it, for he saw nothing in it “but the soot of the centuries and the clumsy brush of a naive painter,” and from that moment, he dedicated his whole life to creating another picture, of another beauty. But unlike the first painter, he did not give his soul to his work; he created it coldly and rationally, not out of faith but through science, knowledge, and technique. And when his work was finished, he brought it to the square and, for a minute, the crowd “remained as if bewitched. But only for a minute: all eyes turned to the church where the old icon was, and the crowd fell to their knees.” And then he understood why his plan had failed; he understood that “beauty is not in the beauty of lines and the mysterious play of colors... It is only because one sees one’s own soul incarnated in things that things are beautiful”:

And then the men understood that the painting was more than beautiful – that it came from past centuries – that it was sacred... One cannot create the sacred. It is eternity that creates it. And the proud painter fell on his knees before the icon of his enemy in the ecstasy of prayer. In the ecstasy of the intoxication of the sacred which is higher than the intoxication of the beautiful. [Et alors les hommes comprenaient que le tableau était plus que beau – qu’il venait des siècles écoulés –, qu’il était sacré... On ne peut créer du sacré. C’est l’éternité qui le crée. Et le peintre fier tomba à genoux face à l’icône de son ennemi dans l’extase de la prière. Dans l’extase de l’ivresse du sacré qui est plus haute que l’ivresse du beau.]⁵²

What is most remarkable about this story is that it is built on everything Levinas will later denounce in art — beauty, the sacred, immortality, eternity, the transfusion of the subject into the object of creation, the very notion of myth —, but which here seem to have a positive — transcendent meaning; so much so that the second painter, who represents the technical mastery that, for the mature Levinas, will be a prerequisite for any creation or discourse on art, ends up acknowledging that his painting is incomparably inferior to that of the first painter who sacrificed himself for his work.

52. OC3, 289.

I must say that when I first read this story, I was so struck by it and by the enthusiastic and fascinating way Levinas tells it, considering that these same questions will be problematic in his mature work, that it occurred to me that this tale might have an ironic intention; that perhaps Levinas created this myth of the immortal painter and his sacred creation with the very intent of denouncing what he names in the last sentence, “the ecstasy of the intoxication of the sacred,” the very same expression that we find in his *Difficile Liberté*, where he will precisely urge an humanity free of myths, free of the sacred, whose fallacious prestige and enticement “prolong the animal within the civilized.”⁵³ If that were true, this tale would be perhaps even more ingenious, or rather, precociously so, for not only it would mean that, as soon as 1925, Levinas was aware of the need to unravel the Holy [*le Saint*] from the sacred [*le sacré*] but that he attempted to denounce the sacred and thus the very temptation of mythogenesis, not in a blunt or accusative manner, but precisely through the creation of a myth! And yet, it could be that, at the time, Levinas was honestly and truly fascinated by the possibility of a painting that incarnated the soul of its creator; a painting so powerful and so beautiful that transcended its materiality; it could be that Levinas simply (still) believed in the sacred, that he believed that “without a soul seeing itself in everything there is no beauty anywhere.”

For their arresting mixture of candor and prescience, for the themes and concerns they herald, these early writings, as Séan Hand argues, add “to our appreciation of the interdisciplinary inspirations, generic mobility, and radical relationality all fueling Levinas’s attempts to depart from certain categories of being,”⁵⁴ and I would add, of the *non-sense*.

Literature and the literary practice accompanied, as already noted, Levinas’s journey from Lithuania to Strasbourg and, there, the early years of his “first exile.” But besides Blok and Mayakovsky, his literary references were still the classics as, even in France, the Russian masters were joined in Levinas’s bedside table by the likes of Racine, George Sand, and Corneille. Then, in 1926, Levinas met Maurice Blanchot. The, at the time, undergraduate in

53. “Judaism also appeals to a humanity devoid of myths. Not because the marvelous is repugnant to its narrow soul, but because myth, albeit sublime, introduces into the soul that troubled element, that impure element of magic and sorcery and that intoxication of the sacred and of war that prolong the animal within the civilized [Le judaïsme lui aussi en appelle à une humanité sans mythes. Non pas que le merveilleux répugne à son âme étriquée ; mais parce que le mythe, fût-il sublime, introduit dans l’âme cet élément trouble, cet élément impur de magie et de sorcellerie et cette ivresse du sacré et de la guerre qui prolongent l’animal dans le civilisé.]” DL, 82-83.

54. Séan Hand, “Levinas, Literature and Philosophy”, in Michael L. Morgan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 543.

German and Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, who would later “quit” philosophy to pursue journalism, it was Blanchot who introduced Levinas to modern French literature, “and to a certain French mindset [*esprit*].”⁵⁵ And though at the time Blanchot was yet a virgin author, Levinas was immediately impressed not so much by his ideas, but by “a certain possibility of saying things, very difficult to imitate and appearing as a lofty strength.”⁵⁶ Beyond their quite different personalities, they had also opposing political sensibilities: while Blanchot was a bourgeoisie-aristocratic monarchist who would very soon embrace his far-right inclinations, Levinas was a Lithuanian Jewish emigrant, a discreet but staunch republican, for whom France was a dazzling vision of equality, freedom and achievement; and yet, very soon, they had access to one another.⁵⁷

The long-lasting friendship and complicity of thought between Levinas and Blanchot has over the years become a theme in itself, with numerous scholars addressing their affinities and divergences, their mutual respect, manifest not only in the way they refer to each other, but in the many allusions they each make to the other in their works. That is not my intent at all; not yet. My very brief account of Maurice Blanchot is for now circumscribed to the Strasbourg period, at a time when everything was still “to come,” everything still to be said and written, and their paths still to diverge. Thus, in Strasbourg, their affinity was a starting, unspoiled one, grounded on the love of literature and the interest in philosophy, particularly “in these phenomenological things” that they were just starting to discover.

Like Levinas, Blanchot was an avid reader whose literary references were however (though not surprisingly) other than his own. Between Goethe, Hölderlin, Rilke, Kafka, Barrès, Maurras, Mallarmé, it was Valéry, Proust and Léon Bloy, whom Blanchot introduced to Levinas, that had the most influence on the young philosophy student, authors who would feature in many of his works, including in the *Carnets de captivité*.⁵⁸ But whether it was

55. Christophe Bident. *Maurice Blanchot. A Critical Biography*. Translated by John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 30. Orig. pub. as *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire invisible; Essai biographique* (Seysssel: Éditions Champ Vallon, 1998).

56. Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 73-74.

57. Poirié, 72.

58. Levinas dedicates several pages of the *Carnets de captivité* to Proust whom he calls le “poète du social;” moreover, the essay Levinas will dedicate to Proust — “L’autre dans Proust”, *Deucalion* 2 (1947), 117–123 — and already announced in the note “œuvre à faire” (see *infra* 33 and ss.) is sketched in pages 71 to 73 of the *Carnets*. As to Leon Bloy, the author figures on several pages of Levinas’s war notebooks, mainly through commented excerpts of his *Lettres à sa fiancée* (150–160).

literature or philosophy, Bergson or Proust, Pradines or Valéry, it was really the readings, the ideas, the possibilities of language and the skepticism that drove them, without definitions nor compromises:

Philosophy would forever be our companion, by day, by night, even by losing her name, by becoming literature, knowledge, nonknowledge, or becoming absent, our clandestine friend of whom we respected — loved — that which did not allow us to be bound to her, all the while sensing that there was nothing awakened in us, vigilant unto sleep, that was not due to her difficult friendship. Philosophy or friendship. But philosophy is precisely not an allegory.⁵⁹

By the late 20's, the two young men's attention was turned to Husserl and Heidegger, and to all the new ideas that Levinas was bringing over from Freiburg. Levinas's departure for Germany in 1928, which marks the beginning of his phenomenological adventure, and, indeed, of his philosophical journey, marks, on the other hand, the first interlude in his literary ventures, as his last known poem, titled "Tournez votre interrupteur" (written, incidentally, on the page of a German diary), dates from 1927.

1.3 'Mon œuvre à faire'

After the publication in 1930 of his thesis, *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, the first complete study on Husserl in France, Levinas leaves for Paris to pursue the associate degree in philosophy (*l'agrégation*); a year later he obtains French citizenship for which he does military service in the 46th Infantry Regiment in Vicennes, on the outskirts of Paris, between 1931 and 1933. Meanwhile, Levinas takes part in the philosophical gatherings organized by Gabriel Marcel where he meets, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre. After a brief trip to Lithuania in 1932 to marry the pianist and childhood neighbor, Raïssa Lévy, Levinas returns to Paris to work as an administrative assistant to the general secretary of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU); during this period, he publishes "Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme" (*Esprit*, 1934), "De l'évasion,"

59. Maurice Blanchot, "Notre compagne clandestine" in François Laruelle, ed., *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980), 80.

(*Recherches Philosophiques*, 1935-6) and a series of articles, among which, “L’actualité de Maïmonide,” in the journal of AIU, *Paix et droit*.⁶⁰

In 1939, at the age of 34, Levinas is mobilized to the French army as an interpreter of Russian and German, and in June of the following year is captured with the 10th Army in Rennes by the German troops. He spends his first year of captivity in France, in the *Frontstalags* of Rennes, Laval and Vesoul, and in 1942 is transferred to the Stalag XI B in Fallingbommel near Magdeburg, Germany; here, he recounts:

I was immediately restricted to a special condition: declared as a Jew, but spared the uniform fate of the deportees, grouped with other Jews in a special commando. Working – separated from all the other Frenchmen – in the forest, but apparently benefiting from the provisions of the Geneva Convention protecting the prisoner. [Me voici d’emblée restreint à une condition spécial: déclaré comme juif, mais épargné par l’uniforme du sort des déportés, regroupé avec d’autres juifs dans un commando spécial. Travaillant – séparé de tous les autres Français – dans la forêt, mais bénéficiant apparemment des dispositions de la convention de Genève protégeant le prisonnier.]⁶¹

Levinas would remain in the German prison camp until May 1945, thus, spending a total of five years in captivity. But in spite of the occasional references to this period, and to events that occurred during his captivity in some of his works and interviews, these five years of Levinas’s life were, for too long, covered with emptiness and silence. The publication in 2009 of the *Carnets de captivité* came to fill that void, but as Sarah Hammerschlag accurately observes, “they are not a diary, nor a narrative account of life in the stalag, but, rather, something of a laboratory for ideas,”⁶² in which personal reflections on war, on the very concrete and extreme experience of captivity, often against the pre-war situation, but also, interestingly, against the possible post-war existence, intermingle with fortuitous memories of films, plays, songs, with aphorisms, and with philosophical, biblical and literary reflections. And indeed, literature is one of the most recurrent subjects on these notebooks.

60. Levinas wrote a total of six articles between 1935 and 1939 for *Paix et droit*. These were later republished in *L’Herne. Emmanuel Levinas* (1991), in the section “Épreuves d’une pensée”: 142-153.

61. Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 92.

62. Sarah Hammerschlag, “Levinas’s prison notebooks”, in Morgan, *Oxford Handbook*, 22. It bears mentioning that although the *carnets* were mostly written between 1940 and 1945, the first entry dates in fact, as we saw, from Sep. 8th, 1937, thus prior to Levinas’s detention, while the last, about religious evolutionism, was written around 1950, precisely five years after his release.

In what is likely the first entry written during captivity (in Laval, 1942), Levinas quotes the two final verses of Henri de Régnier's poem "L'ennui": "Since my dreary, interminable and dark dream / Haunts a heavy river which is not the Lethe. [Puisque mon rêve morne, interminable et sombre / Hante un fleuve pesant qui n'est pas le Léthé.]" In the next page he discusses extensively Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem *Roland Furieux*, and in the following, he writes a brief note about J. Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le Bonheur dans le crime*, and so on. He alludes to the most varied authors and novels; he quotes entire paragraphs, pens fragmented but detailed attempts at literary criticism, he also makes simple observations regarding certain literary works, and announces new readings; and while it is impossible to account for every novel and author he mentions in his notebooks, what is clear is that literature was a central part of Levinas's life in the prison camps. Already in the *Carnets*, literature appears to be more than a source of moral support, not only for the profuseness and depth of the philosopher's remarks about it, but because very soon it began to arouse, or more precisely, *reawaken*, in the philosopher, that drive for literary creation that had been, it would seem, dormant since 1927 neither, however, and much like in his youth, as a product of circumstantial despair, nor as a mere recreation, but as his preferred register of articulation, of expression.

Published in the third volume of *Œuvres complètes, Éros, Littérature et philosophie*, along with theoretical notes and the aforementioned "Écrits de jeunesse en langue russe", Levinas's two novel sketches — *La Dame de chez Wepler* and *Eros* or *Triste Opulence*⁶³ — attest to a concern that saw in literature (however briefly), not just the "philosophical temptation" he would later acknowledge, but the appropriate place to at once testify and evade the grim reality in which he found himself. And though both novels were left unfinished, Levinas is known to have resumed the writing of *Eros* or *Triste Opulence* well

63. Because the proper title of this novel is yet to be determined, most scholars have favored keeping the ambiguous "or" between the two titles. While the name "*Triste Opulence*" appears on several pages of the archive folders, including the note "mon œuvre à faire", "*Eros*" was written on the cover of the folder containing the second and third parts of the sketch of the novel, along with other writings, including, as suggested by the editors, preparatory work for *Totalité et Infini*. According to the editors, "no doubt Levinas will not have pronounced himself definitively and will have gone from *Triste Opulence* to *Eros*." Cohen-Levinas, "The Literary Instant and the Condition of Being Hostage," in *Levinas and Literature*, 200.

after the end of the war, from 1959 until 1962⁶⁴ — a most relevant finding, given that Levinas's first *magnus opus* and state doctoral thesis, *Totalité et Infini*,⁶⁵ was published in 1961, which means that he worked on both fiction and philosophy, if not simultaneously, at least in the same period.⁶⁶

The fragmented and fickle texture of the novels, all too evident in the precariousness of their narratives and characters, is not just the natural outcome of their incompleteness (and ultimate forsaking) nor of Levinas's lack of literary talent, but ultimately, I believe, of what the philosopher perceives to be the unique appeal of literature: the possibility of rendering the sense of the sensible in which the events appear in their mystery. As Jean-Luc Nancy finely observes: "Levinas did not go further in his literary endeavors, but the movement that carried them has not been erased."⁶⁷ And it is precisely this movement which is also, and essentially, a movement toward *mystery*, for in mystery lies the essential of the literary work, that I aim to unravel through a careful analysis of Levinas's novel sketches alongside some of his notes from that period comprised in his *Carnets de captivité*, where we find the following note from 1942 titled "mon œuvre à faire":

Mon œuvre à faire :

Philosophique : 1) L'être et le néant
2) Le temps
3) Rosenzweig
4) Rosenberg
Littéraire : 1) Triste opulence
2) L'irréalité et l'amour
Critique : Proust⁶⁸

64. February 15, 1962 is the date of a typewritten letter from the Fonds Social Juif Unifié whose verse Levinas reused to write one of the pages of the novel; it is the most recent date the editors have found. It was precisely through the various dated letters, library cards and pamphlets reused by Levinas, that the editors were able to determine, with some degree of accuracy, the periods during which the author had worked on his novel.

65. *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* was published by Martinus Nijhoff in 1961, the same year of its defense at the Sorbonne (June 6, 1961), before a jury chaired by Jean-Wahl which also included Gabriel Marcel, Paul Ricœur, Georges Blin and Vladimir Jankélévitch who was asked to replace Merleau-Ponty due to the latter's unexpected passing.

66. In view of this chronological proximity, Colin Davis suggested the 1961 work to be the culmination of both Levinas's philosophical work over the 1940s and 1950s, and his literary work of the same period, pointing "the war and the difficulty of making sense of it as it throws into doubt the subject's understanding of its own experience" as the common issue to both. Davis, "Levinas the novelist," *French Studies* 69, no. 3 (2015), 342.

67. Nancy, "L'intrigue," 29.

68. OC1, 74.

Notwithstanding the relevance of the themes, it is in fact the very formulation of Levinas's note that lends it the greatest interest and bearing to our analysis. For one thing, it attests to a non-incompatibility between the "literary" and the "philosophical," adding moreover, the "critical," as the three (co)existent registers his work ought to assume; and in doing so, reflects on Levinas's own literary practice as more than a mere recreation, and certainly not a frivolous one, but rather as an integral part of a tripartite design which, at the time, structured and impelled his thinking. One could certainly argue that Levinas's plan simply outlines the work he wished to accomplish in the *Carnets* and not afterwards; however, considering that the *Carnets* already encompass most (if not all) of the major formulations Levinas would go on to develop in his later work, including substantial parts of *De l'existence à l'existant* and *Totalité et Infini*, to restrict the philosopher's plan to the *Carnets* would, in my view, be a misjudgment.⁶⁹

Levinas did indeed forsake his literary attempts, and his work is undoubtedly primarily philosophical, but that is not tantamount to saying that the "philosophical" is the sole register of his work, or that, by extension, the philosophical word alone succeeds in voicing the ethical imperative. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes: "the 'work' imposes itself at once according to these three rubrics whose connection, not to say complicity and intrigue, resounds obviously in a very clear way in the spirit of the one who conceives it."⁷⁰ From Nancy's words, and from what we know of Levinas's own work, it seems clear that the "literary" and the "critical" should not and cannot be regarded as mere articulations of his philosophical discourse, but rather as modalities, analogous to the "philosophical," of exposing the human intrigue, of articulating *the ethical inquiry*. A more radical reading, as far as the literary is concerned, is made by Arthur Cools who claims that "the literary is already at work in Levinas's ethical inquiry."⁷¹ Building on the opening question of his article, about the sense of searching for a concept of literature in Levinas's philosophy, Cools argues that it is the question on "the emergence of meaning into being" rather than "what is literature?" that

69. Also, the fact that Levinas refers throughout the pages of the *Carnets* to "ma philosophie", "ma philo," or simply "φ," is telling as to the breadth of the *Carnets*, which constitute, so to speak, a "book of intentions," in the sense that in his notebooks Levinas lays out the themes and the direction he envisioned for his philosophy.

70. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Eros, Emmanuel Levinas's Novel?," in *Levinas and Literature*, 17-18.

71. Arthur Cools, "The anarchy of Literature" in *Levinas and Literature*, 2.

concerns Levinas, constituting the “structural and indissoluble coherence” between his “ethics as first philosophy and the work of literature,” from which he gathers:

The attempt to delineate the literary in Levinas’s reflections or to articulate Levinas’s reflections on literature may seem to be unfounded. For the literary is already at work in Levinas’s ethical inquiry. From the perspective of the question concerning the emergence of meaning into being, the manifestation of the ethical significance appears to be already literary and the manifestation of the meaning of the literary work appears to be already ethical.⁷²

Underlying Cools’s reasoning is what the author names the “deformalization of narrative” which “results from the attention given to the concreteness of the event prior to the act of narration,”⁷³ thus challenging the primacy of the narrative form whose synthetic coherence is not only insufficient but unsuited to articulate the emergence of meaning into being. The deformalization of narrative follows Levinas’s conception of time as deformalization, and thereby, as diachrony, whose excess of discontinuity in its disrupting and interruption of the synthetic time regarding the singular event is, according to Cools, dependent on the literary which “is required in order to be able to approach and to articulate the emergence of meaning in being, even when this articulation implies the deformalization of all literary means.” Insisting on this dependence on the literary, Cools goes on to argue that because “the literary irreducibly exceeds the concept of literature, preceding the moment of its conceptualization and thematization,” both literature and philosophy are secondary regarding the literary.⁷⁴ Although the word “secondary” to express the precedence of the “literary” over philosophy, strikes me as objectionable, there is, I feel, much truth to Cools’s claim. Indeed, it harks back to a question that inadvertently crossed my mind when I first read *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*: “is this philosophy?” Though the answer was a resounding “yes,” the question nonetheless lingered, insofar as the text, philosophical in both language and content, seemed to be steered by something other, something that at once appeared to displace and root its philosophical discourse, something that somehow preceded philosophy, but which

72. Cools, “Anarchy,” 2.

73. Cools, 6.

74. Cools, 16.

also exceeded it, not unlike “a trace that would predate the walk, or an echo that would precede the sound of a voice.”⁷⁵

But all these ideas and, hopefully the very notion and appeal of the literary will be, I feel, better understood once we attend to the philosopher’s two novel sketches — *Eros* or *Triste Opulence* and *La Dame de chez Wepler* — which I now propose to analyze, mindful of the two aforementioned notions of the “emergence of meaning into being” and the “focus on the concrete experience over narration.”

1.4 Levinas the novelist

Set during World War II, and covering its whole five years, is Levinas’s longest and, albeit unfinished, most complex, and personal novel sketch, *Eros* or *Triste Opulence*. That said, only about a quarter of it is believed to have been written during captivity; resumed, as noted earlier, in 1959, this manuscript stretches to about 25 pages in its continuous version, and based on the given dates and scenarios, can be roughly divided into three parts, plus a concluding interlude that draws on Faust’s Gretchen’s tragedy, and whose inclusion in the novel adds to the general sketchiness of the whole. The first “section,” set between May and June 1940 — respectively, the German invasion of France, and the defeat of France — is for the most part focused on a single character, a military interpreter named Paul Rondeau whom we first meet in a Parisian office bidding farewell to his comrades due to his deployment to the war front, and who is subsequently taken prisoner by the German army and sent to a prison camp in France. A leap from June 1940 to the spring of 1942 marks the transition to the second part of the novel, that although coherently set during captivity, no longer figures the name Rondeau; the characters are instead Tromel (or Tramuel), Weil (Weill or W.), Lando (Lo. or L.) and Montespan. Finally, in the third part, the setting is once again Paris, after the end of the war, in 1945, as a character named Jean-Paul returns home from captivity; shortly after however, the character’s name is suddenly “Jules” — are they all meant to be the same person or different people? Is the changing of names meaningful or is it merely the result of the author’s indecision and the work’s sketchiness? Or is it, on the other hand, that names are irrelevant? That it is not the name, but the experience that counts, an experience

75. See *supra* 2, n. 3.

shared by many nameless people? We are left wondering. Either way, and whatever the name or names of the protagonist, it is to Levinas himself to whom the depictions and events of this story all seem to relate; from his position as a translator officer in Paris, to his confessed love of France, to his deployment to the front in May 1940, and subsequent capture in June, to his period of captivity in Rennes, Laval and Fallingbistel (all of which are named in the novel) to, finally, his return to Paris five years later — little doubt remains as to the autobiographical nature of *Éros* or *Triste Opulence*.

“— In short, the front is stabilizing. We held on the Aisne, we held on the Somme.” Rondeau was convinced that the war would not last, and if it eventually did, he was not ready to admit it: “How to admit war?” His greave deception was bound up with his unwavering faith on his beloved France whose immense and everlasting stability, no war, phony or otherwise, could to his mind change: “O country where no disaster will prevent the civil servants from receiving their pension, where civilized life reaches such a possession of itself that it knows itself as eternal, as immutable as nature...” Here we come across the first instance of a recurring ploy to underline the sense of idleness that pervades the entire story, that is, the framing of the historical context and events, and the very progression of the plot, often elliptically, through long poetic and existential reflections, and in many cases making more and less direct literary and philosophical allusions.

Even the presentiment of the chaos that loomed ever since May 10, was easily dismissed by the sightings on the train to Creil: of the trees and the setting sun, of the ordinary people going around their everyday life, of a young happy girl at the piano whom one might glimpse through the window, in sum, of reality: “The war is a nightmare that will disappear. It is enough, as in waking up, to welcome the first sounds of the morning that penetrate right into our dream, for the chimera to dissipate.” But Rondeau’s deception was shattered when he overheard the response of a lieutenant to a soldier’s question about the reinstatement of leave permissions at Creil station: “Permissions restored? My poor friend. Maybe never.” Suddenly, after three weeks of denial in which he had stored away the things he saw and the words he heard, “all the fatality, all the presence of the war . . . penetrated Rondeau;” only then did he realized that “France, his France on which all his humanity rested, all his dignity, this France in which reality was ordered and held, that France was coming undone.” This is the turning-point of the novel, for it is this crumbling of the protagonist’s innermost belief

in the immense and everlasting stability of his beloved France that prompts both the unfolding of the action and the theoretical motifs.

Upon his “revelation,” Rondeau murmured:

— I am alone. [Je suis seul.]

And adds without knowing why: [Et il ajouta sans savoir pourquoi:]

— Alone with God. [Seul avec Dieu.]

J.-L. Nancy argues this passage should be understood as the end of a chapter given that underneath it Levinas drew a line,⁷⁶ and on which he is believed to have left the novel until its resumption in 1959. Deliberately or not, it is in any case a remarkable line for an interlude of roughly 15 years. And when Levinas does resume the novel, he repeats the same line, adding a question mark:

Alone with God? Will we find a character who can endure this solitude without being tempted? [Seul avec Dieu? Trouvera-t-on un personnage qui pourra supporter cette solitude sans se laisser tenter?]

It is a very interesting passage in that Levinas seems to deride “his own” invocation of God, an impression reinforced by the author’s allusion to Rondeau as “character;” it is as though, argues Nancy, “he asked himself, as the author: will I be able to find a character? And, at the same time, a character means a person here; it means ‘someone’”,⁷⁷ and straight after:

There was a moment of total emptiness between the disappearance of France and the reappearance of France, a moment of defeat where nothing was yet remade – a vertiginous emptiness, an interregnum, a hiatus, the absolute interval. Everything had to be decided at that moment when the chain of moral causes was interrupted. [Il y eut un instant de vide total entre la disparition de la France et la réapparition de la France, un instant de défaite où rien ne se refaisait encore – un vide vertigineux, un interrègne, un hiatus, l’intervalle absolu. Tout devait se décider à ce moment là où l’enchaînement des causes morales s’est interrompu.]

The essential of *Eros* lies in this string of statements, and in the interlude in-between. In the first quote, Rondeau heedlessly invokes God, as one does in moments of momentary

76. Nancy, “Eros,” 26.

77. Nancy, 27.

despair,⁷⁸ an invocation, as mentioned, quickly dismissed by the author himself who then describes a moment of absolute interval — the interstice in which moral order is lost and thus “everything is permitted.”⁷⁹ This saying that Levinas quotes multiple times both in this novel and in *La Dame de chez Wepler* which, no doubt, is borrowed, once more, from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, is the aftermath of the debacle: the reversal of order, the collapse of the law, of institutions, the shattering of values, of society itself; but what was left was neither anguish, resentment, pity or hope, but only the consolation of personal happiness — “At last captivity seemed to begin”:

He was born with a new wisdom. He opened his eyes for the first time on a world from which all the fog had lifted. One reached the things themselves... He looked at France in a good mood that month of June 1940, when it was not a question of defending oneself against enemies or of fighting for existence in the midst of deprivation – but simply of not being moved by anything –, of feeling joyfully alone, without parents, without friends, without luggage, without anger or disappointment, but in an immense curiosity and appetite [Il lui naissait une nouvelle sagesse. Il ouvrait pour la première fois les yeux sur un monde dont se sont levés tous les brouillards. On atteignant les choses elles-mêmes... C’est dans la bonne humeur qu’il regardait la France ce moins de juin 1940 où il ne s’agissait nullement de se défendre contre des ennemis ni de lutter pour l’existence au milieu des privations – mais tout simplement ne s’émouvoir de rien, – se sentir joyeusement seul, sans parents, sans amis, sans bagages, sans colère ni déception, mais dans une immense curiosité et un immense appétit.]

The remaining pages of *Eros*, up to Jean-Paul’s return to Paris after five years in captivity, feature an array of episodes from life in captivity, evocative of the debacle: aphorisms, desires, dreams, landscapes, and gestures blend together succeeding one another, like snippets from a collective diary — both chimerical and a-temporal —, where characters, and scenes, as S. Hand aptly puts it, “seem little more than evanescent instances of an aesthetic

78. One finds such inattentive invocation of God in *La Dame de chez Wepler* as the protagonist is looking for ways to satisfy his sexual desire. Cf. OC1, 124.

79. Levinas resorts to this expression in the text “Sans Nom” to state the second of the three truths which he deems necessary for man to live humanely after Auschwitz; he writes: “In the decisive hours when the decadence of so many values is revealed ... The supreme duty when ‘everything is permitted’ consists in feeling responsible for these values of peace... not to wallow in the tragic situation with the virile virtues of death and desperate murder, to live dangerously only to avert the dangers and to return to the shade of one’s vine and fig tree [Aux heures décisives où la caducité de tant de valeurs se révèle ... Le suprême devoir quand ‘tout est permis’ consiste à déjà se sentir responsables à l’égard de ces valeurs de paix... ne pas se complaire dans la situation tragique aux vertus viriles de la mort et du meurtre désespéré, ne vivre dangereusement que pour écarter les dangers et pour revenir à l’ombre de sa vigne et de son figuier.]” Levinas, “Sans Nom,” in NP, 143-44. Org. pub. in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 6 (1966).

See *infra* 41, n. 82.

abstraction.”⁸⁰ Among the most memorable and meaningful of these episodes are, for instance, the truck scene in Fallingbostal where the prisoners, used to jostling to admire the clothes or sometimes a pair of ladies’ stockings through the window, one day see a girl combing her hair and have “the impression of an indecency or a dream of a sharp and heartbreaking poetry of beauty that hurts... The mixture of a great beauty and a great baseness,” a scene that leads to an internal monologue about the true essence of the comb, other than its façade as an utensil — that which leads it to “the cannibal world of eroticism;” or the dog Bobby (or Bobby), “the only being who did not distinguish between the prisoners and the arjans guarding them ... he alone recognized the human right and the dignity of the person of these Jews” or immediately following, W.’s recurring “dream of Alençon” which metaphorizes the absolute denouement, after the debacle: “the fall of all draperies.”⁸¹

The last scene to take place in captivity concerns the relations between prisoners and the special character of those relations which, unlike in the “world,” are not chosen for these are people who do not know each other, and who would perhaps never do if it wasn’t for war; but in captivity, “all that is needed is a little discernment so as not to suffer from the promiscuity and to come to know men of value.” Words that both announce Jean-Paul’s return to society and foreshadow its very failure.

Paris, after five years of absence, appeared as if time had stopped... Jean-Paul had the impression of having reopened an old book from his childhood. [Paris, après cinq ans d’absence, apparut comme si le temps s’était arrêté... Jean-Paul avait l’impression d’avoir rouvert un vieux volume de son enfance.]

As Jean-Paul walked down the steps of the Gare du Nord, he found his same old Paris, his immutable, ordered Paris and felt once again “at home;” despite the cracks, the ruins, the closed businesses, “nothing was dead,” everything could be repaired, rebuilt, and very soon

80. Hand, “Levinas, Literature and Philosophy,” 533.

81. “The fall of all drapes after the reserve captain asked for champagne from the looters of the château. Reality prolonged it almost without interruption.” This scene whose meaningfulness is at once clear from the host of allusions made to it in the *Carnets*, is not meant to describe only a reversal “of values ... but of the human nudity of the absence of authority,” which extends also to things that decompose, to reality that “appears in its (naked) contours”; the fall of all drapes constitutes the controlling metaphor of the novel (of both novels in fact, as we will see), and to some extent, of the *Carnets*, as the sharp expression of the denouement of reality, of the defeat or defection of all power, of the end of sense and the issuing solitude.

For an insightful analysis of this scene and its philosophical significance in Levinas’s work see François-David Sebbah, “La débâcle ou le réel sous réduction. La ‘Scène d’Alençon’” In *Levinas: Au-delà du visible*, 181-196.

See *infra* 49, n. 104.

“he was going to become a member of society again. Thousands of invisible threads were already knotting around him. He became united, responsible.” But Jean-Paul’s positivity is soon after replaced by Jules’s despise of others’ happiness for whom life “stopped, as if by miracle, at the human condition.” And then we begin to understand that this society to which Jules (or Jean-Paul) returned after years of captivity was not the same from which he had left, or perhaps it was him who had changed; either way, he felt overwhelmed by this hollow, consumerist, and oblivious society for whom nothing was too much and, at the same time, never enough: the society of “Sad opulence.”⁸²

With our revolver, to commit suicide is a pleasure.
[Avec notre revolver, se suicider est un plaisir.]

*

At barely eleven pages in its continuous version, *La Dame de chez Wepler* is Levinas’s shortest literary attempt, and in line with the note “mon œuvre à faire,” it is also his second planned novel though, at the time, under the title of “L’irréalité et l’amour.” As to when Levinas first began to write this story it is, sadly, impossible to tell exactly given the absence of dates on the manuscript, although the few allusions to it in the *Carnets* strongly suggest that it may have been as early as 1943.⁸³

Set in late May 1940, this wartime tale of obsession and obscenity, centers on an army officer named Simon (or Roland) Riberat who soon to leave to the front spends an evening in Paris searching for a high-class prostitute whom he had seen at the George V hotel three years earlier. At the time though, Riberat had not acted on his desire — “he could not detach himself from the world of responsibilities” for the fairy world where she stood, and ever since, the glimpse of the woman had remained a “forgotten image.” But now everything was different. Some weeks before his wife had been committed to an asylum: “La femme de

82. Once again in “Sans Nom” Levinas elaborates this critique of post-Liberation society, with consumerism, the creation of false needs, being precisely the object of the first “truth”: “To live humanely, men need infinitely fewer things than the magnificent civilizations in which they live – that is the first truth. [Pour vivre humainement, les hommes ont besoin d’infiniment moins de choses que les magnifiques civilisations où ils vivent – voilà la première vérité.]” NP, 143.

83. A change in style and material of writing, as well as extensive proofreading on the first two pages of the manuscript have led the editors to speculate that *La Dame de chez Wepler* may have been resumed at a later date, although they have not been able to substantiate this hypothesis. Cf. OC3, 148, note a).

Simon était folle” is the very first line of the novel. His wife had been ill for some time, “ill but not yet insane,” and Riberat had tried to look for her behind her eccentricities, her bizarre ideas, and kept her, while he could, in the family home setting, “however upsetting it was, the partner of a game where there are rules.” But when extravagance gives way to madness, all rules are broken, nothing is graspable anymore; his wife had become a simple presence, “a supreme absence,” and the distress of trying to make sense of what was now beyond her, was finally over once she was locked-up: “Riberat felt liberated. The labyrinth had a way out.” By then France had long been at war with Germany, so that war “was now part of the defined things,” a reality which, unlike his wife’s madness, one could make sense of, one could still do something about, and even when, a couple of weeks later, around May 25th, Rondeau was called-up to the front, “the prospect of a more direct contact with the concrete war did not take away from the war this character of stable, tangible, intelligible reality ... it was of the order of peace.” Levinas expands on this association of madness with war in direct reference to the novel in the following entry from the *Carnets*:

Riberat: even the war. The war to the human measure. It was not yet cataclysm. The evocation of all the situations where one prefers an evil to the measure of the human forces – to the evil with abyss and vertigo. A deadly disease to a shameful disease, a shameful disease to {madness}. “Not to be loved” to an affair that survives, poverty to an anguish, etc. In short, to prefer mediocrity. [Riberat: même la guerre. La guerre à la mesure humaine. Elle n’était pas encore cataclysme. L’évocation de toutes les situations où l’on préfère un mal à la mesure des forces humaines – au mal avec abîme et vertige. Une maladie mortelle à une maladie honteuse, une maladie honteuse à la {folie}. “Ne pas être aimé” à une liaison qui se survit, la pauvreté à une angoisse, etc. En somme préférer la médiocrité.]⁸⁴

It is a most remarkable passage that in maintaining the cynical tone that pervades the novel, illustrates well the psychological disposition of the protagonist, for whom even the evil or the madness of war that “felt like the end of the world in times of peace” was preferable to what he had recently known to truly correspond to the end of the world: insanity.

The situation of disorder from which Riberat was now coming out, brought to his mind a distant memory to which this passage from the *Carnets* also alludes — “Not to be loved” was preferable “to an affair that survives” —, the memory of a love affair he had with a provincial girl named Suzanne when he was 20 years-old. A pure and delicate girl, Suzanne

84. OC1, 139-140.

lived and loved by the books she read, and Riberat “was bored in the midst of all these manifestations of the sublime. Not that he was without delicacy, but he was without love.” His escape from the boredom of being with her, of having to spend time with her, was sex, which had by then become increasingly more violent, more intoxicating: “Ah if Suzanne knew that he caressed her not to have to support her love,” because she gave herself entirely to him, she was completely accessible, to the point that there was nothing left to find, nothing left to be said nor done in common, and her presence had become a mere source of boredom — which is “why people get married.” Like Suzanne, Riberat’s relationship to his wife had, due to her insanity, become unbearable, precisely because her madness had meant “her rupture of communion in things, to become a simple presence that nothing common could no longer delay, camouflage or replace.” But now Riberat was free from the overriding presence and anguish women inspired in him: “and once again women appeared to him in the simplicity of their sex ... an instrument of pleasure.” As in *Éros*, with the tragic fate of France, the madness of Riberat’s wife is the trigger for the narrative to unfold, that which gives rise to the moral and ethical suspension where “everything is permitted.” But also, his imminent departure for war and the resulting detachment contributed to the sense of freedom, of power of someone who could now freely indulge in pleasure, without looking back and leaving a guilty conscience behind, and so Riberat walks to the George V in search of the prostitute, the object of his obsession; but “the woman was not there. Here ‘Aufmachung’ of the hotel.”⁸⁵

His disappointment at the unsurprising absence of the woman dissipates quickly as he starts to contemplate the idea of searching for sex elsewhere, accosting a prostitute in the street, going to a brothel, or even raping a woman: “but how?” What stops the protagonist from committing such acts is not his abhorrence of them, but the fear of being recognized, of being judged: “one is compromised in front of strangers... *votre cas les regarde parce qu’ils vous regardant.*” Yet again, Riberat finds himself frustrated at the impossibility of avoiding the overriding presence of the other, in a clear reversal of Levinas’s later ethics of the irreducible and inaccessible other, of the irruption of the face which dominates me not

85. As the editors observe: “‘Aufmachung’ means ‘presentation’ with an ostentatious nuance. The sentence is therefore no doubt a note left in store for a future description.” OC3, 146, note b). Absent from Levinas’s published work, the term “*Aufmachung*” is far from irrelevant in the philosopher’s *Carnets de captivité*, where it appears a total of four times and is referred to as the very definition of cinema which, as Levinas will write, is “an art of its own, the art of *Aufmachung* and the point of view.” OC1, 102. See *infra* 49-55 where I will be analyzing this concept.

by his height, but by his weakness; instead, everything about this novel and its protagonist cries violence, solipsism, and the thwarting of responsibility.

As the street filled up with people returning from their fulfilled duties, knowing where they were going, Riberat felt his freedom dissipating into meaninglessness: he felt lost, like “a small child on the fringe, wandering and despicable ... No reason to turn left or right.” And then suddenly he is addressed by a junior colleague, Solal, who invites him for a drink and “the chaos in which Riberat had felt himself dissipating until then vanished. A solid form clothed him again... How sweet it was to feel framed and integrated, to go somewhere. Or suddenly feel life simplified.” Indeed, as Riberat looks around, he notices a group of blond women sitting at the big terrace of the brasserie Wepler: “Here is one who goes out alone and speaks to him softly.” And so, we are left at the end of the novel to entertain the prospect that Riberat might at last consummate his desire, not with the woman from the George V Hotel, but with the blonde woman from the Brasserie de chez Wepler.⁸⁶

*

Reading these two novel sketches, beyond their many hesitations and regrets — the countless crossed-out words and scratched-out paragraphs, the half-done and loose sentences, the misspellings of characters’ names, the jumping between characters — we realize that there is more in common between them than a shared historical context and initial staging and similarly anguished and mediocre characters. And yet they are far from being a repetition of one another; they are instead separate threads of a single line of thought that aims at showcasing the clash between order and disorder, the faith in stability and the inevitability of its collapse, the cultural and moral chaos that comes with war: that remarkable situation — at once inadmissible and liberating — which more than the setting where the narratives take place, is the initial and ultimate *event* that enables them, that allows for such transgression that *everything is possible*, that *anything is admissible*. And it is in this predicament, in this situation of moral and ethical suspension where the central and guiding motif of both novels, that is, “Eros”, or “sexual intrigue” (what Levinas will later

86. The blonde woman of chez Wepler is curiously the centerpiece of a putative connection between Levinas’s two planned novels, as evidenced by the following note dating from 1944: “Before the departure of Rondeau, visit to the blonde woman – once – from Wepler. [Avant le départ de Rondeau, visite chez la femme blonde – une fois – de chez Wepler.]” OC1, 135.

call the “intrigue of the other”⁸⁷ is played; and precisely because of that, it is played in the most “un-transcendental” possible manner — as a disturbing obscenity in *La Dame de chez Wepler*, as carnality in *Eros* — hence, the very opposite of the levinasian “love without concupiscence.” But how is Levinas able to present this intrigue in the novels? According to Nancy, because:

Literature allows transgression: that is to say, it transports it out of any moral or legal framework and allows its expression. Obscenity often haunts these pages as an indication of what is despicable only if one looks at it from the outside and not if one accesses it in a caress. Thus, novel writing can adopt the point of view of the actor and not that of the spectator.⁸⁸

In *Eros* or *Triste Opulence*, desire materializes through vision, in fleeting appearances: the scene in the bunker, or the pair of stockings drying in the wind, while in *La Dame de chez Wepler* such impressions are less unprompted, for the story is itself centered around the quest for an erotic encounter; and yet nothing about that encounter and nothing leading up to it is either theoretical or narrative, in the sense of plot-structured. J.-L. Nancy’s understanding of “narrative fiction” as a “presentation disengaged from the concept”⁸⁹ articulates well the non-theoretical disposition of Levinas’s novels, while the philosopher’s blatant disinterest in the building and progression of the plot and characters attest to its non-narrational manner.

Both novels dwell on this wavering: while being clearly intended and understood as narratives insofar as they display its typical components (a setting, a story, characters, dialogue and even a resolution), they somehow manage to elude that same category; this, in my opinion, is less due to their unfinishedness and even, in the case of *Eros*, to its

87. “Human sexuality – irritation by the fact of others. [Sexualité humaine – irritation par le fait d’autrui.]” OC1, 182. As Nancy points out, “this word can be understood both in its physiological sense of arousal and in its humoral sense of discontent.” Nancy, “L’intrigue,” 27. In his first works, notably, in *Le Temps et l’autre*, Levinas refers to the mystery of the interpersonal relationship in terms of the sexual difference, which is the way the philosopher defines Eros in this period — “this non-indifference of absolute opposites ... eros is communication and first expression. [cette non-indifférence des contraires absolus ... l’eros est la communication et l’expression première]” (OC3, 162) — this however gives rise to a confusion between the phenomenology of the eros and that of the feminine which the philosopher acknowledges in *Totalité et Infini* in which, while maintaining the non-fusional character of the Eros, one can observe a clear shift from sexual difference to the asymmetry of the relation between the same and the other, in which sensibility (still understood nonetheless as enjoyment) plays a crucial role. Only after *Totalité et Infini* will Levinas abandon Eros as the stage of the face-to-face in which egoism and violence would come to thwart responsibility.

88. Nancy, “L’intrigue,” 28.

89. Nancy, 28.

irremediable fragmentariness, than to a deliberate attempt by the author to place (and pace) the novel in the flowing time of lived experience, where it is built not from actions, or adventures, but from sensations, emotions, desires and repulsions, from instants of experience, presented in their human rhythm and, in that sense, as noted above by Nancy, from the point of the view not of the spectator, but of the actor himself. Because ultimately, what truly matters to Levinas is the possibility of touching the *mystery*, which dwells not on representation, but on a presentation, on an opening, that has its own particular temporality — a corporeal temporality. In being bound to the formal time dimensions, the idea of “plot” is action-driven, and therefore it does not serve Levinas’s purpose; beyond chronological time and context, it is rather in the “instant” where the human drama, the human intrigue, is played: “The meaning of events is in their instant, in their ‘dead time’ and not in their temporal context. In their instant: their initiation into being, their way of embracing the adventure of existence.”⁹⁰ The disruptiveness of the event — its mystery — lies in the singularity of the instant of its appearing; if neither narrative (as plot) nor conceptualization succeed in rendering the experience of the singular event without blunting its radicality and thus, without taming the instant into duration, what, if anything, can?

Levinas’s writings, not only literary but also philosophical, pose this problematic, on which I feel the following note from the *Carnets*, titled “Mes procédés littéraires” which as the title implies, outlines his literary procedures, may help shed some light:

1) To describe everything at the level of “sensation”, in the elementary, in this elementary where all the complex is already present. [Décrire tout au niveau de la “sensation”, dans l’élémentaire, dans cet élémentaire où tout le complexe est déjà présent.]

2) The real situation is described soberly. {One reaches it through a wide-open door}. But a small final image on which it is never advisable to insist, {like a skylight that is opened for a moment}, makes it {circulate} like a rapid draught of the fantastic. The whole “real situation” appears above a precipice. [La situation réelle est décrite sobrement. {On y accède à travers une porte largement ouverte.} Mais une petite image finale, sur laquelle il ne convient jamais d’insister, {comme un vasistas qu’on entrouvre pour un instant}, y fait {circuler} comme un courant d’air rapide du fantastique. Toute la “situation réelle” apparaît au-dessus d’un précipice.]

3) Giraldisms of images – very sober – [Giraldisme d’images – très sobre –]

90. “La signification des événements est dans leur instant, dans leur ‘temps mort’ et non pas dans leur contexte temporel. Dans leur instant: leur initiation à l’être, leur manière d’accueillir l’aventure de l’existence.” OC1, 306.

Levinas’s singular use of literary quotes are a testimony of this approach for, as Arthur Cools observes: “Levinas often uses a literary quote via reducing it to a single appearance of meaning ... without any consideration for the narrative context and complexity of the original text.” Cools, “Anarchy,” 9.

4) Processes of the films - montage of words to avoid those heavy descriptions for which my hand does not rise. [Procédés du films – montage de mots pour éviter ces lourdes descriptions pour lesquelles ma main ne se lève pas.]

5) Effect sought in (2) can be obtained by what I call the care of the *Aufmachung*. [Effet recherché dans (2) peut être obtenu par ce que j'appelle le souci de l'*Aufmachung*.]⁹¹

Levinas speaks of “procedures” in the plural, when in fact points one and two seem to refer to a single procedure that point one sets out clearly — “to describe everything at the level of sensation,” — and point two elaborates on, mostly in terms of its effect. As we know from another note from the *Carnets*, Levinas attributes two quite different intents to the act of writing: “the intention to express (explicitly)” and “the intention to draw signs [*tracer des signes*].”⁹² Now, the procedure described above seems to refer to the latter — “to draw signs” — which, unlike the first, designates not an objective or transitive act of attribution of an express meaning, but rather, as Nancy sets out neatly: “to think the movement of meaning being made.”⁹³ The procedure is then “completed” with an image on which, Levinas cautions, “it is never advisable to insist” (we will see why in our next chapter), whereby it must be “small and final,” a mere glimpse, that narrows that wide open door that the sober description provides, and makes the real situation circulate as a draught of the *fantastic*. The term “fantastic,” abundantly present in the *Carnets*, describes, according to Levinas, an “astonishment before sensation” which he claims to be the very method of art, its particular rhythm that transforms sensation and reality into something fantastic; he writes:

the particular rhythm of the work of art (fantastic) ... a reality that, though being in the real, is beyond the real (fantastic), by virtue of a sort of internal law that transforms it into a work of art. [le rythme particulier de l'œuvre d'art (fantastique) ou du portrait... une réalité qui tout en étant dans le réel est au-delà du réel (fantastique), en vertu d'une espèce de loi interne qui la transforme en œuvre d'art.]⁹⁴

That is, a reality that appears desubstantiated, a reality without reality, characterized not by its representational contents but by its rhythm, a particular mode of the temporalization of time, by which elements lose their signification, by which objects lose their function of tools,

91. OC1, 194-195.

92. OC1, 304. At first glance, it would seem that the first intention concerns the philosophical writing, and the second, the literary writing, yet this bifurcation is hardly unequivocal.

93. Nancy, “L'intrigue,” 19.

94. OC1, 150.

that is, cease to have a purpose and return to their elemental nature — and that is, precisely, how Levinas describes the experience of captivity, “the fantastic situation par excellence” according to the editors of the *Carnets* which they describe as “a fantastic novel of captivity.”⁹⁵

Levinas’s experience of war, the situation of captivity, constitutes a sort of limit-experience that the philosopher likens to the fantastic insofar as it accomplishes this desubstantiation of reality whereby the elements decompose and lose their meaning — only gestures remain; “a reality without reality – not only absence of objects but absence of progress”⁹⁶ — where reality itself, the most solid of realities bears the stamp of the temporary.⁹⁷ And yet, at the same time, Levinas likens the prisoner to the believer who “lived in the beyond [*dans l’au-delà*], because unlike, he claims, the “settled man,” the bourgeois who “cannot escape the seriousness of his life” and thus “remains a spectator,”⁹⁸ the prisoner is *uprooted* — “engaged in a game that goes infinitely beyond this world of appearances,”⁹⁹ he is always on the point of leaving whereby in captivity, as Levinas beautifully notes, one learns the difference between having and being, one learns about freedom.¹⁰⁰ What these words tell us is that, paradoxically as it may seem, captivity poses the possibility of *escape*, that is, the evasion from the seriousness of existence — the crushing weight of existence, the “acute feeling of being held fast” [*rivé*], about which Levinas had already written in

95. “La captivité apparaît dans ces *Carnets* comme la situation fantastique par excellence, et les *Carnets* ne sont dès lors rien d’autre qu’un roman fantastique de la captivité.” OC1, 19.

96. OC1, 126.

97. OC1, 202. The “end” of this singular effect of captivity is made most clear upon Jean-Paul’s return home at the end of *Eros*: “Jean-Paul realized how concrete this return to Paris was. [Jean-Paul constata combien ce retour à Paris était concret.]” OC3, 54-55.

98 “Le bourgeois est un homme installé. Il ne peut se soustraire au sérieux de sa vie. Son activité quotidienne, est la réalité vraie. Sa maison, son bureau, son cinéma, ses voisins, sont les points cardinaux de son existence. Sur le monde, sur le vaste monde il n’ouvre que son journal et il l’ouvre comme une fenêtre. Il reste spectateur.” OC1, 202.

99. OC1, 202.

100. “We have learned the difference between having and being. We have learned how little space and how few things it takes to live. We learned freedom... a new rhythm of life. We had set foot on another planet, breathing an atmosphere of an unknown mixture and handling a matter that no longer weighed. [Nous avons appris la différence entre avoir et être. Nous avons appris le peu d’espace et le peu de choses qu’il faut pour vivre. Nous avons appris la liberté... un rythme nouveau de la vie. Nous avons mis le pied sur un autre planète, respirant une atmosphère d’un mélange inconnu et manipulant une matière qui ne pesait plus.]” OC1, 203.

1935,¹⁰¹ and whose need he had clearly asserted there, without however having found a solution, a *way out*. All throughout these notebooks, Levinas sets himself the task of describing this situation, this predicament of a desubstantiated reality that appears beyond reality while being in it, this divestment of reality that restores “the sense of the essential,”¹⁰² and this rhythm of time by which, he claims, the future is lived as a past, and the present as a memory,¹⁰³ something that, as the philosopher acknowledges, the literary work, and more generally the work of art, appear to *accomplish* better than philosophy.¹⁰⁴

And indeed, returning to Levinas’s “literary procedures,” the introduction of that small and final image makes reality appear at the edge of an abyss, suspended “over a precipice” which the image allows us to glimpse at, “like a skylight that is opened for a moment.” Now this effect of divestment of reality that thus appears as fantastic, a reality that, as said earlier, “though being in the real, is beyond the real” is, Levinas claims, achieved also by what he terms the “care [*souci*] with the Aufmachung” a concept with which the philosopher defines *cinema*.

101. First published as an essay in *Recherches Philosophiques*, 5 (1935-6), 373-392, *De l'évasion* was later republished by Fata Morgana in 1982.

102. “Et puis, il y eut un dépouillement qui rendit le sens de l’essentiel.” OC1, 202.

103. “Il vit l’avenir comme un passé, le présent comme un souvenir. À développer: ce rythme du temps.” OC1, 112.

104. This predicament of a suspended reality is felt vividly in Levinas’s novel sketches, and particularly in *Eros* or *Triste Opulence* where there is the aforementioned “scène d’Alençon,” relieved by prisoner Weil (“W.”) in dreams during captivity (see *supra* 40, n. 81). As Levinas explains: “The drapes that fall in my scene of Alençon also concern things. Things decompose, lose their meaning: forests become trees – all that which forest meant in French literature – disappears. The ultimate decomposition of elements – the butts of wood that remain after the circus has left or on the stage ... But I do not want to speak simply of the end of illusions; rather, the end of meaning. {Meaning itself as illusion.} The concrete form of this situation: the empty houses and staying in these empty houses. Cheese and champagne at 5 in the morning. [Les draperies qui tombent dans ma scène d’Alençon concernent aussi les choses. Les choses se décomposent, perdent leur sens : les forêts deviennent arbres – tout ce que signifiait forêt dans la littérature française – disparaît. Décomposition ultérieure des éléments – des bouts de bois qui restent après le départ du cirque ou sur la scène ... Mais je ne veux pas simplement parler de la fin des illusions ; mais plutôt de la fin du sens. {Le sens lui-même comme une illusion.} Forme concrète de cette situation : les maisons vides et le séjour dans ces maisons. Fromage et champagne à 5h du matin.]” OC1, 132.

The fall of all drapes in the “scene of Alençon” can, ultimately, I believe, be taken as a metaphor for the egress of the *il y a* of which, as Francesco P. Ciglia finely observes, “one can only speak poetically” (this brings to mind Levinas’s youthful poems where the “experience” of the *il y a* was all but named). F. P. Ciglia, *Un passo fuori dall’uomo. La genesi del pensiero di Levinas* (Padova: Cedam, 1988), 81. And indeed, as we will see in our next chapter, art, in Levinas’s postwar writings, is thought of in the horizon of the *il y a* — there is a relation between the two, but as Jacques Rolland notes, this relation “is not a type of object relation [*relation objectale*] but could be said in terms of brushing, grazing [*frôlement*].” Jacques Rolland, *Parcours de l’Autrement* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 247. For now, however, Levinas makes no such analogy, but limits himself to describing this “effect” of the divestment of reality that according to him literature, art, accomplish.

Thus, in the last two points of his note, Levinas draws an interesting analogy between literary and film procedures, starting with point 4, in which he likens the film procedure of “montage” to a “montage” of words. As a synonym for “assemblage” or “editing,” the French word “montage” designates the process of juxtaposing and sequencing separate images for the purpose of condensing more information in a shorter time span. The acknowledgment of “montage” in the history of cinema is however hardly separable from the Soviet montage theory in which the accent is on denoting a (symbolic) effect, rather than on denoting the passage of prolonged time: effect vs. continuity, but also meaning vs. action. While it is true that Levinas makes no such distinction in his note, two reasons lead me to believe that by “montage” he means more than simple “assemblage”¹⁰⁵: the association of film “montage” to a “montage of words,” and the as yet unaddressed concept of *Aufmachung* — both of which should be considered in light of the foregoing analyses of Levinas’s literary procedures and of his novel sketches. The phrase “montage of words” as an explicit counterpoint to what the author defines as “heavy descriptions,” not only somewhat echoes the intention of his writing to “draw signs,” but also points to the desire to interrupt a certain narrative/visual continuity. In its prioritizing of sensation over image and event over plot, the deformalization of narrative is certainly allied with a montage that rather than searching for continuity by a manipulation and artificial “construction” of time searches for discontinuity, for disintegration, for the dismembering of the event into various points of view, for a *diachrony* in the juxtaposition of disproportional shots, dissonating perspectives, or opposing movements of tempo and a *rhythm* that disrupt the expected sequence of shots and cuts that sustain the diegesis, thus ultimately breaking down the normally flowing event. Now, the *close-up* shot is a particularly effective technique to achieve just that. Deemed by many as the distinctive quality of the cinematographic art that sets it apart from all other arts, and in particular from photography, or still, as cinema’s greatest (and only) invention, the close-up shot is not however a univocal technique, as it can be employed in a variety of ways and in view of different meanings and ends: fragmented, juxtaposed, medium, big,

105. I do not mean to imply that by referring to “montage” Levinas meant explicitly the Soviet montage. To do so would be pure speculation, even if, at the time of Levinas’s note, Sergei M. Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), for instance, had already been released in France. Still, I think the distinction made between the two montage practices is pertinent, and that considering Levinas’s analogy, a montage practice that puts effect and meaning over continuity is likely more adequate to understand its rationale. Then again, the symbolic effect of film montage can also bring to mind other “unfortunate” examples, such as Leni Riefensthal’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), the infamous Nazi propaganda film, in which, I can only suspect, Levinas was thinking when he wrote: “Propagande et terreur — L’action de l’art = propagande.” OC1, 189.

extreme, or in synecdoche, as in Eisenstein, who contrasted his method of the close-up to its (typical) use in American cinema in which, according to the Soviet filmmaker, the close-up was used in “its sole capacity as a means of showing,” while in his own practice, the chief function of the close-up was “not only and not so much to *show* or to *represent*, as to *signify* ... to create a *new quality of the whole from a juxtaposition of the separate parts*.”¹⁰⁶ This understanding of the close-up shot as a new qualitative and signifying element that, introduced in the normally flowing event often unexpectedly, generates dissonance (or chaos), as if out of context, out of proportion, thus offering the possibility of an *abstraction from representation*, is an understanding that I believed Levinas shares, as indeed the following passage from the chapter “Existence sans monde” in *De l’existence à l’existant*, makes clear:

Close-up shots ... interrupt the action in which a particular is bound up with a whole, and let it exist apart; they let it manifest its particular and absurd nature which the camera discovers in an often-unexpected perspective, in a shoulder line to which the close-up gives hallucinatory dimensions, laying bare what the visible universe and the play of its normal proportions tone down and conceal. [Les gros plans ... arrêtent l’action où le particulier est enchaîné à un ensemble pour lui permettre d’exister à part: ils lui permettent de manifester sa nature particulière et absurde que l’objectif découvre dans une perspective souvent inattendue, la courbure d’épaule à laquelle la projection donne des dimensions hallucinantes en mettant à nu ce que l’univers visible et le jeu de ses proportions normales estompent et dissimulent.]¹⁰⁷

Much like Eisenstein, Levinas holds that the interest of the close-up shot lies not so much in its ability to show or represent, in its capacity to provide details, that is, to make them visible, as in this emancipation of the particular from the whole that it accomplishes, this dismembering of the whole into parts, that it singularizes, autonomizes and to which it gives “hallucinatory dimensions,” turning into, what Eisenstein calls, “monstrous incongruities” — the particular, the thing, the *face* thus singularized appears in itself, in its nakedness which is also its “absurd nature,” in its fundamental strangeness; and it is “in their strangeness,” that things appear by *Aufmachung*, it is how “things reveal themselves as a mystery. This is the charm of cinema.”¹⁰⁸

106. Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the film today,” in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harvest, 1977), 238. Orig. publ. in 1944.

107. DEE, 88.

108. OC1, 82.

With the notion of *Aufmachung* Levinas intends to designate, precisely, this essential strangeness that, according to him, the cinematographic image confers upon the things it presents to us, by the way it presents them, more than by the content or the detail it provides of things. We could, therefore, consider the aesthetical mode or, as it were, the mode of expression of the *Aufmachung* as “presentational” rather than as “representational,”¹⁰⁹ insofar as the former conveys, I believe, a certain opacity, since it presents itself rather than represent something external to itself, that is, it draws attention to itself. Thus, the way in which things are presented by *Aufmachung* — in their oddity, their foreignness, and thus, in their *impenetrability*, which is how they *confront* us instead of offering themselves to us, defying therefore our capacity to apprehend them, to encompass them in thought; opacity which is not a *concealment* which, instead, characterizes the representational mode that conceals as a way to direct our gaze towards something else, to make us “look through” the (present) actions and gestures in a logic of *transparency* and continuity characteristic of representation, as the adequacy of the thing thought to the thought that thinks it, which presupposes something illuminated and clear and therefore immediately given, apprehensible — an *object* — because part of a graspable unity which the close-up shot, as we saw, precisely disrupts, breaks down into parts, into dissonant “aspects” that do not form a continuum, and whose “sum” does not add up to a synthesis — but *dematerializes* the object, turns it into a *non-object*; and this brings us to the other dimension of Levinas’s definition of cinema as the art of *Aufmachung*: the point of view:

Cinema is an art of its own: the art of the *Aufmachung* and the point of view. Photography is already <its> possibility. Cinema is an art not because it parts from photography, but because it holds to it. [Le cinéma est un art propre: c’est l’art de l’*Aufmachung* et du point de vue. La photographie en a déjà <la> possibilité. Le cinéma est un art non pas parce qu’il se sépare de la photographie, mais parce qu’il en tient.]

As the impressionists discovered light, cinema discovered the variations of point of view. [Comme les impressionnistes ont découverte la lumière, le cinéma a découvert les variations de point de vue.]¹¹⁰

109. It is, I think, relevant to note, even if only briefly to avoid falling into generalizations, that the aesthetic mode of cinema, of cinematic expression of “presentation” is, broadly speaking, that which best characterizes Eastern (including Asian) cinema, in contrast to Western cinema, whose dominant model is “representational.”

110. OC1, 102.

Adding to the strangeness of the object through the close-up shot, there is moreover a profusion of angles, points of view, perspectives and (accompanying) movements that add to its abstruseness, and thus to the difficulty of its apprehension; a multiplicity that rather than clarifying the object through an ideal unit, decomposes it and thus preserves or protects its mystery. To the visual dimension of the close-up shot, the point of view adds a temporal dimension to the concept of *Aufmachung* which precisely differentiates cinema from photography that, as Levinas notes, is the possibility of cinema, but possibility *only* which defines its very existence — cinema “in potency,” if I may put it so. The filmic temporality consists in an inscription of instants in a movement of succession, one that dictates the very *dissipation* (of their *ostension*), so that when one image appears, another (the former) must disappear. Certainly, each image is inscribed, recorded on a material support, but without its reproduction the image remains absent; it is only through its reproduction that each image, each instant comes to be present, of a presence that is not a permanence however; a presence that is also (and instantaneously) an impermanence; thus, no matter how many views, how many perspectives we are given of an object, we are never given the object as a whole, in a synthetic unit, for one aspect “erases” the other, and so on, decomposing the object until there is nothing left but an outline, a shadow in a way, a reminiscence. It is thus that filmic temporality precludes (in theory) the memorization of a film in its entirety: not the number of characters nor their lines, not the plot, but the camera movement(s), the rhythm of the montage, the shots, cuts, angles, lights, and perspectives and their de-multiplication that make up the duration of the film; the recollection of a film, however we may think it vivid in our mind, cannot but be partial, abstract, a contour, an echo, a fragment — what remains is a fragment, but the fragment is not dogmatic, the fragment is allusive, the fragment is an opening¹¹¹ — “Memory essentially *Aufmachung*.”¹¹² The cinematographic image interrupts or *disturbs* continuity; certainly, a film is ultimately sequence, a succession of events, but the change of shot, the change of point of view functions by progressively shattering that

111. “The remarks [*propos*] from before the discourse... Remarks without eloquence? – no, no. Remarks without pretension, yes... Remarks without discourse [*propos sans discours*], that’s it! Remarks without discourse are not remarks without responsibility! Sometimes half a word is more important than a whole sentence, often the halves of words join together. It is the unfinished sentence which retains the force. In writing there is the force of the fragment. The fragment is what is most suggestive, because in it there is allusion. The fragment is not dogmatic, the fragment is an opening. And writing is the fragment which remains.” Emmanuel Levinas in conversation with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger “What would Eurydice say?,” *Athena*, 1 (2006), 140.

112. “Les paysages viennent *machen sich auf vor uns*. Souvenir essentiellement *Aufmachung*.” OC1, 82.

continuity and thus the possibility of a unitary vision, a synthesis of that multiplicity; what remains is more like a fragment of one shot and the next, and a meaning that arises in-between the two, between the appearing of the image and its fading, and the appearing of the next: the sensation of its remaining in its fading. Memories have this fragmentary character — scraps, loose words, anonymous faces, isolated, encircled by a void, a gap, nothingness, without horizon, without possible unity; but memories always refer to a subject, to a past that *was lived*; a memory is not “severable” from the subject, it supposes the subject, it does not contain what was not lived by him, a past prior to his, while the writing, the film — *art* — presents something that was never lived by the spectator, by the reader (and more often than not, not even by its author): a past without the subject, without me — art accommodates memories, but memory cannot truly, or fully, accommodate art. By characterizing memory as “essentially *Aufmachung*,” Levinas raises this concept to a broader, general, aesthetic category or quality, that albeit deriving its sense from the cinematographic image, is not exclusive to it. And this is exactly what we gather from the next note where the analogy with literature returns in a rather curious way:

The description of landscapes not in the perfect knowledge one can have of them, but in their *Aufmachung*. Poetry of the *Grand Meaulnes*. First scenes of the film. ‘The most beautiful film I have seen, a car, a young girl, a young man passing by,’ said Michel. [La description des paysages non pas dans la connaissance parfaite qu’on peut avoir d’eux, mais dans leur *Aufmachung*. Poésie du *Grand Meaulnes*. Premières scènes du film. ‘Le plus beau film que j’ai vu, une voiture, une jeune fille, un jeune homme qui passe’, disait Michel.]¹¹³

At the time this note was written, Alain-Fournier’s 1913 modern classic *Le Grand Meaulnes* (*The Wanderer*) had not yet been adapted to film, with the first (known) adaptation being that of Jean-Gabriel Albicocco dating from 1967, which means that the use of the term *Aufmachung* here does not refer to a cinematic work, but to a literary work which is “seen” through the lens of film, starting with the landscape which, broken down into various shots and points of view, loses its continuity, but thus stands out in itself with each fragment, in its mystery, it simply *appears*: “opens up in front of us [*machen sich auf vor uns*].”¹¹⁴ As for the term “poetry,” it designates here, I believe, the *rhythm* created from the play of images

113. OC1, 81.

114. OC1, 82.

and cuts, the play of instants and of the juxtaposed elements that appear and disappear, which affect us as spectators, not cognitively, but sensorially: we are *carried away* by it, by its movement, by its *musicality* for “poetry is ... like a rhythm ... poetry is things set to music.”¹¹⁵ It is thus that Levinas’s reading or the recollection of Fournier’s work takes on the form of a film, the language of film, its mode of presentation, *Aufmachung*, thus tendering a co-extensivity between cinema and literature, where the former is nowise a derivative of the latter, but somehow lends it a new quality; hence the expression “the care [*le souci*] of the *Aufmachung*,” which animates Levinas’s *Carnets* whose own fragmentary quality, erasures, and obliterations attest to a rhythm of their own, a rhythm of thought, of search, of an essential incompleteness, “a writing of the extraordinary, at once fragment and system ... their fragmentary form reveals the system of thought, a feature of the writing of the marvelous,”¹¹⁶ much like his own literary manuscripts attest to his intent of deformatization of the narrative, in which meaning is not given by the plot, nor by the context, neither is it derived from the succession of events in the narrative and temporal continuum, but *arises* in the singularity of the instant of the appearing of the event that disrupts the narrative, detaches itself from it, and stands out in itself, in its strangeness — in its *mystery*.

115. “There are certain situations, certain images which by themselves are arranged according to a poetic rhythm: for example: the laughter J. which prevented the big J. from sleeping; Jonas who sleeps in the storm of which he is the cause. Poetry is thus like a rhythm. The artifice of language, of color, can create this rhythm. Poetry Music is this rhythm in its purity. Poetry is things set to music. [Il y a certaines situations, certaines images qui par elles-mêmes se rangent selon un rythme poétique : par exemple : le rire j. qui empêchait le grande J. de dormir ; Jonas qui dort dans la tempête dont il est la cause. La poésie est donc comme un rythme. L’artifice du langage de la couleur, peut créer ce rythme. La poésie musique est ce rythme dans sa pureté. La poésie c’est les choses mises en musique.]” OC1, 100.

The notion of rhythm that Levinas assimilates here to poetry (and later we will see how the word in poetry is likened, by the philosopher, to the musical sound) is one of the key notions of his aesthetic conception that first emerges in the *Carnets*. Now this notion, which derives from the field of music is already here raised to a general category, designating the very functioning of sensation, and, therefore, detached from the field of music. See *infra* 56 and ss.

116. Michaël Levinas, “Mon père m’a transmis une esthétique de l’extraordinaire et du merveilleux”, interview by Martin Duru (18 September 2012), Philosophie Magazine, September 18, 2012, <https://www.philomag.com/articles/michael-levinas-mon-pere-ma-transmis-une-esthetique-de-lextraordinaire-et-du-merveilleux>

“There is in these fragments of manuscripts and in these erasures a rhythm of speculation, which is also a breathing chant of thought, a literary art which, as for other writers, is born from a certain form of declamation and a poet’s research on the non-cadential scansions of thought. The concept cannot be conclusive, it is incomplete, ready to the rebound of thought, to pulverization.” Michaël Levinas, “Introduction: La transmission posthume. L’écriture désespérée, l’écriture inspirée: les *Carnets de captivité* et autres inédits,” in *Levinas au-delà du visible*, 16.

Now, the effect described above of the desubstantialization of reality, its appearing as if above a precipice, thus achieved by this care with the *Aufmachung* with which Levinas characterizes the cinematographic image and assimilates to his own literary procedures, ought to be traced back to its originary movement, to the *phenomenological reduction* that we recognize in Levinas's theorization of the aesthetic event which is based on a phenomenological analysis of the sensible, and whose original conceptualization dates from 1944, constituting, as such, the first known attempt at a systematic aesthetic theorization by our philosopher, and which I propose we analyze over the next few pages.

1.5 The play of art¹¹⁷

Right at the opening of the fifth notebook of Levinas's *Carnets de captivité*, we come across the title "Problems of aesthetics" [*Problèmes d'esthétique*] that ushers in a relatively long paragraph that begins as follows:

The sound, the color, the word, cover objects. The sound as noise, the color as covering a surface, the word as harboring a meaning. Sensations have thus an objective signification. [Le son, la couleur, le mot recouvrent des objets. Le son comme bruit, la couleur comme recouvrant une surface, le mot comme recélant un sens. Les sensations ont donc une signification objective.]¹¹⁸

At stake here is the constructed character of sensation as claimed by the classical analysis, and assumed by the idea of intentionality that interpret sensation in function of objectification; thus understood, sensations are always extended and objective, sensations *of* (something), relative to the object, to the support of which they are a quality, and are thus reduced to the schema of an object endowed with qualities, to the function of qualifying the (real) object, from which they derive their signification — their objective signification which is then this (inescapable) *referentiality* to the object. By sound, color, and word [*mot*], in this context, one should thus understand the sensible qualities that make a given object appear, the *form* that frames and clarifies a given content, making it appear as a synthetic and logical

117. Play = *Jeu*.

118. OC1, 131.

whole, thus habilitating the object as an illuminated surface, by which it can be grasped, apprehended, and thus, possessed, by which, in sum, it completely corresponds to the structure of consciousness. Thus understood, sounds, colors and words are “light,” and by the fact of light, exteriority becomes (is reduced to) interiority, by which objects are at our disposal, are *already naturally possessed* — whereby the world of perception is a world of transparency: “continuous world in which the form perfectly matches the content: the content ... is clarified by the form that gives it meaning.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, in perception, the matter is subordinated to form which invests the object with a specifiable meaning, whereby the sensible prototype of light that characterizes perception is this straightforwardness by which objects are already naturally possessed, insofar as, even before being desired, they are already turned into interiority whereby *to perceive an object is already to perceive its sense*. As Levinas writes in *Le Temps et l'Autre*: “The illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us. It does not have a fundamental strangeness.”¹²⁰

But the aesthetic event bears a different structure, a particular structure that Levinas accounts for through its quintessential expression — the work of art, whose

first movement consists in detaching the sensation from this objective meaning, from this objective reference. Sensation *αἴσθησις* – becomes object of aesthetics. [dans l’art on peut dire que le premier mouvement consiste à détacher la sensation de ce sens objectif, de ce renvoi objectif. La sensation *αἴσθησις* – devient objet d’esthétique.]

So, what Levinas is basically positing here is that sensation is not necessarily reduced to the schema of an object endowed with qualities, but one can think of a sensation detached from its objective signification, that is, from its referentiality to the object, which amounts to considering sensation in itself, that is, in its specificity, in its very materiality, that is again, as “pure sensation,” sensation qua sensation, precisely what Levinas terms *aesthesis* — “object of aesthetics.”¹²¹ As such, and in light of what was said above, this detachment of

119. “Monde continu, où la forme épouse parfaitement le contenu: le contenu ... est clarifié par la forme qui lui prête un sens.” OC2, 90.

120. “L’objet éclairé est à la fois quelque chose qu’on rencontre, mais du fait même qu’il est éclairé, on le rencontre comme s’il sortait de nous. Il n’a pas d’étrangeté foncière.” TA, 47.

121. “In my philosophy, study of the signification of sensation: vision – light – reason; hearing – voice – verb; touch – caress – love; taste (smell) – eating – need. And yet alongside all this remains sensation in its

sensation from its objective signification that characterizes the aesthetic object means that the work of art does not “appear” in the likeness of the worldly objects; surely, the work of art is *as real* and *as perceptible* as any other object, but because in it sensation is freed from its subservience to perception, that is, as quality of the matter of the object, it no longer stands as a real moment of perception, but is rather *in itself* — pure quality without support: non-objectifiable, sensation qua sensation, irreducible to a conceptual and definitive logic and to the objectifying character of intentional consciousness. The movement that Levinas acknowledges in the aesthetic event is thus the movement of the sensible outside perception, that is, of sensation beyond perception that issues in pure sensation, sensation in its pure state, which means that Levinas not only acknowledges Husserl’s distinction between sensation and perception,¹²² but radicalizes that distinction, so that sensation instead of being disfigured into an abstract moment of the intentional perceptual act, is posited in itself, in its pure state — object of aesthetics. Thus, by *suspending* the character of the perception materiality, i.e., the sensible as quality or matter of the object, Levinas seeks to give back to sensation a “material” base, discovering therefore the sensible in its pure state.

Beyond its “function” as matter of an object, the pure sensible has a sense of its own,¹²³ an internal sense, not that of the intentional act, nor that of a representation, but rather a non-

pure materiality, object of aesthetics: vision – color, hearing – sound, verb – rhythm, etc. [Dans ma philosophie, étude de la signification de la sensation: vision – lumière – raison ; ouïe – voix – verbe ; toucher – caresse – amour ; goût (odorat) – manger – besoin. Et cependant à côté de tout cela demeure la sensation dans sa matérialité pure, objet de l’esthétique ; vision – couleur, ouïe – son, verbe – rythme, etc.]” OC1, 142.

122. “One easily sees, namely, that *not every real, inherent aspect* in the concrete unity of an intentional experience itself possesses *the basic character of intentionality*, i.e., the property of being ‘consciousness of something.’ This applies, for example, to all the *data of sensation* that play so great a role in the perceptual intuitions of things. In the experience of the perception of this white paper, more precisely, in the components of it related to the quality, the white of the paper, we find the datum of sensation, white, through a suitable shift of focus. This white is something belonging inseparably to the essence of the concrete perception and belonging as a *really obtaining*, concrete integral part of it. As a content displaying the white of the paper (the white that appears), it is a *bearer* of an intentionality, but not itself a consciousness of something. Precisely the same holds for other data of experience, for example, for so-called *sensory feelings*.” E. Husserl, *Ideas* I, §36 (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett, 2014), 63-64.

123. As Levinas writes in “Réflexions sur la ‘technique’ phénoménologique”: “The new way of treating sensibility consists in conferring upon it, in its very obtuseness, and in its thickness, a signification and a wisdom of its own and *a kind of intentionality*. The senses have a sense. Every intellectual construction will receive from the sensible experience it claims to transcend the very style and dimension of its architecture. Sensibility does not simply record facts; it unfolds a world from which the highest works of spirit stem and from which they will not be able to escape. [La façon nouvelle de traiter la sensibilité consiste à lui conférer dans son obtusité même, et dans son épaisseur, une signification et une sagesse propres et *une espèce d’intentionnalité*. Les sens ont un sens. Toute construction intellectuelle tiendra de l’expérience sensible qu’elle prétend dépasser, le style et la dimension même de son architecture. La sensibilité n’enregistre pas simplement

objectifying and, somehow, *conceptless* sense that orders sensations and functions as such; an order independent from the logic of the object, not founded on any preliminary knowledge and non-symbolically coded by which the aesthetic sensation is not chaotic, but instead

reveals something of its own and organizes itself in unity and in an order of its own. By this the work of art is a knowledge of a particular kind – not as intuition opposed to reason – nor interior to exterior. Is it still a knowledge? Is it not being? [révèle quelque chose qui lui est propre et s’organise en unité et en un ordre propre. Par-là l’œuvre d’art est une connaissance d’un genre particulier – non pas comme intuition opposée à la raison – ni intérieur à extérieur. Est-ce encore une connaissance ? N’est-ce pas être ?]

The aesthetic event is for Levinas the “site” of a suspension or neutralization of the relations of reference, of instrumentality and judgment that underlie our habitual (existential) stance towards things, insofar as it begets, forces, as it were, a suspension, a bracketing of our pre-reflective acceptance of experience, and thus of the pragmatically limited context of the real world in which we are immersed, of this “world of solitude, where everything that is other is at the same time mine.”¹²⁴ Before the work of art, we are no longer facing the illuminated and self-evident worldly object devoid of alterity because already possessed; instead of a form that frames a content, that accommodates things and bestows a specifiable meaning, we are instead facing something that cannot be framed as a content, because in it, sensation exceeds or overflows by itself the form that frames the content, whereby in the aesthetic experience the object is *dematerialized* — the object synthesis formed by the perceptual act is imploded, so to speak, disintegrated into an ensemble of sensations that are what truly constitutes the work of art, making it, as Levinas claims, a “knowledge of a particular kind,” not as intuition (which would be a representation of the object by analogy) opposed to reason, nor exterior to interior since it surpasses the object and its materiality while remaining independent and at a distance from me, the spectator — the sensation “at play” in the work of art, the sensations that constitute it are not mine, these do not come from me, the work comes not from me but *to me* — it is inconvertible into interiority; it is thus that the suspension implied in the aesthetic event ruptures the scheme subject-object and interiority-

le fait. Elle tisse un monde auquel tiennent les plus hautes œuvres de l’esprit et dont elles ne pourront s’évader.]” Levinas, “Réflexions sur la ‘technique’ phénoménologique” in *En découvrant l’Existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. 2nd Ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1967), 118. Orig. pub. in M. Béra (Ed.), *Husserl. Troisième Colloque Philosophique de Royaumont* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1959: 95-107).

124. “... monde de solitude où tout ce qui est autre est à la fois mien.” OC2, 90.

exteriority, to the point that Levinas should ask of art: “it still a knowledge? Is it not being?”¹²⁵

In music we understand this stripping down. The musical sound is no longer noise. It forms wholes, rhythms independently of the object. [En musique on comprend ce dépouillement. Le son musical n'est plus bruit. Il forme des tous, des rythmes indépendamment de l'objet.]

The stripping down of the objectivity that characterizes sensations in art can, not surprisingly, be best understood in music in which the disengagement from the object could not be clearer and more natural: to understand a musical sound is certainly not to perceive an object, nor is this sound a noise. Because sound is the “purest” sensation there is, in that it is the most independent quality of the object, music is also the aesthetically “purest” art form, in that there is no sensuous representation, there is no representation at all — “music is preeminently something played. There is no mental image of a melody,”¹²⁶ music is both pure deconceptualization and pure dematerialization; in listening to music one experiences it, *lives it musically*,¹²⁷ through its synthesis and ensembles that have nothing to do with the order of objects, are independent and indifferent to the synthesis of worldly objects, and instead make up for the internal functioning of music; because rather than a certain utterance, a certain phrase or a determined rhetoric, the significance of music lies in the very movement of the *enunciation* of sounds, and this movement is precisely its *musicality* which is not to be mistaken with some objective rhythm, the rhythm of a certain piece, but a sort of pure rhythm, a something of its own in which music organizes and unites its elements, lets them exist to themselves and thus somehow eternizes them *in their very evanescence*. Music is the bearer of a specific temporality, one that is somehow beyond time in suspending it: music

125. This question leaves us a glimpse of one of the guiding questions of the 1948 essay, “La réalité et son ombre,” namely Levinas’s contention that art contrasts with knowledge, leading not to “truth” but as he will then claim to the “non-truth” of being that is nothing more than its sensible character. See *infra* 78, 122.

126. “La musique est par excellence jouée. Il n’y a pas d’image mentale de la mélodie. La reproduire c’est la rejouer mentalement.” DEE, 47.

127. A note from *Carnets* accounts for this musical experiencing in the figure of the conductor whose function of “measuring, correcting mistakes” is expendable, meaningless compared to what he brings to the orchestra: *soul*, “and the fact that he gives soul is the fact that the work is musically experienced by him. It is the synthesis in him – the passion. [Situation tout à fait particulière du chef d’orchestre. Son rôle aux répétitions, la mesure, la correction des erreurs – tout cela peut se remplacer. Ce qui donne l’âme – c’est cela qu’il apporte. Et ce fait de donner l’âme – c’est le fait que l’œuvre est musicalement vécue par lui. C’est la synthèse en lui – la passion.]” OC1, 143.

is “the very movement of accomplishment. *Pure time*.”¹²⁸ This is exactly what we are told in *De l’existence à l’existant*, where the question of music is addressed through that of melody which the philosopher describes as a series of instants that “exist only in dying” (while “a wrong note is a sound that refuses to die”) insofar as their existence (of the instants) is bound up with their own immolation “in a duration which in a melody is essentially a continuity,”¹²⁹ in which “the instant is not self-possessed, does not stop, is not present” which is why Levinas claims that music resembles a *play*.¹³⁰ Consequently, one could say that not only do the instants fade away in the melodic continuity, but the melody itself is evanescent, “stamped with nullity,” it is always on the verge of dissolving, of vanishing, not unlike the different shots in a film, the multiplicity of points of view, as we saw earlier regarding the concept of *Aufmachung* and the filmic temporality in which what was left was the sensation of their [the images] remaining in their fading.

Now, much could be said about sound which will be, in 1948, the unexpected protagonist of the conference “Parole et Silence”¹³¹ in which Levinas will develop an unheard of “phenomenology of sound” that retrieves many of the ideas put forward in the *Carnets* from around 1944, precisely the date of the note we are presently analyzing, when sound starts to be paid attention to by the philosopher who sees in it, as suggested above, the prototype of accomplishment (sound is, Levinas claims, the accomplishment of communication),¹³² but also the key to his understanding of the notion of “expression.”¹³³ Levinas considers the phenomenon of sound *in its very sonority*, that is, of sound as such, pure sound, which he

128. My emphasis. “La musique – mouvement même de l’accomplissement. Le temps pur.” OC1, 82.

129. “les instants de la mélodie n’existent que dans la mesure où ils s’immolent à la durée qui, dans la mélodie est essentiellement continuité. . . Les instants de la mélodie ne sont là que pour mourir. La fausse note est un son qui se refuse à la mort.” DEE, 46.

130. “This duration in which the instant is not self-possessed, does not stop, is not present, is what makes music like a play. [C’est cette durée où l’instant ne se possède pas, ne s’arrête pas, n’est pas présent, qui rapproche la musique du jeu.]” DEE, 47.

131. Published in OC2, the conference “Parole et Silence” will be addressed in Chapter 2.1.

132. “We do not speak to communicate ourselves, rather, we communicate ourselves because we use sound. What I mean is: if sound is used for communication it is not as an external object that we notice and from which we recreate within ourselves the thought from which it proceeds. Sound is the accomplishment of communication. [Ce n’est pas pour se communiquer qu’on parle mas c’est parce qu’on se sert du son qu’on se communique. Je veux dire: si le son sert à la communication ce n’est pas en tant qu’il est objet extérieur qu’on remarque et à partir duquel on recrée en soi la pensée dont il procède. Le son c’est le accomplissement de la communication.]” OC1, 145-146.

133. Cf. OC1, 167.

recognizes in two instruments: the drum and, particularly, the bell,¹³⁴ two “instruments” that will be two founding components of the so-called Spectral Music, or spectralism,¹³⁵ whose composers found in the psychoacoustic properties of sound, in its vibration, in its sonority, in its *spectrum* — ambiguously in-between harmony and timbre (to the point of their indistinction) — what impels and guides their composition and compositional decisions, marking their independence from, for instance, rhythm, tonality, regular pulse or the linear structure of notes and intervals that characterize classical or non-spectral compositions; organized not (as in tonal and modal systems) by traditional scales, or (as in serialism) by chromatic rows, spectral music is organized according to the sound spectrum (the overtones, and not just the fundamental tone) of the various acoustic instruments; splashes of sound, slow harmonic development, electronic and natural, concrete, sounds combined, and the consequent resource to microtones, accidentals, additive synthesis, frequency shifting, and a variety of other techniques that impart on spectral music its character of *heterogeneity* and *unpredictability* that, precisely, characterizes sound itself. As a sort of music of music, spectralism marks *the return of music to sound*, to its fundamental — sonorous — nature, to sound in its function of sound, in its vibrancy, attempting to discover, to arrive at its *inner reality*; a return that Levinas’s phenomenological notes seem to herald almost 30 years earlier, in describing sound, precisely, as reverberation, as vibration — *sound sounds* — there is a tautological property to sound (and a sort of apophantic quality as well), a self-referentiality of sorts: sound returns to itself, it *rebounds*.

134. “The sound – as burst and symbol. There are instruments that have as their sole purpose the sound as such: the drum (with the anguishing sth. it brings) and especially the bell that pierces silence and fills space with something that comes from yonder. / “The sound of the bell – pure sound. It is not music, but it is not a simple sign either. Sound in its very sonority. [Le son – en tant qu’éclat et symbole. Il y a des instruments qui n’ont pour but que le son en tant que tel: le tambour (avec le qqch. D’angoissant qu’il amène) et surtout la cloche qui crève le silence et qui remplit l’espace de quelque chose qui vient de là-bas. / Le son de la cloche – son pur. Il n’est pas musique, mais il n’est pas simple signe. Le son dans sa sonorité même.]” OC1, 152. As claimed by Levinas’s son Michael, one of the co-founders of the spectral movement in France: “The bell, its spectral components, will be the founding acoustic structure of computer sound synthesis and the structuring model of new musical and harmonic forms. The drum, its skin, the timbre of the snare drum vibrating by sympathy will be one of the founding components of my music research: ‘music of a music.’ A music whose essence consisted in what sound sounds like Levinas’s violoncello violoncellises in *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*.” Michaël Levinas, “La transmission posthume,” 17. See *infra* 240-242.

135. Though the term “spectral music” was only coined in 1979 by Henri Dufourt, the spectral movement began in the early 70s with the contemporary music ensemble L’itinéraire founded, in 1973, by Tristan Murail, Gérard Grisey, Roger Tessier and Michaël Levinas, with the support of their teacher, the composer Olivier Messiaen.

But there is, still, another characteristic of sound that is worth considering that will help us to understand its difference to color and, on the other hand, a certain similarity to the word; a characteristic that comes also from the fact that sound is the most detached quality of the object: sound is the prototype of an essential *renewal*, in the sense that,

to reappear [it] must be reproduced. The red is the same red – but the C is always new. To be sure, the red also reproduces itself anew with each dawn – but it does not start over like the sound – it is the light that returns – while for the sound <it is> its whole being that is remade. [Le son – pour réapparaître doit être reproduit. Le rouge est le même rouge – mais le do est toujours nouveau. Certes le rouge aussi se reproduit à nouveau avec chaque aube – mais il ne recommence pas comme le son – c’est la lumière qui revient – tandis que pour le son <c’est> tout son être qui se refait.]¹³⁶

In order to reappear, sound must be reproduced, by which it is *always new*, it begins anew or renews itself every time it is played, whereby every time one hears a note, one hears it, as it were, for the very first time so, naturally, the same happens when one hears a music, even though the melodic phrases and harmonies, the notes themselves that constitute it, are exactly the same. Now, compared to sound, the case of color is more complex, in that it is more intimately attached to the object; if sound, as claimed above, is the most detached quality of the object, color would be, on the contrary, the most attached to it; still,

the color whose link with the object is more intimate, is detached from it in the modern painting to form sets of its own. [La couleur dont le lien avec l’objet est plus intime, s’en détache dans la peinture moderne pour former des ensembles qui lui sont propres.]

In modern painting, color is freed from its subservience as an intrinsic quality of the object, it leaves its contours, its edges, does not touch them — “*un dans et non pas un contact*”¹³⁷ — where it “loses” its objective meaning, to become a pure quality, quality without support: color *is*, but it is *for nothing*. Why because modern painting is essentially a fight against representation, against realism, *against vision*,¹³⁸ and so its depicted reality is not a

136. OC1, 167.

137. “Light in the impressionists – the density of light <of> certain painting of <Paris?> – vision without form. An ‘in’ and not a ‘touch’ [La lumière chez les impressionnistes – la densité de la lumière <ds/de?> certaine peinture de <Paris?> - vision sans forme. Un ‘dans’ et non pas un ‘contact’.]” OC1, 52.

138. “Painting struggles with vision. Cosmos = creation of surfaces. [Peinture lutte avec la vision. Cosmos = création de surfaces]” OC1, 52. Levinas will reprise this idea in *De l’existence à l’existant*: “Paradoxical as it may seem, painting is a struggle with vision. It seeks to wrest from the light beings integrated in a whole. To

continuation of the real but, on the contrary, a *discontinuity*, because the concern with perspective, with proportionality or correspondence, in short, with the fidelity of a representation that characterizes classical art, is everything that the modernists fight against, whose canvas is, therefore, a space without horizon, without order, without perspective or continuity, open space, *the very openness of space*, vacuity of forms and objects; a space in which simultaneity overrides continuity, in which the synthesis of the object that holds together the sensible elements is deformed into an anarchy of sensations, and thus the object is desubstantialized, literally shattered into debris and fragments, into a mass of traces, lines and colors, that do not serve as skeletons as do the rigid lines that contour the objects in classical painting but, wrested from light, disintegrated from a whole, emerge in themselves, in their particularity, in their infinite, because independent, naked selves, and in this sense open to the dimension of the possible; thus, the reality represented on the modernist canvas does not give access to an object, any object; rather, like sound, it refers back to itself — it is, somehow, *tautological*. As such, the denouement of objectivity proposed in modern painting reflects an absence not only of clothing but of forms: “To strip the form – to render naked. Nudity is not the simple undressing. Undressing of the classics and nudity of the moderns. *Beauty dresses*.”¹³⁹ Instead of concealing things under the guise of the beautiful, modern painting presents them in their nakedness, in their *elemental* nature, and displays them, arranges them in a certain order, not a universal order, and not necessarily a logical order, but one created, or rather, brought about, aroused, from their evocativeness, their vibrancy, their “power of suggestion;” the sensible proximity of colors to other colors, and elements to other elements creates the idea of movement, of a rhythm, an infinite play of colors and lines detached from their servile function as qualities of objects, from their intimate links to things in the world. But can the same be said about, for instance, the word?

The word is not separable from meaning. But first there is the materiality of the word which forms phenomena like rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, meter. But the word is detached from meaning in yet another way: in so far as it is attached to a multiplicity of meanings.

look is to be able to describe curves, to sketch out wholes in which the elements come to be integrated, horizons where the particular appears by abdicating its particularity. [Si paradoxal que cela puisse paraître, la peinture est une lutte avec la vision. Elle cherche à arracher à la lumière les êtres intégrés dans un ensemble. Regarder est un pouvoir de décrire des courbes, de dessiner des ensembles où les éléments viennent s'intégrer, des horizons où le particulier apparaît en abdiquant.]” DEE, 90.

139. My emphasis. “Dépouiller de la forme – rendre nu. Nudité n’est pas le simple déshabillé. Déshabillé des classiques et nudité des modernes. La beauté habille.” OC1, 52.

[Le mot n'est pas séparable du sens. Mais il y a d'abord la matérialité du mot qui forme des phénomènes comme rythme, rime, allitération, mètre. Mais le mot se détache du sens encore d'une autre manière : en tant qu'il s'attache à une multiplicité de sens.]

The word is always attached to a signification, an objective or literal signification: it says, it names, it designates something, a thought to which corresponds an object, a content, a being, a thing, and in this sense, the word is transparent, crystalline: it does not refer to itself, but to something other than itself, precisely to that which it names and to which it, thus, leads, to which it gives access to — the object it designates — it is a vector of objectivity, the word *immobilizes*, it covers (something) and, thus, in a way, it sustains reality, by naming it, by ordering it. But the word is not a simple matter, it is a *precious* one, it holds a secret; which is why there is such a thing as *poetry*. In poetry, the word, the smallest of them becomes opaque, it draws attention to itself, and *re-sounds*, because *sound* is its natural element — sound is the very matter of words, and has priority over semantics in poetry which “arranges” the words into song, into music, through phenomena like “rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, meter,” echoes and metaphors that appealing to other words, to other meanings, to images and so on, further dissociate the word from its objective signification, making it equivocal, difficult to grasp exactly, reverting it back to the element of the sensible. Thus, the second reason for the detachment of the word from its objective signification: its polysemic ambiguity whose play constitutes the very significance of sense. Words do not have isolable and objective meanings in a poem, as they do in a dictionary, because before referring to a content, to a given, they refer, laterally to other words, and in its sensible proximity to other words, a word cannot have an equivocal or objective meaning, precisely because it is attached to a multiplicity of meanings; and it is because of this multiplicity that the poem is somewhat insubstantial, precisely non-objective, as if the various senses interrupted one another; poetic language is divested of all referentiality and thus of all purposefulness; thus the words in the poem are returned to their sensible element, “this elementary where all the complex is already present.”¹⁴⁰ And it is precisely at this pre-syntactic and pre-logical level at which the word

functions as the naked fact of signifying without signifying a determined object. It is the vagueness of the poem. By this the word approaches the musical sound. [Alors il

140. See *supra* 46 and ss.

fonctionne comme le fait nu de signifier sans signifier un objet déterminé. C'est le vague du poème. Par là le mot se rapproche du son musical.]

In referring to the “vagueness of the poem,” Levinas is not implying neither that the poem is incoherent in meaning nor that it is simply meaningless, but rather that the divestment, the denouement of objectivity that the poem brings about means that before designating an object, a person, anything, before going toward an (objective) meaning, the words in the poem go towards the very materiality of sound which is why the poem signifies something other than what its words say, other than a theme or an object, signifies otherwise than as a name, a designation — the poem refuses, as it were, the category of *noun*, of substantive — what matters is *the very poetry of the poem*; hence poetry brings about this rupture of immanence to which language in general is bound to, the logic of referentiality in which it is imprisoned — it suspends the present of the objectifying consciousness thus opening to what somehow escapes representation and intelligibility, because beyond or, rather, *behind* the intelligible signification of a poem, words have in sound, as said above, their natural element, for words are meant to be voiced and to be heard, and the poem deploys their profound, or elemental, musicality,¹⁴¹ this deeper meaning foreign to any semantic objectivity that the musicality of the poem resonates and which is nothing other than the divorce between expression and its object — poetry *sets things to music*;¹⁴² but what matters is less the song, that is, what they sing about, than this *singing itself*, this evasion, this delivery of sorts — this coming, this *approaching* that says nothing other than this very approach, that signifies nothing other than itself, and which describes the functioning of the word in the poem, its *accomplishment*¹⁴³ in the sense of its mode, its pure *how* — “the naked fact of signifying without signifying a determined object,” that is, *a significance without significant* — it signifies itself.

But one can go even further: the story, the image, the metaphor – can detach themselves from their objective meaning and function as a function – one can go even further: the

141. In *De l'existence à l'existant*, Levinas claims that “in breaking with classical prosody” modern poetry seeks the musicality of the verse at a deeper level (than classical poetry), precisely this divorce between expression and its object that we have been discussing, thus becoming “pure poetry”: “La poésie moderne, en rompant avec la prosodie classique, n'a donc nullement renoncé à la musicalité du vers, mais l'a cherchée plus profondément.” DEE, 87.

142. OC1, 100.

143. See *infra* 68, n. 145 and 70, n. 151.

philosophical concept can also dematerialize in this way and become like art itself a profound knowledge. [Mais on peut aller plus loin encore : le récit, l'image, la métaphore – peuvent se détacher de leur signification objective et fonctionner en tant que fonctionnant – On peut aller même plus loin: le concept philosophique peut aussi se dématérialiser de la sorte et devenir comme l'art lui-même une connaissance profonde.]

Regarding the story, well, we have seen all throughout this chapter how the significance of a novel does not lie primarily in the objective events it narrates, in the literal or even figurative meanings that can be derived from it, in the narrative sequence and the narrative time but rather, at a more profound level, at the very level of sensation where it arises from the focus on the concreteness of events, taken in their temporality of the flowing time of the lived experience, in the nakedness of sensations understood as the beyond of the phenomenon as the correlate of an aiming: in the unassimilable distance and proximity of the sensible which takes precedence over the withdrawal of theoretical thought. As for the image, a notion about which we will speak at length in our next chapter, and which is, on the contrary, practically absent from the *Carnets*, it too can detach itself from its objective meaning, as is, in fact, easily observed in the modernist movements where abstraction imposes itself on figurative representation, where the image is not governed by a principle of similarity, where the intention of faithful and realistic representation is replaced by the idea of *de-figuration* and deconstruction, introducing strange elements (for instance through assemblage), movement, time even, into the pictures that thus do not present anything objective and nameable, but traces, signs, indications of what might be a figure, remains of what might be an object, without our having access to it, without the image providing that practical and direct access to the object. And then somehow the image is *in itself*, separates itself from the canvas, from the support which seemed to sustain it. Regarding the metaphor,¹⁴⁴ etymologically, it designates a transfer of meaning based on the resemblance between terms; as the reference to an absence, the metaphor would be that by which a given that is absent from the field of perception acquires a meaning, a meaning that perception cannot give, because perception is finite — it is *not enough for meaning* whereby it has to compensate that lack with something it cannot represent — with a metaphor. But that being

144. It is worth nothing that after *Totalité et Infini* (1961), Levinas will elaborate an extensive study on the metaphor (Cf. OC2, 319-347) where we read for the first time the expression “otherwise than being” [*autrement que l'être*]; delivered as a lecture, on February 26, 1962, at the Collège Philosophique, Levinas will not however publish this study. Cf. Rodolphe Calin, “La métaphore absolue. Un faux départ vers l'autrement qu'être” in *Au-delà du visible*, 125-142.

the case, the metaphor, and the meaning it carries would signify a deficiency of perception, and would be, thus, still attached to it, understood from perception, by contrast with it, as a consolation of sorts, and not in itself. But if the metaphor can be detached from its objective signification, from its fixed meaning (the object it designates), and through that detachment, “function as a function,” that means that what is proper to the metaphor is not the fact that it objectivizes a thought, is not the reference to the objective hierarchy, to its designating something in place of something else (the fact that one thing signifies another) — but the excess, the “excellence”, the surplus of meaning that it involves — that goes beyond the object it names, a sublimation, a something new that it brings to thought, to experience, to the real itself.

Thus, the objective meaning is not their first or original signification; instead, all objective meaning is preceded by something else, by another *sense*, a prior signification that is not deducible from the objective meaning but precisely conditions it — first makes it possible, because the objective signification has no value of its own: it merely presents the world as it is, but changes nothing in it. And then comes philosophy: the philosophical concept too can be dematerialized because it is fundamentally heterogenous, ambiguous and equivocal, and if it can be detached from its objective meaning and thus say more than the thesis it objectifies and names, be more than the immobility of the said that fixes it, beyond the coherence of its discourse, and can exist and function beyond a system of ideas, a theory, or in a concatenation of concepts in which it is integrated, it is because its original sense comes from another articulation beyond the horizon of thematization and the order of synchronism, beyond the sphere of objectivization, somehow, beyond theory itself — it is not in the explanation that lies the essential of philosophy for Levinas, but in *description*: is not the vocation of philosophy precisely phenomenology? The “return to things themselves,” to the concrete, the attention to the *how* of the phenomenon, the “how” of things, their mode, their modality, rather than their quiddity, their “what?”¹⁴⁵ To my mind, the idea of

145. “To bring out this order of accomplishment – this is the methodological side – the philosophical level – of my philosophy. To pass from the objective and subjective plane of the phenomena to their plane of accomplishment. What is accomplished in this or that phenomenon? Not phenomenology that looks for the ‘intention’ or the meaning of the phenomenon.’ Husserl’s ‘*Wohin hier hinausgewollt ist.*’ A psychoanalysis of the mind. But something else. What? [Dégager cet ordre de l’accomplissement – c’est le côté méthodologique – le plan philosophique – de ma philosophie. Passer du plan objectif et subjectif des phénomènes à leur plan d’accomplissement. Qu’est-ce qui est accompli dans tel ou tel phénomène ? Non pas la phénoménologie qui cherche ‘l’intention’ ou la signification du phénomène.’ ‘*Wohin hier hinausgewollt ist*’ de Husserl. Une psychanalyse de l’esprit. Mais autre chose. Quoi?]” OC1, 62.

dematerialization of philosophy can only lead to the phenomenological description and to its first gesture, or rather the gesture that makes phenomenology possible — the *reduction* — through which reality appears in its ultimate structure. Is that not what is at stake in this note? In this aesthetic conception by Levinas? Hence art is, argues the philosopher, “a profound knowledge” — there is no irony here; art is not an objective knowledge, it does not state a truth, rather it is a profound knowledge because somehow, perhaps paradoxically, it escapes knowledge, it transcends the pure immanence of knowledge, consciousness and objectifying intentionality; it can neither be measured nor proven, and in the absence of all referentiality, it cannot be contrasted with something else; it exceeds the objective discourse that would exhaust it, hindering it somehow — art is a profound knowledge, then, because, in a way it is *irreducible* to knowledge.

At last, we come to the note’s conclusion:

This detachment of the objective meaning gives art the character of play. The objective events have no value of their own. Every work is in some way inconsequential. [Ce détachement de la signification objective donne à l’art le caractère de jeu. Les événements objectifs n’ont pas de valeur propre. Toute l’œuvre est en quelque manière sans conséquence.]

In light of all that has been said, the term “play”¹⁴⁶ ought, I believe, to be understood here in an essentially *positive* sense as gratuity, givenness, pure loss, pure dispensation, without compensation, without purpose — towards nothing and for nothing: a *transcendence of play*.

Art interrupts the order of the real, or the real as order, it disrupts our intentional life; it presents a possibility of *escape*¹⁴⁷ from the seriousness of existence of which we spoke

146. It is this same term with which, in *Le Temps et l’Autre*, Levinas describes the caress: “It is like a play, with something that slips away, and a play absolutely without project nor plan, not with what can become ours and us, but with something else always other, always inaccessible, always to come. [Elle est comme un jeu avec quelque chose qui se dérobe, et un jeu absolument sans projet ni plan, non pas avec ce qui peut devenir nôtre et nous, mais avec quelque chose d’autre, toujours autre, toujours inaccessible, toujours à venir.] TA, 82.

147. The term, or philosopheme, “escape” [*évasion*] with which in the 1935 article “De l’évasion” Levinas translates the need to get out of being, naming thus this path other than that of being, is a term that the philosopher admits to having borrowed from the language of literature and literary criticism of his day; he writes: “The escape, in regard to which contemporary literature manifests a strange disquiet, appears like a condemnation, the most radical one, of the philosophy of being by our generation. This term which we borrow from the language of contemporary literary criticism, is not just a fashionable word; it is the disorder of our time. [L’évasion dont la littérature contemporaine manifeste l’étrange inquiétude apparaît comme une condamnation, la plus radicale, de la philosophie de l’être par notre génération. Ce terme que nous empruntons au langage de la critique littéraire contemporaine n’est pas seulement un mot à la mode; c’est un mal du siècle.]” Levinas, *De l’évasion*, 69-70.

earlier; escape not toward something objective (because, indeed, is not the philosopher himself who claims that “the objective events have no value of their own?”), but this possibility of escape itself, into something that is not being, and thus escape as such — freedom with regard to the weight of existence and, maybe, the self-absorption in it, the interestedness it implies, from the self: the *gratuity of grace*.¹⁴⁸

Without project, nor plan, never definitive, and inexhaustible, art’s “character” of play is not a limitation, but its *condition* whose inconsequence is not synonymous with impotence, but with its lack of purpose, of objectivity derived in part from its tautological character, which is not a default but, again, a condition (a condition that phenomenology knows to, and how to, respect), a condition on which Levinas will not cease to insist (and, particularly in “La réalité et son ombre” to denounce) that precisely, for the philosopher, justifies both the function and the need for criticism.¹⁴⁹ And in its tautology, art is, essentially “open-ended,” not an opening *to* as revelation or unveiling, but dawn of signification, in the sense of pure *articulation of language* — language that is the very matter that art articulates, with which it plays:¹⁵⁰ *expression before exhibition*, verb (or adverb) before noun. Expression, which is not expressivity, which is not the exteriorization of a soul, nor the expression of some pre-existing content or thought, but “the way in which the interior becomes reality — accomplishment,”¹⁵¹ accomplishment that disrupts the parallelism noema-noesis and which I believe grounds the notion of “transcendence of expression” that Levinas places at the basis of his philosophy:

148. “Grace – the possibility for existence to shed its burden. Conditions do not change into their opposite. Grace = gratuity – no more counterpart which is precisely this reversal into its opposite. [La grâce – la possibilité pour l’existence de se dépouiller de sa charge. Les états ne virent pas en leur contraire. Grâce = gratuité – plus de contrepartie qui est précisément ce virement en contraire.]” OC1, 134.

149. A note in the *Carnets* seemingly dated also from 1944 puts forward the essence of the critique by opposition to the artist; Levinas writes: “The critic – that who in essence can say something other than (repeat) this very work (= essence of the artist). [Le critique – celui qui par essence peut dire autre chose que (répéter) cette œuvre même (= essence de l’artiste)].” OC1, 139.

150. “The expression of thought – is always something else than the objective content of thought. Already by the simple fact of expression – words – intervenes all the being that articulates and all the ‘play’ that involves the articulation – the ‘picturesque’ of language. It is in language – in this ‘matter’ of thought that art operates. [L’expression de la pensée – est toujours autre chose que le contenu objectif de la pensée. Déjà par le simple fait de l’expression – mots – intervient tout l’être qui articule et tout le ‘jeu’ que comporte l’articulation – le ‘pittoresque’ du langage. C’est dans le langage – dans cette ‘matière’ de la pensée qu’opère l’art.]” OC1, 116.

151. “what is the verb originally? Thought? No: expression – the way the interior becomes reality. Accomplishment. [qu’est-ce que le verbe originellement? Pensée? Non: expression – la manière dont l’intérieure devient réalité. Accomplissement.]” OC1, 133.

The transcendence that I place at the basis of my ϕ – neither the transcendence toward the object – neither the transcendence toward the future – neither the transcendence toward love – but the transcendence of expression. [La transcendance que je pose à la base de ma ϕ – c’est ni la transcendance vers l’objet – ni la transcendance vers l’avenir – ni la transcendance vers l’amour – mais la transcendance de l’expression].¹⁵²

Transcendence towards nothing, without this nothing being a direction, an end in itself — mystery; transcendence not towards something, but transcendence of intentional consciousness, that Levinas’s analysis of the aesthetic event brings to light and in which one can “perceive” a sense more original, or more profound, than intentional sense, beyond opening as opening *to*, and thus irreducible to the objectifying intentionality that characterizes representation, which is precisely the sense of the sensible. The sensible has its own sense, its own internal sense; an un-thematized, un-actualized, un-objectivized and thus, somehow always *potential* sense, that the sensible in art, the aesthetic “object” brings forward, and which does not refer to any objective reality. It is this sense, then, that we might say, *en-forms* the work of art which, thus, transcends the object that properly speaking gives it a form — the canvas on which the colors settle, the composition in which the sounds fit, the stanza that frames the words — and “finds” its *reality*, its *irreducibility*, in sensations themselves, in the infinite and ungraspable materiality of sensations and the rhythm, the musicality, it imbues them with; precisely in its mode, in its *how* rather than in its *what*.

Assuming then, as I must, the accuracy of my interpretation of this first aesthetic formulation by Levinas (even though it may have perhaps exceeded its analysis), the question arises: what then, if anything, justifies the ambiguity that we stated at the launch of this study characterizes the philosopher’s understanding of, and stance towards art? Where does the pole, or poles, of “negativity” lie that would warrant it? Can we detect it, here, already?

Well, on the basis of this and the earlier notes we have analyzed throughout this chapter, I would argue that we can only see the possible origin of that ambiguity, without it being expressly stated. The ambiguity of sensation, the ambiguity of the idea of a “play without consequences,” the ambiguous mode (i.e., non-objective) in which art gives itself, the idea that “everything is possible,” the idea of desubstantialization that will mark Levinas’s later pronouncements on art which will acquire also a moral or ethical dimension, much as an

152. OC1, 195.

ontological one. Here Levinas's considerations do not derive from any sort of judgment (moral or otherwise), but are "purely" phenomenological, if I may put it so, in the sense that these are "limited to" receiving and describing the mode in which art offers itself, gives itself, without going beyond, without exceeding the limits of this giving itself, in its very irreducibility (precisely what the phenomenological gesture demands). In that sense, literature, art, would appear not only to escape any charges whatsoever (and namely, of idolatry), but even perhaps to *accomplish* a further escape, one to which Levinas had thus far found no solution to, the *escape* from being. More than that, it is certainly not illicit to speculate that this aesthetic theory and the phenomenology of the sensible that grounds it, on which it is built, may very well have been at the origin of Levinas's entire thought, namely, as an early step toward the finding of a diachrony in intentionality and thus, the means to reverse it, to jeopardize it, not least because almost immediately afterwards he wonders:

The ultimate consequence of my aesthetic conception – metaphysics is ultimately an art, the meaning of existence is an art? – existence an art? [La dernière conséquence de ma conception esthétique – la métaphysique est en fin de compte un art, le sens de l'existence est un art? – l'existence un art ?]¹⁵³

But it is here, perhaps also, with the radicality (and the reductionism) of this enunciation, where Levinas's ambivalence toward art first finds its ground.

153. OC1, 132.

CHAPTER 2

The Ambiguities of Art

« Is it presumptuous do denounce the hypertrophy of art in our time when, for almost everyone, it is identified with spiritual life? »

— E. Levinas*

On January 30, 1945, only a few months prior to his release from captivity, Levinas wrote a letter to his wife Raïssa saying: “My philosophical work is almost finished. Naturally, I still have to work on the manuscript, but it is a pleasant task. But I have such a poor image of the present intellectual atmosphere that I often doubt what I am doing.”¹ There is a lucidity to these words that I find remarkable: Levinas is not only aware that the path of his philosophy is laid out, but he is equally awake to his own *obscureness* within and about the French intellectual scene. One can hardly claim surprise on hearing of Levinas’s obliviousness to the philosophical and literary productions of a Merleau-Ponty, a Sartre, a Bachelard, a Bataille, or even a Blanchot, among many others for whom the Occupation proved a fruitful period of publication and acknowledgment; while, far across the Rhine, the milieu of Levinas’s philosophical output whose elements (as we learn from yet another letter dated 1944)² were all already present to him, was the Stalag XI B, where he wrote most of his first book, the rebelliously titled *De l’Existence à l’Existant*, in whose preface we read:

* “Est-il outrecuidant de dénoncer l’hypertrophie de l’art à notre époque où, pour presque tous, il s’identifie avec la vie spirituelle?,” RO, 125-126.

1. OC2, 13.

2. Letter from March 17, 1944, correspondence of Levinas with his wife. Cf. OC2, 13.

The stalag is not mentioned here as a guarantee of profundity, nor as a claim to indulgence, but as an explanation for the absence of any consideration of those philosophical works published, with so much impact, between 1940 and 1945. [Le stalag n'est pas évoqué ici comme une garantie de profondeur, ni comme un droit à l'indulgence, mais comme une explication de l'absence de toute prise de position à l'égard des œuvres philosophiques publiées, avec tant d'éclat, entre 1940 et 1945.]³

Levinas's unwilling deafness to the voices of his fellow philosophers and intellectuals under the Occupation, together with his experience of captivity, not to mention the horrid news arriving from Lithuania,⁴ are remarkably reflected in the obscure and exotic atmosphere of this work in which the phantoms of war — of the loss of all sense — haunt every one of its pages. If in 1935, Levinas had already challenged the verb *to be*, that is, the problem of *being qua being*, and envisaged the *need to escape being*,⁵ it was only while enduring captivity, that such an escape gained a more definite and radical contour, as a “profound need to leave the climate of Heideggerian thought,”⁶ though still maintaining *a foot on being*. I brought this up not to entertain a discussion on Levinas's “complicated” relationship with Heidegger (though it will, now and again, inevitably come up), but to merely point out that while others were basking in Sartre's existentialist freedom and transparency of consciousness, Levinas was speaking of a “monde cassé,” of being torn away from the world, of the night, of fatigue, of insomnia, of amorphous objects, in short: of an existence without existent, of an existence without a world, to the point of asking us, “imagine all beings, things, and persons reverting to nothing.”⁷

Well, none of this is foreign to Levinas's discussion of art from this period, whose event is placed, as we will see, in this very situation of the end of the world, in a significant and perilous vicinity to the *il y a*.

The chapter that now begins, covers a relatively long period, stretching from 1946 up to, and including 1961, the year of the presentation and publication of Levinas's doctoral thesis

3. DEE, [10].

4. As is widely known, Levinas's entire family in Lithuania, his parents, brothers, and father-in-law, were murdered by the SS. Raïssa's mother, Levinas's mother-in-law that lived with the couple in Paris, was deported and never heard from again; Raïssa and their daughter, Simone, were first hidden in Blanchot's apartment in Paris and afterwards in a Vincentian convent near Orléans.

5. I am referring to Levinas's article “De l'évasion.”

6. DEE, 19.

7. DEE, 93.

and first major work: *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*. These fifteen years separating the philosopher's freedom from his affirmation as one, were notwithstanding his marginality from the French academic establishment, what one might call, well-spent years: three published books — *De l'existence à l'existant*, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* and *Totalité et Infini* —, a dozen articles issued in journals of reference such as *Deucalion*,⁸ *Les Temps Modernes*,⁹ *L'Esprit*, or *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*,¹⁰ and the aforementioned, annual conferences at the *Collège Philosophique*; all the while serving as Director of the *École Normale Israélienne Orientale*.¹¹ Of more significance to our purposes is however the fact that it is also from this period that date some of Levinas's writings that are most deeply (and more directly) concerned with art and aesthetics, some of which were already mentioned in the previous chapter — such are the cases of “La réalité et son ombre” and “La transcendance des mots” — but there are others; for instance, “L'autre dans Proust” (1947), “Le regard du poète” (1956), Levinas's first essay about M. Blanchot, and while not as focused, some of his lectures at Wahl's *Collège* such as “Parole et silence” (1948), “Pouvoirs et origine” (1949), “Les nourritures” (1950) and “L'écrit et l'oral” (1952) contribute to the discussion, as do the articles “L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?” (1951) and “Éthique et Esprit” (1952).¹² Last but definitely not least, there is *Totalité et Infini* which delivers occasional yet meaningful insights into our subject matter.

These are, to be sure, quite different texts. But notwithstanding their diversity of form, aim and context, what one finds is a series of common concerns, of common themes and

8. “Il y a” (Aug. 1946), “L'autre dans Proust” (Oct. 1947).

9. “La réalité et son ombre” (Nov. 1948) and “La transcendance des mots. À propos des Biffures” (Jun. 1949).

10. “L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?” (Jan.-Mars 1951), “Liberté et commandement” (Jul.-Sep. 1953), “Le Moi et la totalité” (Oct.-Dec. 1954), and “La philosophie et l'idée de l'Infini” (Jul.-Sep. 1957). Not coincidentally, Levinas's contributions to the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* come in the early years of Jean-Wahl's connection to the journal of which he was co-director alongside Dominique Parodi from 1950 until the latter's death in 1955, having then assumed alone the direction of the journal until his own death in 1974, being succeeded by Paul Ricœur.

11. As Levinas would later confess to Salmon Malka: “In the aftermath of Auschwitz, in directing the *École Normale Israélienne Orientale*, I had the impression that I was responding to a historical call. It is my secret... Strangeness of a young man, probably. Even today I am aware and proud of it.” Malka, 2003,

12. “Le regard du poète” was first published in *Monde Nouveau*, 98 (mars 1956), and later republished in *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1995); Levinas's conferences at the *Collège Philosophique* are gathered in *Œuvres Complètes 2: Parole et Silence*, while “Éthique et Esprit” was initially launched in the journal *Évidences*, 27 (Sep.-Oct. 1952) and re-edited in *Difficile Liberté* (1963).

threads, some of which yet to find their ultimate articulation: from the platonic Good beyond being, the definite break with Parmenides, the fruition of (and a certain deflection from) phenomenology, the search for and sense of exteriority, the articulation of subjectivity, to the progressive radicalization of alterity — from existence, to time, and to ethics — it is the ambiguous character of art that Levinas heightens through the very ambivalence of his discourse about it, swinging between what seems like austere criticism and heartfelt applause, that I will strive to enlighten over the coming pages: *enlighten*, and *not efface*. It is not at all my intention to try to soften or, even less, to feign to suppress the distances and contradictions that easily emerge from these texts; to do so would amount to not only a perversion of Levinas’s conception of art, but also to a failure to appreciate the *necessary and positive* character of said ambiguity. What many scholars have interpreted as a radical change or “evolution” in Levinas’s appreciation of art, notably after *Totalité et Infini*, I see as the natural development of a discourse that had not yet found its most suitable language and reached its ultimate form. But the ambiguity of art in Levinas’s thought finds no more justification in his more mature texts than it finds in the aforementioned writings from the earlier postwar period, even if, in the latter, the philosopher gives greater (and coarsest) attention to one of the moments of art over the other — its ‘*idolatrous moment*.’ This is particularly striking in *Totalité et Infini* but is far from passing unnoticed in “La réalité et son ombre.”

Often deemed severe, hostile and even naïve, Levinas’s first article in *Les Temps Modernes* is though relatively unfamed, a genuinely novel and riveting text whose glossed readings by too many commentators have fostered its very obscuration based upon some ill-considered inferences: that Levinas nurtures a “deep-seated antipathy — and sometimes outright hostility — to art,”¹³ that he is “severe in its denunciation of the work of art, and the work of criticism as well,”¹⁴ or that he makes the work of art the “object of a virulent aggressiveness based on groundless prejudices;”¹⁵ while, on his part, Colin Davis claims: “no one (as far as I know) agrees with or is persuaded by Levinas’s argument in ‘La réalité

13. Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 98.

14. Robbins, *Altered Reading, Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 83.

15. Francesca Albertini, “The Language of the Meeting with the Other and the Phenomenology of Eros. Traces of Aesthetic Thinking in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Levinas in Jerusalem: Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Joëlle Hansel (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 158.

et son ombre,’ which is far from clear in any case,” which is why, he adds, “a number of strategies have been adopted in order to argue that, in one way or another, Levinas did not mean what he says here.”¹⁶ Though it is true that “La réalité et son ombre” has been the subject of an unending interpretative debate, leading to surprisingly disparate translations (to the extent that Richard A. Cohen felt the need to write an article subtitled “Getting ‘Reality and its Shadow’ Right”),¹⁷ I am quite frankly at odds with Davis’s claim about the article’s lack of persuasive power, and shy away from any strategy premised on the rather silly suggestion that ‘Levinas may not have meant what he wrote.’ How could that be, I ask, when there is not a single argument in that article that the philosopher has not, in one way or another, revisited or echoed in his subsequent writings? How could that be, when Levinas himself refers unreservedly to “La réalité et son ombre” in his two major works — *Totalité et Infini* and *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*?¹⁸ and, when in a 1982 interview, Levinas once more evokes this article, saying:

E. Levinas: ... There is goodness in beauty, and there is certainly an idolatrous moment in art, I think. The idolatrous moment is very strong. Or [*sic*], if you will, in the end the good that is in it is absorbed by the form. I wrote something some time ago, “La réalité et son ombre,” where this is very clear. One experiences the accommodation in resemblance, in form. It remains a moment, but at the same time it is necessary to complete it [the form].

Edith Wyschogrod: Can one go beyond it?

16. Colin Davis, “Levinas the novelist,” *French Studies*, 69:3 (2015), 336; 337.

17. Richard A. Cohen, “Levinas on Art and Aestheticism: Getting ‘Reality and its Shadow’ Right,” *Levinas Studies*, 11, 2016: 149-194.

18. The reference to “La réalité et son ombre” in *Totalité et Infini* (III.C.1, “La relation éthique et le Temps,” note 1) comes after the following, straightforward, resumption of the fundamental thesis of the article: “or like the gods immobilized in the between-time of art, left for all eternity on the edge of the interval, at the threshold of a future that never occurs, statues looking at one another with empty eyes, idols which, contrary to Gyges, are exposed and do not see. [ou comme les dieux immobilisés dans l’entre-temps de l’art, laissés, pour l’éternité, au bord de l’intervalle, au seuil d’un avenir qui ne se produit jamais, statues se regardant avec des yeux vides, idoles qui, contrairement à Gygès, s’exposent et ne voient pas.]” *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), 244. While in *Autrement qu’être* (V.2.E, “La gloire de l’infini”, note 1), the same fundamental thesis of the 1948 article appears already reinscribed in the ethical context, and according to the Levinasian lexicon that in this work reaches its ultimate “form”: “The immemorial past is intolerable for thought. Thus, there is an exigency to stop: *ananké stenai*. The movement beyond being becomes ontology and theology. And, thus, there is also an idolatry of the beautiful. In its indiscrete exposition and in its stoppage in a statue, in its plasticity, a work of art substitutes itself for God. [Le passé immémorial est intolérable à la pensée. D’où l’exigence de l’arrêt: *ananké stenai*. Le mouvement au-delà de l’être devient ontologie et théologie. D’où aussi l’idolâtrie du beau. Dans son indiscrete exposition et dans son arrêt de statue, dans sa plasticité, l’œuvre d’art se substitue à Dieu.]” *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, 10 ed. (Paris : Livre de Poche, 2017) 191. Beyond these works, “La réalité et son ombre” is furthermore referenced in “L’interdit de la représentation et ‘droits de l’homme’” in *Altérité et Transcendance* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1995), 129.

EL: Go beyond it? Not go beyond it so much as see that it is a part of the truth.¹⁹

What I am trying to say is that “La réalité et son ombre” is neither a misstep in Levinas’s oeuvre, nor a dogmatic critique that its author went on to abandon or refute in favor of a more “amiable” or “lighthearted” understanding of art in his later writings: there is no indulgence in the philosopher’s later writings on art, no more than there is now. I feel strongly about the essential and unsurpassable ambiguity that Levinas perceives in art, from which derives his own ambivalence toward it, which emerges in his various discussions of the subject throughout his work that prompt the philosopher to approach the artistic question with discretion, modesty, and above all, with a premeditated, and prudent, *distance*. How could it be otherwise when art for the Levinas of the postwar emerges in the horizon of being understood as *il y a*, as the echo of its anonymous and horrifying rustling, that frightens almost as much as it fascinates, as *a silent rapture*?

Which is why I would like begin by addressing a subject one too many times left out, or not delved into enough in the host of analyses of Levinas’s writings on art: *silence*. Why silence? Because for the author of *Totalité et Infini*, before anything else, and after everything else, *art is bound for silence*. Levinas’s seemingly severe appraisal of art in his postwar writings is, I believe, an attempt to show precisely this foredoom of art, as it were, for a silence that precedes the Revelation, a silence that elicits not, as in Heidegger, the truth of being, but precisely its non-truth, its obscuration, or still, its *errancy*.²⁰ Previous to the order

19. “Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” conducted and translated by Edith Wyschogrod (December 31, 1982), *Philosophy and Theology*, 4 (2), 1989: 105-118; reprinted in E. Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy’s Others* (Fordham University Press, 2006), 293.

20. In his essay “Le regard du poète” devoted to M. Blanchot’s *L’Espace Littéraire* (1955), Levinas writes about the non-truth of being as the non-destination, the errancy, to which literature leads. Though knowing the complicity between the two authors, between two friends, it is nonetheless remarkable how their reflections sometimes touch, how strangely colluding at times, in such a way that without ever merging, their voices often intertwine; such is the case of this “refusal” of the Heideggerian truth (that culminates in the striking invitation to “leave the Heideggerian world”), and the entrance into the non-truth, the obscurity of being from which Levinas moves away, toward the Other, “leaving behind” Blanchot, who penetrates ever more deeply in it. Levinas writes: “The errancy of being – more external than truth. In Heidegger, an alternance of nothingness and being also occurs in the truth of being, but Blanchot, contrary to Heidegger does not call it truth, but non-truth. He insists on this veil of the ‘no,’ this inessential character of the ultimate essence of the work... And yet, it is in this non-truth to which literature leads, and not in the ‘truth of being,’ where authenticity resides. Authenticity that is not truth – this is perhaps the ultimate proposition to which Blanchot’s critical reflection leads us. And I think it is an invitation to leave the Heideggerian world. [Erreur de l’être – plus extérieur que la vérité. Pour Heidegger, une alternance du néant et de l’être se joue aussi dans la vérité de l’être, mais Blanchot, contrairement à Heidegger, ne la nomme pas vérité, mais non-vérité. Il insiste sur ce voile du ‘non’, sur ce caractère inessentiel de l’essence dernière de l’œuvre... Et cependant, dans ce non-vrai auquel conduit

of language and knowledge, art imposes silence in a sacred fascination — a “bewitching rhythm” to which we passively yield — which leads us to identify it with spiritual life; hence, the quote with which I opened this chapter: “Is it presumptuous to denounce the hypertrophy of art in our times when, for almost everyone, it is identified with spiritual life?” for it helps greatly to understand Levinas’s apparently harsh assessment of art which, as I understand it, and as I believe his own words evince, is not only directed at the work of art per se, *and its ambiguous value*, but also at its (almost) religious adoration — as an ineffable language, as the sensuous display of the Absolute, or still as the opening of a world — at the romantic rhetoric of exaltation of the aesthetic and artistic dimension of culture that tends to paganism or to *aestheticism* — life as art, the aestheticization of experience in its totality —, and leads to viewing art as the supreme value of civilization. But does reproaching such an extolling of art amount to a dismissal of or disregard for art itself? Or, to put it another way, must the fact that art does not constitute for Levinas the supreme value of civilization, beg the conclusion that the philosopher does not, therefore, acknowledge any value to art other than that of instilling a fascination that lulls the spectator into an egotistic and quiet pleasure, and that of absolving the artist of his duties as a human being by granting him an easy and undeserved nobility as a creator of myths?

In what follows, I will seek to show that it should not; I will strive to shed light on how singularly well Levinas appreciates the value and the power of art, by which he is not, however, and unlike others, *bewitched*.

2.1 Silence and the dogmas of art

Historically, politically, and culturally, silence was the may be unavoidable, but surely sad predicament of postwar Europe, a predicament that lingered for a very long time, for too the shadow of the Second World War in Europe proved to be an exceptionally long one. Silence over Europe’s recent past was perhaps, as Tony Judt claims, “the necessary condition

la littérature, et non pas dans la ‘vérité de l’être’, réside l’authenticité. L’authenticité qui n’est pas la vérité — voilà peut-être l’ultime proposition à laquelle nous conduit la réflexion critique de Blanchot, Et nous pensons qu’elle invite à sortir du monde heideggérien.]” Levinas, “Le regard du poète,” in SMB, 19-20.

for the construction of a European future,”²¹ but the French intellectuals, and the existentialists in particular may be said to have excelled at it. We are instantly reminded of Sartre’s (in)famous opening lines in “La République du Silence,” in which he heralds the French people’s freedom through an “heroic” silent suffering:

Never have we been freer than under the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, first and foremost the right to speak... The very question of freedom was posed, and we were at the verge of the most profound knowledge which man can have about himself... This total responsibility in total solitude, wasn’t this the revelation of freedom?²²

A silent suffering that turned after the war into what the founder of *L’Esprit*, Emmanuel Mounier, called the “strange silence” — over the evidence of Nazi atrocities, over the Jewish Question, over antisemitic prejudice, deportations and famine in Communist systems, among other sore spots — the banner of “commitment” [*engagement*] boasted by the existentialists was, it seems, little more than revolutionary lyricism, a way to screen their “self-imposed moral anesthesia.”²³ For while Sartre is certainly to be commended for exposing antisemitism in France at a time when it was sorely needed, and in that sense his 1946 work *Réflexions sur la question juive* was by its audacity and timeliness no doubt instrumental in turning French public discourse around, his handling of the Jewish question, in overtly subordinating it to the existentialist political program, somehow “detached” it from the Holocaust, about which not a word is said; not to mention that despite Sartre’s insistence on the demands of morality and the need for an existentialist ethics, his concrete attention to morality and ethics was residual at best.

But if Sartre can be scolded for his actions falling short of his words (but then Sartre is not exactly famous for his virtues of consistency), what to say about him whom Levinas once claimed ought to be recognized as the “only existentialist or philosopher of existence ... Heidegger himself, he who refuses the term”²⁴? Heidegger who found in the

21. Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 10.

22. Jean-Paul Sartre, “La République du Silence,” *Les Lettres françaises*, 9 (20), 1944. Republished in *Situations, III. Lendemain de Guerre* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), 11. See *infra* section 2.4.

23. Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 140.

24. “Et alors peut-être, il nous faudra reconnaître qu’il n’y a qu’un seul existentialiste ou philosophe de l’existence — et ce seul existentialiste, ce n’est ni Kierkegaard, ni Nietzsche, ni Socrate, ni même — malgré

consequences of an abusive technology no essential difference between the “mechanized food industry” and “the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps”²⁵ where the murder of hundreds of thousands was perhaps therefore not “authentic” enough to merit the verb “dying,”²⁶ answered with silence to what he once referred to (in what is easily his strongest condemnation of the Nazi regime) as “the bloody terror of the Nazis.”²⁷ Unlike Sartre, however, Heidegger may actually escape the charge of lack of consistency as he was, one could say, only living up to his dictum that “Man speaks by being silent.”²⁸ The fact is that the rigid silence of the German genius came as blow bitter to Levinas than indeed the knowledge of the former’s political loyalties in the early 1930s; it was, in fact, in light of Heidegger’s refusal to speak that Levinas reconsidered the connection between his Nazi sympathies and his chef d’oeuvre *Sein und Zeit* in which he wondered whether one could “be sure that evil never found an echo” and if the diabolical had not “infiltrate” it.²⁹ But controversies aside, silence has deeper roots in which both the great talent of Sartre and the genius of Heidegger are entangled. Which is why they are among the

tout le talent déployé – les successeurs de Heidegger. C’est Heidegger lui-même, celui qui récuse le terme.” Levinas, “Intervention dans *Petite Histoire de l’Existentialisme* de Jean Wahl,” in IH, 97.

25. The full statement which reads — “Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starvation of the countryside, the same as the production of the hydrogen bombs” — is part of Heidegger’s lecture “Das Gestell,” one of the so-called Bremen Lectures delivered by the philosopher in 1949; although it was later radically emended upon its publication in *Die Frage nach der Technik*, Levinas addresses its original wording in his 1987 text “Comme consentant à l’horrible” where he claims: “This stylistic turn of phrase, this analogy, this progression, are beyond commentary. [Cette figure de style, cette analogie, cette gradation se passent de commentaires.]” Levinas, “Comme un consentement à l’horrible,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, (22-28 January 1988), 48-49.

26. “Hundreds of thousands die *en masse*. Do they die? They perish. They are cut down. They become items of material available for the manufacture of corpses. Do they die? Hardly noticed, they are liquidated in extermination camps.” Excerpt from the lecture “Die Gefahr” (“The Danger”), also from the Bremen Lectures; remains unpublished.

27. Contained in Heidegger’s reply of 20 January 1948 to a letter from Herbert Marcuse dated 28 August 1947 in which the German American philosopher challenges Heidegger’s reticence about Nazism and his view of the “Jewish Question,” asking him for a public avowal of his change of views: “Many of us have long awaited a statement from you ... which would free you clearly and finally from such identification.” Available at <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/40spubs/47MarcuseHeidegger.htm>

28. Martin Heidegger, *Che cosa significa pensare?* Translated by U. M. Ugazio and G. Vattimo. (Milan: Sugarco, 1996). First published 1954 as *Was Heisst Denken?* by Max Niemeyer.

29. “On the issue of Heidegger’s participation in ‘Hitlerian thinking,’ I do not believe that any kind of historical research, archival data, or eyewitness accounts ... can equal the certainty that comes to us in the famous Testament in *Der Spiegel*, from his silence concerning the Final Solution, the Holocaust, the Shoah.” Levinas, 1989, p. 487.

targets of Levinas's conference "Parole et Silence," his second delivered at Wahl's *Collège Philosophique*, in February 1948, in which the philosophy of existence³⁰ is caught in a confrontation with the western philosophical tradition whose privileging of light and reason, Levinas claims, entails the subjugation of language to thought and power, and thus, the prevalence of silence over the word, the prevalence of the Same.

Delivered only a few months before the publication of "La réalité et son ombre," this lecture stands, I daresay, as Levinas's most relevant from the early postwar period, and as an instrumental piece to better understand the *Les Temps Modernes*' article; not only insofar as it entangles *Le Temps et l'Autre* and *De l'Existence à l'Existant* to which it is deeply connected, nor only insofar as it confronts the idealist subject, points the way beyond Husserl's "limitation of a certain register of intentionality," opposes Heidegger's *Dasein* as co-originality of being, contrasts with Merleau-Ponty's theory of perceptual experience and expression, and scolds Sartre's atheist and solipsist freedom, but because it does so through the devising of an unheard of "phenomenology of sound," which in many ways announces what, in *Totalité et Infini*, the philosopher will call *the epiphany of the face*, being thus, no doubt, decisive for the genesis of Levinas's "mature" thought. Having said that, I do not claim, nor do I dare, to cover exhaustively this very important, yet much neglected text, whose complexity and breadth go far beyond the scope of the present study; it seems to me, however, that its choice as starting point for this chapter and thus as a kind of introduction to "La réalité et son ombre" where the discussion of art truly takes place is, though admittedly unorthodox, warranted, among other things, by the fact that it provides us with a careful and contextualized account of the passage from the sovereignty of silence to the intersubjectivity of the word³¹ which is of special interest to us, since what I trust to be one of Levinas's major reticences toward art concerns, as said, its boundness for silence which the language of criticism is called out to disturb. But in order to adequately address this particular issue, it is perhaps wise to try and understand its rationale deployed precisely in "Parole et silence" which begins as follows:

30. As Levinas stresses in "De la description à l'existence," the philosophy of existence is but one aspect of Heideggerian philosophy that his metaphysical work brought to light — the transitivity of the verb *to be* [être] —, precisely that which exerted a dominant influence in the postwar philosophical scene, particularly in the French existentialism. Cf. "De la description à l'existence," in EDE, 91-107.

31. This in turn, as Danielle Cohen-Levinas rightly notes, means furthermore "the passage from an ontological problematic of phenomenology to an ethical problematic of phenomenology." Cohen-Levinas, "La phénoménologie et son double. Le son parle, la parole sonne," in *Levinas: au-delà du visible*, 90.

There is in contemporary philosophy and literature, an exaltation of silence. The secret, the mystery, the unfathomable depth of a world without words bewitching. Chatter, indiscretion, pretension – the word breaks this spell. One readily forgets that silence, the natural place of peace and “harmony of the spheres,” is also stagnant water, sleeping water where hatreds, underhanded designs, resignation, and cowardice rot. One forgets the painful and heavy silence; that which emanates from those “infinite spaces,” frightening for Pascal: one forgets the inhumanity of a silent world. [Il existe dans la philosophie et dans la littérature contemporaines, une exaltation du silence. Le secret, le mystère, l’insondable profondeur d’un monde sans paroles ensorcelant. Bavardage, indiscretion, prétention – la parole rompt ce charme. On oublie volontiers, que, lieu naturel de la paix et de “l’harmonie des sphères”, le silence est aussi l’eau stagnante, l’eau qui dort où croupissent les haines, les desseins sournois, la résignation et la lâcheté. On oublie le silence pénible et pesant ; celui qui émane de ces “espaces infinis”, effrayent pour Pascal: On oublie l’inhumanité d’un monde silencieux.]³²

Protesting against a romanticized and heroic view of silence in the contemporary *imaginaire* (Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are no doubt in Levinas’s mind),³³ the philosopher, far from indulging such affections for silence, casts upon it moral doubt, condemning its praise as a hard-hearted underplaying of sociality, of the direct social relation, in sum, of the real presence of the Other. As in *De l’Existence à l’Existant*, the philosopher evokes Pascal’s frightening “infinite spaces” to warn us of the vertigo and “inhumanity of a silent world” to which the evasion of language and the adherence to silence dangerously lead, and which he associates both with the “romanticism of the solitary genius which suffices himself in silence,” and with a “phenomenological” diffidence of language that in its aim to “return to the things themselves” questions language which often degenerates into prattle and error, losing sight of the object it was meant to name.

32. OC2, 69.

33. Sartre’s aforementioned article “La République du Silence” as well as his lecture “L’existentialisme est un humanisme” are, I would say, implicit in Levinas’s critique; as for Merleau-Ponty, one needs only recall his *Phénoménologie de la perception* in which he speaks of the “primordial silence beneath the noise of words,” the pre-linguistic (and pre-reflective) world that the philosopher posits as the origin of thought and expression, which philosophy is meant to perennially interrogate without breaking, and thereafter, what is “required is silence, for only the hero lives out his relation to men and the world.” Finally, and although there is no indication that Levinas was, at the time, familiar with the work of Max Picard, (though he would later acknowledge the important contribution of Picard’s meditations of the face for his own work), it is certainly relevant to remember that it dates from 1948 his famous *Die Welt des Schweigens (Le monde du silence)*, in which the Swiss philosopher extols the regenerative power of silence without which man cannot find happiness, love or faith; a text that Levinas will later evoke in his 1966 lecture about Picard, whose encounter (despite never having met him in person), he likens beautifully to a poetic experience: “To speak of Max Picard is, for me, almost to evoke an *apparition*, but *strangely real*. This is perhaps the very definition of a poetic experience. [Parler de Max Picard, c’est, pour moi, presque évoquer une *apparition*, mais *étrangement réelle*. C’est là peut-être la définition même d’une expérience poétique.]” Levinas, NP (“Max Picard et le visage”), 111.

Appositely titled “Misère et grandeur du langage,” the first section of Levinas’s lecture ends, interestingly, with the reference to the use of jargon in both modern science that “takes refuge in the algorithm,”³⁴ and in modern literature that creates new signs to “replace the historically compromised word,” both of which, then, seek to dodge the complexities and compromises of the living word, by imposing a semantics of their own, an absolute language, which is why the philosopher writes that, in literature, the expressive power of jargon lies in the fact that it “feeds on the void left by the dead languages of civilizations;” jargon, he adds, “bears witness to a perfect civilization.”³⁵ Either jargon or silence, anything is preferable to the social unease brought about by speech, to the appeal to others which “confesses the weakness of the thought that has recourse to it,” to a reason that “betrays its superb sufficiency,” that “abdicates its nobility and its sovereignty” and thus exposes itself to all kinds of criticism. This distrust of language, Levinas tells us, has to do with its relationship with light and thought, to which it owes servile obedience, in the service of absolute thematization. But such a conception of language is furthermore predicated on a preliminary and more profound thesis that, argues the philosopher, dominates western thought, namely, that “truth is a silent revelation of being to reason;” thus, he claims, “the essence of being is that it gives itself, that it lets itself be seized. The essence of Being is its *phosphorescence*.”³⁶ This word that so seldomly found its way under Levinas’s pen in his more mature writings is meant to characterize the coalition between light and reason whose demand for total visibility is met precisely by light, its “servant,” for the structure of reason is that of totality — the possibility of totalization — insofar as it encompasses everything within its universality and is, as such, interpreted as vision. Thus understood, the subject cannot but be defined through power, as does every human relation which is inevitably transformed into a relation of power; accomplishing its social existence in its internal agreement with itself, reason becomes a common, pre-established, and anonymous asset, reducing transcendence to the presence and lucidity of *evidence*:

34. OC2, 70. It would seem that Levinas is alluding to Husserl’s scientific rigor, or “scientificity,” as we confirm later when he states that the word is “reduced in Husserl to the category of an ideal Esperanto” (73), or still, that the algorithm is for Husserl “the very achievement of language.” (74).

35. OC2, 70. In this case, the underlying referent seems to be Heidegger and his “predilection for the etymology of Greek terms [which] depends for him on the antiquity and genius of a language that has been shaped by philosophy.” OC2, 74.

36. “L’essence de l’être, c’est qu’il se donne, qu’il se laisse saisir, L’essence de l’Être, c’est sa *phosphorescence*.” My emphasis. OC2, 76.

To understand is to be a peer. The idea understood becomes the property of the one who has understood it, so that the relationship between people becomes as if it were not. Silence is ultimately the element of reason: signs are enough. [Comprendre, c'est se poser en pair. L'idée comprise devient le propre de celui qui l'a comprise, de sorte que la relation entre personnes devient comme si elle n'était pas. Le silence est en fin de compte l'élément de la raison: les signes suffisent.]³⁷

To this communism of intellection, in which rationality is dominated by evidence, Levinas opposes the sociality of teaching in which language ceases to be simply maieutic, to become the very admission of the distinction between you and I: language is transmission from reason to reason, what Levinas terms “tele-logy” [*télé-logie*];³⁸ a transitivity neither of action nor of influence (in which transitivity would inevitably result in the elimination of the duality of the terms) is thus the dialectical place of teaching, of speaking and hearing, that does not return into thought and interiority, and is thereby accomplished not in the element of light, but rather in that of *sound*. Hence, to the overriding projection of comprehension as a silent visual grasping and objectification, Levinas counterposes a teleology of teaching that he posits as the basis of every human relation since only the act of hearing fulfils the real presence of other as more than simple coexistence with the same or, on the other hand, without their duality turning into unity and still, without the mediation of a common content. Outside of power and intellection, this relationship that Levinas describes as being “without fusion in ecstasy, without absorption in knowledge – a relationship in which the duality of the two terms is maintained integrally,”³⁹ and which is thus antithetical to Husserl’s theory of the *Einfühlung*,⁴⁰ derives its asymmetry, its meaning, not from the projection of power and intellection, but from *expression* that has in sound, and not in light, its sensible prototype: “The relation to being, in its glory of being – is hearing.”⁴¹ It is at last this radical insight that brings Levinas to formulate a phenomenology of sound that is remarkable more than for

37. OC2, 82.

38. Levinas is quick to dispel the potential blunder to which this neologism lends itself, that is, of some kind of spiritual transmission from one reason to another: “The language is teleology as we speak of tele-pathie without, however, the term reason implying anything spiritual. [Le langage est télélogie comme on parle de tele-pathie sans que le terme de raison n’implique cependant rien de spiritité].” OC2, 83.

39. “Sans fusion avec lui dans une extase, sans son absorption par la connaissance – relation où la dualité de deux termes est intégralement maintenue.” OC2, 86.

40. See *infra* 108-109.

41. “La relation avec l’être, dans sa gloire d’être – c’est entendre.” OC2, 89.

its subsequent abandonment⁴² because it is interestingly struck by a paradox which uncovers the double nature of sound, a predicament that takes from the understanding of sensation as discussed in the preceding chapter.

In his aesthetic formulation of 1944, analyzed in section 1.5 above, Levinas claimed that in the aesthetic event of art, sensations appeared not as the qualities or matter of the object but in themselves, because detached from their objective signification, that is, from their referentiality to the object, whereby sensation, as object of aesthetics, did not constitute an abstract moment of the intentional perceptual act but was instead considered as such, in its pure materiality, as pure sensation; an understanding that, extending to all sensations alike was, already then, in 1944, suggested to be most “perceptible” in the musical sound, insofar as sound was claimed to be the most detached quality from the object. Now in “Parole et Silence,” and delving into this prerogative of sound, Levinas sets sound apart not only from all the other sensations, but somehow from sensation itself, that is, from phenomenality, to which however (that is, paradoxically), it also belongs. Put it another way, in accounting for sound, in 1948, Levinas characterizes it as being, simultaneously, a sensible quality and, as such, as being part of the world of light, the world of phenomenality, and something that, within it, seems to come from (and carry) beyond the phenomenal world — hence the dual nature of sound which being light, is “a point of light in which the world deflagrates, in which it is overflowed.”⁴³ So, while sound qua light, comes, like any light, from me, that is, it refers to the subject and is, thus, analogous to sight with which it shares its belongingness to the sphere of immanence, described in itself, qua sound — what Levinas terms, the *sonority of sound*, i.e., what in the sound *sounds* —, it comes from and leads beyond the phenomenal world and thus understood, sound is *burst – rupture – scandal*: “pure rupture that does not lead to something luminous but instead brings out the light,” insofar as in its sonority, sound overflows the form that should contain it, tearing apart the world of light, where forms suit their contents, or rather, where contents fit their forms which clarify them by giving them meaning, whereas sound, in its sonority does not fit its form, but precisely

42. Except for the brief analysis developed in “La transcendance des mots” (greatly indebted to “Parole et silence”), we do not find in Levinas’s published texts any further explicit study of sound. For a more rigorous and insightful analysis of Levinas’s phenomenology of sound, see Dan Arbib, “De la phénoménologie du son à la phénoménologie du visage,” in *Levinas au-delà du visible*, 101-124, and Danielle Cohen-Levinas “La phénoménologie et son double” in the same publication, 85-100.

43. “... un point de lumière où le monde éclate, ou il est débordé.” OC2, 90.

exceeds it, and this “overflowing of the sensible quality by itself, its inability to contain its content – is the very sonority of sound”⁴⁴: its vibration, its *resounding*, for “in its very being, sound is burst [*éclat*].”⁴⁵

Such an understanding brings us to the temporal dimension of sound or, rather, to the temporal process implied in, and engendered by sound which maintains with time a most particular (and irreducible) relationship which is what, primordially, sets it apart from other sensations and, as said above, from sensation as such; for it is not just that sound is not a quality of the thing of which it is the noise of, that is, a “pure and simple” quality that adheres to the thing, to the object it “names,” which is true, as we saw in the 1944 note, not only of sound, but of all sensations in the aesthetic event where their reference to the object, their objective meaning is lost, leaving sensations to their pure materiality, but sound *says the disturbance* of the thing (“You have to disturb the thing for it to make a sound. Sound doubles all the manifestations of the thing”),⁴⁶ owing to its eventfulness, to its temporalization — and in so doing, as I will attempt to explain, it interrupts itself, that is, transcends its (sonorous) materiality in which the sensible qualities are (still) in danger of lapsing into solipsism, that is, of returning to the sphere of the visible and of the Same where the essence of sound as rupture would be cancelled, where it would be but an echo of its own anonymous being: sound sounds, sound delves into itself, but in its sonority it looks forward, it leans into the future,⁴⁷ to something other than itself, as if it did not resist death — as if it was not afraid to die.

The prerogative of sound that Levinas’s 1948 phenomenological analysis makes all too clear, derives from its understanding as a modality of time, or again, of *sound as (being) essentially time*, hence once again its difference from color which, as noted earlier, is virtually the opposite of sound in terms of its attachment to the object — intimate in the case of color, but of an intimacy that, as we know, can be compromised in painting, and notably,

44. “Ce débordement de la qualité sensible par elle-même, son incapacité de tenir son contenu – c’est la sonorité même du son.” OC2, 90.

45. “Dans son être même, le son est éclat.” OC2, 90.

46. “Il faut déranger la chose pour qu’elle émette un son. Le son double toutes les manifestations de la chose.” OC2, 91

47. “The sonority of sound: three characteristics: 1) it leans into the future; 2) it delves into itself; 3) it is a burst. [La sonorité du son: trois caractéristiques: 1) il se penche sur l’avenir; 2) il s’approfondit en lui-même; 3) il est un éclat.]” OC1, 145.

in modern painting. To the brief observations made in the previous chapter regarding the distinction between these two sensations, sound and color⁴⁸ — where the former was said to be the prototype of an essential *renewal* which is not a mere reproduction (because color too “reproduces itself anew with each dawn,” but a remaking, of sorts, precisely a renewal, whereby each time it appears, it is not just “the light that returns” as in the case of color, but “its whole being that is remade” — “Parole et silence” now specifies it in terms of temporalization: because while both sound and color have a duration, this duration, in the case of color, is somehow *(im)passive*, in the sense that color is through time, or again, time passes on in color without neither one affecting the other really, unlike, precisely, sound which, Levinas writes, “rolls time itself, as if it were the displacement or the resounding of time itself, as if it were *time becoming visible*”⁴⁹ — sound materializes, or phenomenizes time, but in such a way (such an immediate way) that it is not congealed into an immobile image — sound is not the freezing of time but its *reverberation* in things, in names and beings; for in its original function, in its sonority which is also its temporalization, that says the disturbance of the thing, of its elusive being, doubling all of its manifestations, sound manifests what does not, but it does so without desecrating (that is, unveiling) its mystery, whereby “through sound, while remaining other, the absolute imposes itself.”⁵⁰ And this is why the philosopher names sound the *symbol par excellence*: “sound is symbol in the absolute sense of the term.” Not a sign, though qua sensation it does function as one, that is, as a reference to something absent, other than itself (the absent as absent) that the sign replaces, in its function of sound, i.e., as burst, sound functions independently from vision, insofar as it manifests not the absent, but what cannot by essence manifest itself, it establishes an “irreducible relationship” with what escapes the power of consciousness — the very mystery of being — which it *resounds*, and this resounding, this vibration or sonority of sound is the word [*parole*]; not a name, but a verb — *the* verb — that which names the relationship with existing — the resounding sound is verb: “to resonate is to impose on us what there is of verb in every noun.”⁵¹

48. See *supra* 62-63.

49. My emphasis. “Le son roule le temps lui-même, comme s’il était le déplacement ou le retentissement du temps lui-même, comme s’il était *le temps devenant visible*.” OC2, 91.

50. “Par le son tout en demeurant absolument autre, l’absolu s’impose.” OC2, 91.

51. “Résonner, c’est nous imposer ce qu’il y a de verbe dans tous les substantifs.” OC2, 91.

It is interesting and I very much doubt irrelevant the fact that Levinas draws on Pushkin's poem "The Prophet"⁵² to clarify his conception of sound, to voice this "mystery of being as other" which he claims to be announced by sound itself, for Pushkin's interior dialogue in which the poet is referred to as a prophetic figure (a first-person analogy that, as is widely known, very soon reflected on Pushkin himself, deemed by many, not least by Gogol and Dostoevsky, to be the very incarnation of the *poet-prophet*)⁵³ engenders, Levinas writes, "a transformation of sense leading to the prophetic knowledge," that passes through hearing, a hearing that gradually extends "to the perception of the very event of being, *as if the very being of things could be heard.*"⁵⁴ This attentiveness to sound, this harkening to, may be, the "elusive sounds" [*les sons insaisissables*] in which Levinas once wondered if he would not dissolve himself,⁵⁵ is a trait that the philosopher recognizes and greatly esteems in poetry, for the poem harkens to the things themselves, it resounds the very being of things, their elusive sound, not to reveal them, but to *set them to music*; poetic language holds to the sonority of sound which it articulates into a chanting of its own, its musicality, that signifies beyond any semantics or objective meanings, beyond any pre-established meaning, much like the sonority of sound. Poetic language would thus appear to be implicated in the transformation, in the passage from the sound to the word, this passage from reverberation to announcement: from the vibration of its anonymous echo, to the announcing of "a world in which the other can appear," a world, thus, other than that of light and the transparency light means and which it precisely ruptures; otherwise, as light, it "would be encompassed

52. Levinas quotes the following middle section of Pushkin's poem which, in light of the disparity of the available English translations, I opted to translate myself from Levinas's own translation to French in OC2, 90-91: "He touched my ears / And they were filled with noises and sounds / And I heard the heavens clashing / And the angels' flight and soaring sweep / And the sea snakes moving in the deep / And the growing branches in the valley. [Il a effleuré mes oreilles / Et elles se remplirent de bruits et de sons / Et j'ai entendu la contradiction des cieux / Et le vol des anges qui montaient / Et la marche des monstres sous-marins / Et la croissance de la branche dans la vallée.]" Pushkin, "The prophet" [*Prorok*], was composed in 1826, during the poet's exile at Mikhailovsky, and first published in 1828.

53. Cf. Pamela Davidson's various insightful studies on the matter of the prophetic image of Russian literature, and particularly her essay "The Moral Dimension of the Prophetic Ideal: Pushkin and His Readers," *Slavic Review*, 61:3 (2002), 490-518.

54. My emphasis. "Dans un poème intitulé 'Le Prophète,' Pouchkine, en décrivant la transformation du sens qui conduit à la connaissance prophétique, étend précisément graduellement l'ouïe jusqu'à la perception de l'événement même de l'être, comme si l'être même des choses pouvait être entendu." OC2, 90.

55. "La musique," OC3, 261.

by the one we are in.”⁵⁶ “Hesitation between sound and sense,” as Levinas will call it, after Valéry,⁵⁷ the poem furthermore bears an equivocality, precisely an hesitation, that is also characteristic of the sonority of sound. Thus, the paradoxical nature of sound, initially derived from its dual nature, extends also to its sonority which, claims the philosopher, is immediately “qualified, integrated into an ensemble, constituting a music,”⁵⁸ and sound’s essence of rupture and burst is cancelled owing to this qualification, this aestheticization, if you will, in which the sound is lost in quality that thus wins over sonority. But ought we deduce from these words a criticism or even a condemnation of music? If by music we mean harmony, continuity, or system of composition, then yes; but that is a reductiveness that surely could not be furthest from Levinas’s mind. More than to music or to musical creation, the philosopher’s words target, I believe, the objectivization of sound, precisely its qualification, that is, sound as quality *of* ... and, therefore, representation itself and the objectifying intentionality that is proper to it, which is why immediately after, Levinas refers to the mundane noises in which, he claims, quality prevails over sonority, that is, the essence of sound is annulled, insofar as “there is no alterity in things;”⁵⁹ the noises of the world are knowable, predictable, familiar — these are attached to their objects which they characterize and from which they derive their meaning, thus “sustaining” the continuity, that is, the intelligibility and transparency, and therefore also, the silence of the world of light.

But there are sounds that disrupt this continuity, that rupture this harmony of silence; the bell, for instance, in whose sound, however familiar to the prisoners in captivity,⁶⁰ Levinas discerns a sonority that is not synchronized as in the mundane noises, a textured diffusion of sound that fills space with time, that fractures, the philosopher claims, the “continuous world

56. “Ce n’est donc pas un défaut, mais un avantage du son, que de déborder sa forme et de ne pas nous donner un autre monde qui en tant que lumière serait englobé dans celui où nous sommes.” OC2, 90.

57. There are, to my knowledge, two occurrences of Valéry’s axiom in Levinas writings: the first is in the manuscript “La signification,” in OC2 (see *infra* 196, n. 398), and the second is in *Autrement qu’être*, 70.

58. “Mais le son [...] est aussitôt qualifié. La sonorité est qualifiée, intégrée dans un ensemble, constituant une musique.” OC2, 92-93.

59. “Mais c’est la qualité qui l’emporte dans les bruits du monde sur la sonorité – car il n’y a dans les choses aucune altérité.” OC2, 93.

60. “The bell was the instrument that, in captivity, beat the recall, the gathering of the prisoners.” Cohen-Levinas, “La phénoménologie et son double,” 92.

of light as *a call from the beyond*;⁶¹ producing sound in its (original) function of sound, sound as such, a “bursting forth” that characterizes the very immediacy of sound experience which is overpowered by itself,⁶² the bell “is not music, but it is not a simple signal. [It is] sound in its very sonority.” The bell, as Cohen-Levinas explains, is characterized by an “exemplary inharmonicity” owing to the fact that “it can produce several pitches that the ear perceives simultaneously,” that, she argues, “enter out of phase with the fundamental sound, causing an irreducible temporal gap” — a dephasing that cracks the unity of the fundamental sound, “into multiple units that are not linked together by any synthesis of understanding.”⁶³ It is thus that the bell brings forth the fundamental dimension of sound; freed from all rhetoric that would otherwise conceal it, the bell expresses this hidden dimension of appeal and summons; in its essence, sound is this manifestation of the yonder [*là-bas*]⁶⁴ and the beyond [*au-delà*]⁶⁵ in which being reverberates, and it is this reverberation that constitutes the primary function of the word.

The true sense of the word, the sense of language does not reside in the image or idea that being associated with it, it communicates, for it is not the common content that enables communication but, on the contrary, communication — the face-to-face of the relation — that enables a common content: it is “in the fact that an object can come to us from the outside – that is, can be taught to us,” wherein truly lies the meaning of the word and the very event of expression that, for Levinas, is the condition of the “spoken doctrine – *Ausdrücklich denken*,”⁶⁶ and which is precisely accomplished in the element of sound.⁶⁷

61. My emphasis. “La cloche est un instrument à produire du son dans les fonctions du son. Elle fait crever le monde continu de la lumière comme un appel de l’au-delà.” OC2, 93.

62. OC2, 152 (“Pouvoirs et Origine,” 1949).

63. Cohen-Levinas, “La phénoménologie et son double,” 92-93.

64. OC2, 93.

65. OC1, 152.

66. We can assume that Levinas’s intention to “take a stand regarding the way Heidegger discredits the term *Ausdruck*,” announced in the *Carnets de captivité* (OC1, 227), finds form in this understanding of expression as teaching.

67. “Sound is the accomplishment of communication. It is communication that gives rise to the cry – that introduces us to others – it is not thanks to the cry that communication is established. This place of the cry in relation to communication is precisely the voice. [Le son c’est l’accomplissement de la communication. C’est la communication qui fait pousser le cri – qui nous introduit dans autrui – ce n’est pas grâce au cri que la communication s’établit seulement. Cette place du cri par rapport à la communication c’est précisément la voix.]” OC1, 145-146

Here we are back again to the word as teaching [*enseignement*] which is given to a consciousness not reduced to intuitive intentionality, to visual understanding, that is given to a consciousness that is not only, nor primarily, vision, but essentially hearing which, as we are told in “La transcendance des mots,” “amounts to more than the experience of reality ... It wrenches experience out of its aesthetic self-sufficiency, the *here* where it peacefully lies”.⁶⁸

to see is to be in a world that is entirely *here* and self-sufficient. Any vision beyond what is given remains within what is given. The infinity of space, like the infinity of the signified referred to by the sign – is equally absent from the here below. Vision is a relation with a being such that the being attained through it precisely appears as the world. Sound; for its part, appeals to intuition and can be given. [Voir c’est être dans un monde qui est tout entier *ici*, et qui se suffit. Toute vision au-delà du donné demeure dans le donné. L’infini de l’espace, comme l’infini du signifié auquel renvoie le signe – n’en est pas moins ici-bas. La vision est une relation avec l’être, telle que l’être atteint par elle apparaît précisément comme monde. Le son, à son tour, s’offre à l’intuition, peut être donné.]⁶⁹

The first thing to know about vision is its correlation with the world; through sight, the world appears and is given to us and, in turn, what you see is what you get, or as Dan Arbib nicely puts it: “vision is the condition of possibility of the world and in return is seen what is of the world”⁷⁰: a pre-determined content, already framed and sealed-off in a form that perfectly suits (and soothes) it — a self-defined totality. In vision, one engages with the *appearance* of sense, be it through sensible or intellectual apprehension — to see is to know and to possess, to take hold of in a horizon which is the “field of my freedom, power and property”: “To see is always to see on the horizon” — hence the primacy and prestige of vision over all other sensations which, unlike vision, offer us no horizon and, thus, *surprise us upon their entrance*,⁷¹ like sound which, overflowing, as we saw, the sensible quality by itself, by which

68. “La présence de l’Autre est une présence qui enseigne; c’est pourquoi le mot comme enseignement est plus que l’expérience du réel ... Il arrache l’expérience à sa suffisance esthétique, à son *ici* où, en paix, elle repose.” Levinas, “La transcendance des mots. À propos des biffures,” in *Hors Sujet* (Montpellier : Fata Morgana, 1987), 202. First published 1949 in *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 44.

69. TM, 200-201.

70. Arbib, “De la phénoménologie du son,” 109.

71. OC2 (“Pouvoirs et origine”), 130.

the form is incapable of holding its content, is a surpassing of the given: it prolongs “a dimension inconvertible into vision.”⁷²

Levinas’s 1949 essay “La transcendance des mots. À propos des Biffures,” his second published in *Les Temps Modernes*, builds on the analysis carried out in “Parole et Silence” in tackling the divide between vision and sound, and their counterparts — synchronicity and diachrony (but also space and time) —, based on Michel Leiris literary method which built around the concepts of “*bifur*” and “*biffure*” is claimed to rehabilitate the notion of association of ideas as a “thought that lies beyond the classical categories of representation and identity.”⁷³ Commonly taken to pre-exist the movement of thinking, and to account for the multiplicity of meanings and the transitivity from one idea to another, the process of association of ideas is shown, through Leiris’s literary procedure to spring from the very internal dynamism of thought,⁷⁴ whose essence is unfolding of meaning, equivocality, symbol — “thought is essentially *biffure* – that is to say symbol,”⁷⁵ whereby “ideas can cling to one another to form a network of associations;” whether spontaneously or circumstantially, through resemblance in terms of sonority, or in their written form, the value of this association rests on the participation of meaning with one another, on the assurance of “the presence of an idea *in* the other,” and thus, on the influence exerted by the erasure whose obliterative character, at the moment when thought changes course, is itself meaningful and represents an overflowing of thought by itself. The objectivity and linear intentionality that characterize the cognoscitive model of thinking are thus constantly compromised by the bifurcations [*bifur*] to which thought is subjected to by “sensations, words, and memories [that] continually turn a train of thought from the path it seemed to be taking towards some unexpected direction,”⁷⁶ from which results the constant correction and alteration — the erasure [*biffure*] of the univocal sense of each element. But it is the

72. TM, 201.

73. “L’association des idées, saisie au niveau des biffures, devient donc une pensée par-delà les catégories classiques de la représentation et de l’identité.” TM, 199.

74. That is how Levinas can state: “The surrealist freedom is not opposed to the other mechanisms of the mind – it is their supreme principle. [La liberté surréaliste ne s’oppose pas aux autres mécanismes de l’esprit – elle est leur principe suprême.]” TM, 199.

75. “La pensée est originellement biffure – c’est-à-dire symbole.” TM, 198-199

76. “Bifurs – car les sensations, les mots, les souvenirs invitent la pensée à se séparer, à tout instant, de la direction qu’elle semble avoir prise et à cheminer par des sentiers inattendus.” TM, 198.

attentiveness to this possibility for thought to go beyond itself in thinking, the capture of the very moment when it changes into something other than itself, than the following up and the abiding to the unanticipated and rectified senses that arise, that mostly interests Leiris and, I would say, Levinas himself, whom despite his criticism of the naiveté and dreaminess of the surrealist movement, would seem to appreciate, at least, the *intention of transcendence*, the aim to free thought from its own objectifying power, and thus to reach a plane beyond the real that animates this movement to which Leiris initially belonged, but to which he soon renounced, to find the conscient roots of his dreams instead of yielding to the mystical whims of the Unconscious;⁷⁷ and insofar as he does not limit himself to some sort of philological description of words and the “latent birth” of his correspondences, but recounts them rather in their very genesis through their remains in images, from facts, situations and memories, whose “richness and apparently unexpected nature” derive from those associations, Leiris’s method, Levinas argues, “becomes the very content of the narrative which presents itself simultaneously as a work of art and as a reflection on the essence of this art,” which is after all, he goes on saying “very much the tradition in French poetry from Mallarmé to Blanchot: the emotion that constitutes the subject matter of the work is the very emotion that forms such matter.”⁷⁸ This “symbiosis between emotion-form and emotion-content,”⁷⁹ that Levinas acknowledges in Leiris’s literary procedure, much like he had, two years earlier, observed

77. “In Breton’s first manifesto we have on the one hand a naïve confidence placed in the secret and miraculous energy of the Unconscious [...] and on the other hand, a critique of the conscious mechanisms of thought, where he is not so much analyzing them as prospecting the dead end into which they lead. Michel Leiris, who at a certain point belonged to the surrealist group, also exalts, in his own way though, the power of dreams in his last book [*Biffures*]. But instead of availing himself of some mysterious power of the Unconscious, he finds causes for his dreams. Causes drawn from conscious life. [Il y avait dans le premier manifeste de breton, d’une part, une confiance naïve dans les énergies clandestines et miraculeuses de l’Inconscient [...] D’autre part, sa critique des mécanismes conscients de la pensée résultait moins de leur analyse que de la prospection des impasses où leur emploi conduit. Michel Leiris qui, à un certain moment, avait appartenu au groupe surréaliste, exalte également dans son dernier livre, à sa façon il est vrai, cette puissance du rêve. Seulement, au lieu de se prévaloir d’un je ne sais quelle puissance mystique de l’Inconscient, il trouve des causes à son rêve. Des causes tirées de la vie consciente.]” TM, 197.

Published by Gallimard in 1948, *Biffures* is the first volume of Leiris’s tetralogy *La Règle du Jeu* which includes *Fourbis* (1955), *Fibrilles* (1966) and *Frêle bruit* (1976).

78. “Elles [*correspondences*] sont relatées dans leur genèse. Michel Leiris est chimiste plutôt qu’alchimiste du verbe. À partir de la page 128, cette chimie s’étend aux faits, aux situations, aux souvenirs. Elle devient le contenu propre du récit, à la fois œuvre d’art et réflexion sur l’essence de cet art. Ce qui, en somme, se rattache bien à la tradition de la poésie française de Mallarmé à Blanchot où l’émotion qui constitue la matière de l’œuvre est l’émotion même de la formation de cette matière.” TM, 198.

79. Cristina Beckert, “O outro literário: A filosofia da literatura em Levinas,” *Philosophica*, 9 (1997), 134, n. 4.

in that of Proust,⁸⁰ is a doubling of emotion that arises from the essential non-coincidence, between the emotion described and the description of that emotion, that exposing, as such, a certain inaccessibility of the other, as other, reveals moreover, the self-reflectiveness that as we will see later, in “La réalité et son ombre,” Levinas will not fail to note and, indeed, to praise in modern art in which, by contrast with its classical counterpart, the artist or author is not satisfied with creating his narratives, his thesis or images, but provides, furthermore, his own interpretation to these, as part of the work itself;⁸¹ an invaluable and often overlooked insight that contravenes, or at the very least, softens the stricture of idolatrous sufficiency that the philosopher will not tire of reproaching in artworks, but which, precisely, the modern artist would appear not only to recognize but to expose in his work, which is also why Levinas speaks of “incompletion, rather than completion” as being, “paradoxically, the fundamental category of modern art.”⁸²

This understanding of the essential (though, as he claims, paradoxical) incompleteness of modern art is here derived from Charles Lapicque’s abstract compositions, where the destruction of perspective opens up a space that rather than containing objects, and thus giving us a direct access to those, is produced by the objects themselves, by their decomposition or bifurcation, by the shedding of the volume of their space and thus the shattering of their rigid contours, from which their lines emerge not as a skeleton or continuity, but as essentially *ambiguous*, providing therefore, not definition, but precisely a space where “the sensible matter is reduced to the infinite suggestions of one form from

80. “Joy, pain, and emotion are facts that, in Proust, are worth nothing in themselves. Within the intimate relation that it normally maintains with itself, the ego has already been split off from its own state, like a stick immersed in water which appears broken while remaining whole ... True emotion in Proust is always the emotion of emotion. [La joie, la douleur, l’émotion, chez Proust ne sont jamais des faits qui valent par eux-mêmes. Le moi s’est déjà séparé de son état, dans l’intimité même où il se mandent normalement avec lui, comme le bâton immergé se brise tout en restant entier ... La vraie émotion chez Proust est toujours l’émotion de l’émotion.]” AP, 120.

81. See *infra* 138-140.

82. “L’inachèvement, et non pas l’achèvement, serait, paradoxalement, la catégorie fondamentale de l’art moderne.” TM, 200. For Valéry, on the contrary, the incompleteness of modern art in its valuing of the sketch over the finished work, alongside its tendency to explore almost exclusively the sensory sensibility at the expense of our faculties of construction, underlies his critique of the modernist work in front of which, he writes, “one feels *volens nolens*, the impression of facility, of impotence, of manufacture without conditions – of approximation [*à-peu-près*].” Paul Valéry, *Cahiers II*. Edited by Judith Robinson (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 950. Hence his distinction between “Great Art,” whose value lies in its capacity to solicit “all the faculties of man” both in its production and in its reception, and “Modern Art” in which composition is replaced by arrangement and the artist, leaving visible the stages of its production, his preparatory work, imposes himself on the work, shifting the attention and “transferring” the value of the work to himself, to his figure of artist.

See *infra* 100-101 and 137-138.

another,” where an inexhaustible play of forms, of colors, of themes, and a plurality of meanings becomes possible: a variation of themes that is not musical, because without duration: it is simultaneous and spatial.⁸³ And it is precisely such a space that the ambiguity of Leiris’s “*jeu de biffures*” produces; in posing the multiple as simultaneous, it delineates a space rather than a temporal rhythm,⁸⁴ and it is this spatial dimension of the play of *biffures* that precludes a true break with identity, with the Same, and with the cognoscitive model of thinking, insofar as it represents the return of consciousness to its aesthetic essence whose symbolism is “explained by the very nature of visual experience to which the western civilization ultimately reduces all spiritual life;”⁸⁵ a dimension which “is concerned with ideas,” that “looks for clarity and evidence,” which “culminates in the unveiled, in the phenomenon” — a dimension to which everything is immanent.⁸⁶ Ultimately then, although Leiris’s *biffures* enlarge and deepen infinitely the visual field to which they relate and though they “magnificently exhaust every possibility of thinking thought in contact with the sensitive matter of words ... they still accept the primacy of thought over language;” however innovative Leiris’s literary method may be, the richness of language is ultimately measured by him “only in terms of its counterpart in thought content,”⁸⁷ whereby Leiris’s

83. “By breaking down perspective and the practical access it gives to objects, Lapicque creates a space that is above all an order of simultaneity. It is not the space that accommodates things, but things that through their erasures, delineate space. The space of each object in turn is divested of its volume, and from behind the rigid line there begins to emerge the line as ambiguity. Lines shed the function of providing a skeleton and become the infinite number of possible connections. [Détruisant la perspective en tant qu’ordre de marche et d’approche, en tant que plan d’accession pratique aux objets, Charles Lapicque crée un espace qui est surtout un ordre de simultanéité ... Ce n’est pas l’espace qui loge les choses, mais les choses, par leurs biffures, dessinent l’espace. L’espace de chaque objet se dépouille à son tour de son volume. De derrière la ligne rigide se dégage la ligne comme ambiguïté. Les lignes se débarrassent de leur fonction de squelettes pour devenir l’infini des rapprochements possibles.]” TM, 199-200.

84. “The originality of the notion of *biffure* lies in positing the multiple as simultaneous, the state of consciousness as irreducibly ambiguous... The ambiguity of the *biffures* forms a space. [L’originalité de la notion de biffure revient à poser le multiple comme simultané, l’état de conscience comme irréductiblement ambigu... L’ambiguïté des biffures forme plutôt un espace.]” TM, 199. Which is why the overflow of thought in Leiris’s *biffures*, although reminiscent of Bergsonian duration, is not to be confused with the latter, where the overflow of thought implies the denial of identity as a process of evolution.

85. “Le symbolisme particulier que comporte l’essence esthétique de la réalité ne s’explique-t-il pas par le caractère propre de l’expérience visuelle à laquelle la civilisation occidentale réduit en fin de compte toute vie spirituelle ?]” TM, 200.

86. “Elle a affaire aux idées, elle est lumière, elle recherche la clarté et l’évidence. Elle aboutit au dévoilé, au phénomène. Tout lui est immanent.” TM, 200.

87. “Nous pensons que les biffures de Michel Leiris épuisent – magnifiquement – toutes les possibilités de l’approfondissement de la pensée pensante au contact même de la matière sensible des mots. Mais elles

word-biffures remain, much as Lapicque's plastic images, circumscribed to the limits and possibilities of thinking, of visuality, of immanence, of the Same. Once again, the primacy of visuality is made manifest; and it is precisely on this privilege of visual experience over all others (and namely, over that of sound) on which, Levinas claims, rests the universality of art: "By creating beauty out of nature, art calms and quietens it. *All arts, even those based on sound, create silence.*"⁸⁸ Which is to say, as Levinas will often do: all art is plastic, for all arts rely on *images*.

Here we are, at last, at the threshold of the question that sparked this whole discussion, that of art and its intimate relation to silence — "silence perhaps of a bad conscience, or heavy, or frightening" — silence of the "self-complete world of vision and art" that only the living word, the proffered word, that which comes not from the me, but from the Other, that which, destined to be heard, is not the manifestation of a thought by an image nor a sign, can come to interrupt, for it is only in the verb that the transcendent function of sound imposes itself;⁸⁹ it is only the word that is not my echo that can rupture the self-sufficient world of vision, that can, thus, "wrench experience out of its aesthetic sufficiency, to its *here* where it peacefully lies." Correlative to vision, art makes silence, for in it a form is wedded to a content that perfectly suits and appeases it — *an image* — a plastic, complete and beautiful form that hides no mystery for reduced to itself, but rather covers over the indifferent matter, the "formless matter [that] precedes the forms of the artist."⁹⁰ The guardian of silence, beauty seizes the spectator in a contemplative silent experience that the words of appreciations of others can only come to spoil, for they are always *less* than the ineffable "said" by the artist who, placed at the heart of his own spectacle, speaks "in enigmas, by allusions, by suggestion, in equivocations;" an obscure saying that one cannot enlighten without revealing its vanity, that entrances me, plunges me, keeps me in a form of dream whereby the world is placed solely in relation to oneself — a beautiful and perfect "dream" in which the other

s'accordent encore avec le primat de la pensée par rapport au langage énoncé dans le classique 'ce qui se conçoit bien...' Les richesses apportées par le langage ne se mesurent en fin de compte pour Michel Leiris que par leur contrepartie en contenu pensée." TM, 203.

88. "Sur ce primat de la vision repose aussi l'universalité de l'art. Il fait de la beauté dans la nature, il la calme, il l'apaise. Tous les arts, même les sonores, font du silence." TM, 201.

89. "Sa fonction de transcendance ne s'impose que dans le son verbal." TM, 201.

90. TI, 295. This expression brings ominously to mind the pernicious words of Michael, the hero of J. Goebbels's 1931 *Kampf um Berlin*: "The mass is for us only a formless material. It is only by the hand of the artist that from the mass is born a people and from the people a nation."

is uncalled-for: beauty, perfection par excellence, suffices to itself, making me forget the other — reduced to an echo, the verb (*la parole vivante*) gives way to silence: “Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace – such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful.”⁹¹ But is the peace of the beautiful enough? Is to silently contemplate a work of art the only, and ultimate aim of the aesthetic experience of art? It is not.

Not content with being absorbed in aesthetic enjoyment, the public feels an irresistible need to speak. The fact that there might be something for the public to say, when the artist refuses to say about artwork anything in addition to the work itself, the fact that one cannot contemplate in silence, justifies the critic. He can be defined as the one that still has something to say when everything has been said, that can say about the work something else than that work. [Non content de s’absorber dans la jouissance esthétique, le public éprouve un besoin irrésistible de parler. Qu’il y a à dire quelque chose du côté du public, quand l’artiste se refuse à dire de l’œuvre autre chose que cette œuvre même – qu’on ne puisse contempler en silence – justifie le critique. On peut le définir: l’homme qui a encore à dire quelque chose quand tout à été dit; qui peut dire de l’œuvre autre chose que cette œuvre.]⁹²

The fact that one cannot remain silent, the fact that over and above the peace of beauty, there is something to be said about the work other than its very repetition, that one feels an irresistible need to speak when faced with the work of art, means that the peace of silent contemplation is simply not enough. That is why “La transcendance des mots” ends with the invocation of criticism which is at bottom, nothing more, or nothing less, than an appeal to language: criticism, Levinas claims, “brings the image, in which art indulges, back to fully real being. The language of criticism takes us out of dreams – of which artistic language is an integral part;”⁹³ the very same appeal with which Levinas both opens and closes his 1948 essay “La réalité et son ombre,” whose guiding hypothesis is, as we will see in detail shortly, the contrasting of art to both language and knowledge, of image to concept, that would not only warrant the necessary intervention of criticism but mark its very rehabilitation: “If art were originally neither language nor knowledge – if therefore it were situated outside of

91. “Ne parlez pas, ne réfléchissez pas, admirez en silence et en paix – tels sont les conseils de la sagesse satisfaite devant le beau.” RO, 125.

92. RO, 108.

93. “la critique ... ramène l’image où l’art se complaît, à l’être pleinement réel. Le langage de la critique nous fait sortir des rêves - dont le langage artistique fait intégralement partie.” TM, 202.

‘being-in-the-world,’ co-extensive with truth – criticism would be rehabilitated.’⁹⁴ Because what would be the point of criticism if the work said it all? What use would it be, what value would it have if there was really nothing else to be said about the work of art other than its own repetition,⁹⁵ other than its faithful interpretation or, still, of its conceptual translation? None. Faced with the superior expression of art, criticism would be “suspect and pointless,”⁹⁶ and the critic “lead a parasitical existence,” which is why Levinas’s so-called “rehabilitation” of criticism entails that art be stripped of its power of expression, of speech (of intelligible speech anyway)⁹⁷ and why also Levinas’s first essay in *Les Temps Modernes*, “La réalité et son ombre,” opens with the denunciation of what the philosopher dubs a false dogma of contemporary aesthetics, namely the apparently unassailable belief for his counterparts that art is not only language, but language of the ineffable and, not only knowledge, but an absolute one:

It is generally, dogmatically, admitted that the function of art is expression, and that artistic expression rests on cognition. The artist says: even the painter, even the musician. He says the ineffable. The artwork prolongs, and goes beyond, common perception. What common perception trivializes and misses, the artwork, coinciding with metaphysical intuition, seizes in its irreducible essence. There where common language abdicates, the poem or the painting speak. Thus, more real than reality, the work attests to the dignity of the artistic imagination which sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute. [On admet généralement comme un dogme que la fonction de l’Art consiste à exprimer et que l’expression artistique repose sur une connaissance. L’artiste dit : même le peintre, même le musicien. Il dit l’ineffable. L’œuvre prolonge et dépasse la perception vulgaire. Ce que celle-ci banalise et manque, celle-là, coïncidant avec l’intuition métaphysique, le saisit

94. “Si l’art n’était originellement ni langage, ni connaissance – si, par là, il se situait en dehors de l’ ‘être-monde’, coextensif à la vérité – la critique se trouverait réhabilitée.” RO, 108.

95. Which constitutes, for Levinas, as noted earlier, the very essence of the artist, by opposition to which he defines, precisely, the critic. See *supra* 70, n. 149.

96. “La critique comme fonction distincte de la vie littéraire et professionnelle, se manifestant comme livre, peut certes paraître suspecte et sans raison d’être.” RO, 108.

97. Already on second page of “La réalité et son ombre” we come across what may be seen as a paradox in Levinas’s rejection of art as language: “Is not to interpret Mallarmé to betray him? Is not to interpret him faithfully to suppress him? To say clearly what *he says* obscurely, is to reveal the vanity of his *obscure speech*. [Interpréter Mallarmé, n’est-ce pas le trahir? L’interpréter fidèlement, n’est-ce pas le supprimer? Dire clairement ce qu’il dit obscurément, c’est révéler la vanité de son parler obscur.]” My emphasis. RO, 108. “What he says obscurely,” “obscure speech”? But then Levinas acknowledges to art the capacity for speech, for language, after all? As obscure as it may be, the introduction of the term “speech” here is something of a surprise, much like, a few pages later, we cannot but be taken aback when we read what seems to be a formal contradiction of the negation of art as knowledge: “in the statue, matter *knows* the death of the idol. [Dans la statue, la matière *connaît* la mort de l’idole.]” My emphasis. RO, 124.

As it will, hopefully, become clear throughout my analysis of this essay, Levinas’s rejection of a knowledge and a saying proper to the work of art is not without ambiguity and difficulty.

dans son essence irréductible. Là où le langage commun abdique, le poème ou le tableau parle. Ainsi l'œuvre, plus réelle que la réalité, atteste la dignité de l'imagination artistique qui s'érige en savoir absolu.]⁹⁸

Now, this belief of knowledge through art that, a bit further ahead, the philosopher hints may be owed to “the tendency to apprehend the aesthetic phenomenon in literature where the word provides the material for the artist,”⁹⁹ brings us to dogma number 2. In a clear allusion to Sartre's *Qu'est-ce la littérature?*,¹⁰⁰ Levinas calls into question the, at the time, fashionable formula of ‘committed art’:

Art-language, art-knowledge, then brings on the problem of committed art, which is a problem of committed literature. The completion, the indelible seal of artistic production by which the artwork remains essentially disengaged, is underestimated; that supreme moment when the last brush stroke is done, when there is not another word to add to or to strike from the text, by virtue of which every artwork is classical. Such completion is different from the simple interruption which limits language and the works of nature and industry. [L'art-parole, l'art-connaissance, amène dès lors ce problème de l'art engagé, qui se confond avec celui d'une littérature engagé. On sous-estime l'achèvement, sceau indélébile de la production artistique, par lequel l'œuvre demeure essentiellement déagée; l'instant suprême où le dernier coup de pinceau est donnée, où il n'y a plus un mot à ajouter, ni un mot à retrancher au texte et par lequel toute œuvre est classique. Achèvement distinct de l'interruption pure et simple que limite le langage, les œuvres de la nature, de l'industrie.]¹⁰¹

But how to understand this completeness of art when in “La transcendance des mots,” as we saw only a moment ago, Levinas professes the essential incompleteness of modern art? Is the philosopher not contradicting himself? Though it may appear so, the completeness to which Levinas is referring to here applies to modern art as much as it does to any work of art (and perhaps also, as he himself wonders, to all human works),¹⁰² for it has to do not with the

98. RO, 107.

99. RO, 108.

100. *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?* was originally published in six installments in *Les Temps Modernes*, 17-22 (February-July 1947), and subsequently in *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948); in 1964, it was published separately by Gallimard.

101. RO, 108-109.

102. Though Levinas claims that the completeness of art is distinct from that of nature and industry, he immediately wonders if “if we should not recognize an element of art in the work of craftsmen, in all human work, commercial and diplomatic, in the measure that, in addition to its perfect adaptation to its ends, it bears witness to an accord with some destiny extrinsic to the course of things, which situates it outside the world,

particular “expression” of the work, but with what makes it art in the first place, that by which it is complete in itself, despite the will of its creator, that by which it is autonomous from the world in which it nonetheless exists and that by which “it does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue.”¹⁰³ And this *suis generis* formal completion that does not correspond to a simple interruption of its production due to any social or material causes, but results rather from the very impossibility of adding anything else to the work, bears witness to an agreement of the work with some “destiny extrinsic to the course of things” by which it is situated outside of the world “like the forever bygone past of ruins, like the elusive strangeness of the exotic,” by which every work of art is essentially *disengaged*, or else it would not belong to art.¹⁰⁴ “*La maître-mot*” of this text, as Nancy called it,¹⁰⁵ the term “disengagement,” of which we will speak at great length later on through a confrontation with Sartre,¹⁰⁶ could lead us to the belief that by affirming the essential disengagement of art, Levinas would endorse something like “the academic aesthetics of art for art’s sake.” Well, not only does he not endorse such formula, but he reproaches it for being both false and immoral:

The formula is false inasmuch as it situates art *above* reality and recognizes no master for it, and it is immoral inasmuch as it liberates the artist from his duties as a man and assures him of a pretentious and facile nobility. [Fausse formule, dans la mesure où elle situe l’art *au-dessus* de la réalité et ne lui reconnaît pas de maître; immorale dans la mesure où elle libère l’artiste de ses devoirs d’homme et lui assure une prétentieuse et facile noblesse.]¹⁰⁷

If the immorality of this early 19th century creed, with its distinct savor of aestheticism, has to do, no doubt, with the irresponsibility, haughtiness, and may be, frivolity, that it would

like the forever bygone past of ruins, like the elusive strangeness of the exotic. [on puisse se demander si on ne doit pas reconnaître un élément d’art à l’œuvre artisanale elle-même, à toute œuvre humaine, commerciale et diplomatique dans la mesure où, en plus de sa parfaite adaptation à son but, elle porte le témoignage de son accord avec un je ne sais quoi destin extrinsèque au cours des choses, et qui la place en dehors du monde, comme le passé à jamais révolu des ruines, comme l’insaisissable étrangeté de l’exotique.]” RO, 109.

103. “L’œuvre s’achève *malgré* les causes d’interruption – sociales ou matérielles. Elle ne se donne pas pour un commencement du dialogue.” RO, 109

104. “L’œuvre ne relèverait pas de l’art, si elle n’avait cette structure formelle d’achèvement, si par là du moins, elle n’était pas dégagée.” RO, 109.

105. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Exégèse de l’art,” in *Le Souci de l’Art chez Levinas*, 267.

106. See *infra* section 2.4.

107. RO, 109.

appear to bring about and to stand for, its falsity is, on the other hand, connected with something far more interesting, that penetrates deeper into the originality of the theorization of art put forward by Levinas in “La réalité et son ombre.” For in refusing to place art above reality, Levinas does not simply refuse it a place in relation to reality and the world, but places it precisely beneath it, beneath dialectics and the life of ideas: “Is to disengage oneself always to go *beyond* ...? Can we not speak of a disengagement on the hither side – of an interruption of time by a movement toward the hither side of time, in its ‘interstices’?”¹⁰⁸

From the “problem” of art as language, of knowledge through art, to the dichotomy engagement/disengagement, and the obscurity that arises from the later, it becomes clear from early on in Levinas’s 1948 article, that the philosopher’s approach to art heads in an entirely different direction from that of his contemporaries; something that becomes all the more striking the minute he closes the opening part of his essay with a deliberate and overt inversion of the “contemporary” notions of creation and revelation: “Art does not belong to the order of the revelation. Nor, moreover, to that of creation whose movement continues in the exact opposite direction.”¹⁰⁹ But though it may feel that it is from the deconstruction of these dogmas that Levinas’s own theory starts to take shape, this text, as David Gritz does well to remind us, “is not a pamphlet of circumstance against the aestheticizing attitude of some of his contemporaries ... it proposes an authentic thought of art.”¹¹⁰ Placing art outside of “being in the world,” and claiming that it “does not give itself for the beginning of a dialogue,” Levinas sets out to describe the peculiar event of art that he terms “commerce with the obscure;” an obscure commerce that he relates, in clear opposition to the co-originary of being and truth that underlined Sein und Zeit, to “a *non-truth* of being,”¹¹¹ which he argues is not opposed to truth as a residue of understanding, but bearing no hermeneutic function, constitutes an independent ontological event that is irreducible to knowledge and intentionality. It is this authentic thought of art whose principles “La réalité et son ombre” sets out like no other of Levinas’s texts that I intend to delve into over the

108. “Se dégager du monde, est-ce toujours aller *au-delà* ...? Ne peut-on pas parler d’un dégageant *en deçà*? D’une interruption du temps par un mouvement allant en deçà du temps, dans ses ‘interstices’?” RO, 109.

109. “L’art n’appartient pas à l’ordre de la révélation. Ni, d’ailleurs, à celui de la création dont le mouvement se poursuit dans un sens exactement inverse.” RO, 110.

110. Gritz, *Levinas face au Beau*, 56.

111. RO, 110.

course of this chapter which began, not randomly, with silence and with the assertion that art, *all art* is, for Levinas, bound for silence; but why? And how? Well, it all begins with the image, and Levinas implies that much right on the second page of his essay when he writes: “Perhaps the tendency to apprehend the aesthetic phenomenon in literature, where speech provides the material for the artist, explains the contemporary dogma of knowledge through art. *We are not always attentive to the transformation that speech undergoes in literature.*”¹¹² Which is to say, the word in or through the literary work becomes an image, an image not unlike that of the painter, an image, a silent image that is here the beginning of art, of all art, whose most elementary procedure is to substitute the object for its image — “*Image et non point concept.*”¹¹³

2.2 The inter-esse-ing image

Contrary to the traditional phenomenological discussion on the subject, Levinas’s account of the image is carried, in his immediate postwar writings, almost entirely within the framework of art, as evidenced by his assertion at one point in “La réalité et son ombre,” that “it is from the phenomenology of the picture that we must understand the image and not vice versa.”¹¹⁴ Thus understood, the image stands for Levinas not as a category of the imaginary of which the work of art would be an exemplary form, but somehow *as the very inner structure of the work of art*. That being said, the relationship between art and image in Levinas’s theory is problematic, to say the least, insofar as the philosopher seems to reduce, or assimilate art, regardless of its medium, to the image; although, as we will see later, this assimilation is somewhat lessened when, introducing the issue of the temporality of art, Levinas resorts to the figure of the “statue,” the equivocality nonetheless remains between the terms “art” and “image.” The philosopher’s gesture that is no doubt related to the

112. My emphasis. “Peut-être la tendance à saisir le phénomène esthétique dans la littérature – là où la parole fournit la matière à l’artiste – explique-t-elle le dogme contemporain de la connaissance par l’art. On n’a pas toujours égard à la transformation même que la parole subit en littérature.” RO, 108.

113. My emphasis. RO, 110.

114. “C’est à partir de la phénoménologie du tableau qu’il faut comprendre l’image et non pas inversement.” RO, 116. This idea, as we shall see in the course of this analysis, goes far beyond the fact that Levinas approaches the image in the context of art; to understand the image from the picture means, for the philosopher, to describe it as a degradation of being, as a caricature of the real.

aforementioned “most elementary procedure of art” — to replace the object with its image — should not, however, ultimately I believe, be understood as the affirmation of a total coincidence with, or reduction of art to the image and vice-versa but rather, as what many years from now, Levinas will claim of the image that it is “one of the commencements of art”¹¹⁵ (which allows us to assume that it is not the only one); the image which will, by then, have lost the almost exclusive “prerogative” over art, to become a broader concept.

After this brief but warranted methodological intermission, let us return to the image proper and to its understanding as the inner structure of the work of art which we find first in the 1947 work, *De l'Existence à l'Existant*, and then in the 1948 article “La réalité et son ombre.”

In both texts Levinas defines as the proper and elementary function of art, the aforementioned substitution of the object for its image; the same assertion gives rise, however, to two different analyses that being neither contradictory, nor mutually exclusive, but somehow complementary, have significantly different consequences: in 1947, Levinas’s approach is turned toward the effects of this procedure of art (and thus, necessarily, of the image) which he describes under the term “exoticism” [*exotisme*], while in 1948, and building on the previous analysis, it is the very nature of the image that is in question, and namely the movement that engenders it which the philosopher will name “resemblance” [*ressemblance*]. In staying faithful to the chronological intention of this study, I propose that we start with the first analysis, with *exoticism*, the term that titles the first section of the fourth chapter of the 1947 work, “Existence sans monde,” that follows a lengthy discussion on the “world” and its essential event — intention and light — which is worth recalling, however briefly, since it is from this world that, according to the philosopher, the work of art, through the interposition of the image, *tears off* the objects it depicts.

Reproaching the “regrettable confusion in contemporary philosophy,” namely the neglect of that which escapes the luminosity of consciousness, negatively called the unconscious for wrongly placed in and approached from the world of light, and thus interpreted as “another consciousness,” Levinas’s criticism is explicitly directed at his two German masters: Husserl and Heidegger. Regarding Husserl, Levinas points to the limitations at work in his

115. “Penser le réel dans son image ... c’est l’un des commencements de l’art.” DO 10.

understanding of “intention”¹¹⁶ which despite adequately describing the relation of being to things in the world is (wrongly) taken in a neutralized and disembodied sense that fails to comprehend the positivity and “good willingness” of desire, and to think beyond the circle of ipseity as the far end of intentionality. Hence Levinas’s claim that intention derives its being in itself and signification from a movement that must therefore “be described. The given is not ourselves.”¹¹⁷ This movement, this possession at a distance is perceived by the philosopher as a suspension, an *epochè* within the very circle of ipseity — the contraction of the I; this suspension that “consists in not committing oneself with the objects,” that instead of entering into being, consists in detaching from it, is what precisely “defines the I, its power to withdraw infinitely” — an *interval in existing*. Which brings us also to Levinas’s discord with Heidegger; after hailing his distinction of the “notion of world from the notion of a sum of objects” as one of the most profound discoveries of his philosophy, Levinas censures Heidegger for having subordinated objects to an ontological finality and, by doing so, failed “to recognize the secular nature of being in the world and the sincerity of intentions.”¹¹⁸ Rejecting Heidegger’s falling mode of existence or *inauthenticity* as the default condition of everyday life, Levinas affirms instead the harmony and balance of the world whose positive ontological function is, he claims, precisely this “possibility of extracting oneself from the anonymous being.”¹¹⁹

It is therefore the effort to acknowledge what his predecessors did not — the *en-deçà*, the hither side of being-in the-world, the “anonymous existence,” the *il y a* — that compels

116. And consequently, to Husserl’s “defective” practice of the *epochè*, which is why Levinas writes: “It is one thing to ask what the place of the world in the ontological adventure is, and another to look for this adventure within the world itself... It is not by being in the world that we can say what the world is. [Autre chose est de se demander quelle est la place du monde dans l’aventure ontologique, autre chose de chercher cette aventure à l’intérieur du monde lui-même... Ce n’est pas dans le monde que nous pouvons dire le monde.]” DEE, 64.

117. DEE, 72.

118. DEE, 65.

119. DEE, 69. As Levinas writes further ahead: “To be in the world is this hesitation, this interval in existing ... our existence in the world, with its desires and everyday agitation, is then not an immense fraud, a fall into inauthenticity, an evasion of our deepest I destiny. It is but the amplification of that resistance against anonymous and fateful being by which existence becomes consciousness, that is, a relationship an existent maintains with existence, through the light, which fills up, and maintains, the interval. [Être dans le monde, c’est cette hésitation, cet intervalle dans l’exister ... Notre existence dans le monde avec ses désirs et son agitation quotidienne, n’est donc pas une immense supercherie, une chute dans l’inauthentique, une évasion de notre destinée profonde. Elle n’est que l’amplification de cette résistance à l’être anonyme et fatal par laquelle l’existence dévient conscience, c’est-à-dire relation d’un existant avec l’existence à travers la lumière qui, à la fois, comble et maintient l’intervalle.]” DEE, 79-80.

Levinas to describe the situation in which “the freedom with respect to being ... comes up against the absence of the world, the elemental.”¹²⁰ And it is, thus, with the striking claim — “In our relationship with the world we are able to withdraw from the world” — that in “Existence sans monde” we are introduced to the concept of *exoticism*:

Things refer to an inwardness as parts of the given world, objects of knowledge or objects of use, caught up in the current of practice where their alterity is hardly noticeable. Art makes them stand out from the world and thus extracts them from this belongingness to a subject. The elementary function of art, which we can discover in its primitive manifestations, is to furnish an image of an object in place of the object itself... This way of interposing an image of the things between us and the thing has the effect of extracting the thing from the perspective of the world. [Les choses se réfèrent à un intérieur en tant que parties du monde donné, objets de connaissance ou objets usuels, pris dans l’engrenage de la pratique où leur altérité ressort à peine. L’art les fait sortir du monde, les arrache, par là, à cette appartenance à un sujet. La fonction élémentaire de l’art qu’on retrouve dans ses manifestations primitives consiste à fournir une image de l’objet à la place de l’objet lui-même... Cette manière d’interposer entre nous et la chose une image de la chose a pour effet d’arracher la chose à la perspective du monde.]¹²¹

This extraction of things from the perspective of the world, that is, from the totality of involvements or referential structure of the world (what Heidegger calls *Bewandtnisganzheit*) which implies the stripping away of their interiority by which we can know them, *possess them*, is achieved through the aforementioned basic procedure of art, viz., the substitution of an object with its image. What would appear to be an innocuous operation has in fact the radical consequence of “turning” the object into a *non-object*. In replacing a presence (the object) with another presence (the image) which re-presents an absence (the object), art extracts the object from the world, thus imparting it with an otherness, by which it can no longer be possessed as any other, real, object, insofar as it no longer carries, like the worldly objects in the sphere of the being-in-the-world, a form that assures its grasping by our utilitarian and conceptual intentions:

A situation depicted or an event recounted must first of all reproduce the real situation or event: but the fact that we relate to them indirectly through the intermediary of the image and the story, modifies them in an essential way... The “objects” are outside, but this outside does not relate to an “interior”; they are not already naturally “possessed.” A painting, a statue, a book are objects of *our* world, but through them the things represented are extracted from our world. [Une situation peinte, un événement raconté doit d’abord

120. “la liberté à l’égard de l’être ... se heurte à l’absence du monde, à l’élémentaire.” DEE, 80.

121. “Nous pouvons dans notre relation avec le monde nous arracher au monde.” DEE, 83.

reproduire la situation et fait réel: mais le fait que nous nous rapportons indirectement à eux, par l'entremise du tableau et du récit, leur apporte une modification essentielle... Les "objets" sont dehors, sans que ce dehors se réfère à un "intérieur", sans qu'ils soient déjà naturellement "possédés". Le tableau, la statue, le livre sont les objets de *notre* monde, mais à travers eux, les choses représentées s'arrachent à notre monde.]¹²²

Hence the term *exoticism*, taken in its etymological sense, i.e., "from the outside": represented, imagined, the objects are literally extracted, put outside which is not to say, in the manner of an idealistic aesthetics, that the work of art is placed outside the world, as indeed, Levinas notes in the very sentence of the above quote, but through the artwork, the objects depicted are torn off from the world, essentially modified. A modification that Levinas acknowledges even in the most realistic works and mediums (such as photography and cinema), by which we can only indirectly relate to the objects that, stripped of their worldly forms, appear instead in themselves, in the pure exteriority of the "non-transmutation of the exteriority in interiority that forms accomplish." But despite claiming that "what is called the disinterestedness of art does not only refer to the neutralization of the possibilities of action" but to an essential modification of contemplation engendered by exoticism, Levinas only announces this modification, without actually expanding on it; not without reason, since this would require a broader ontological perspective than the one put forward in the 1947 work, a perspective that opens up through the concept of *resemblance* without which Levinas cannot truly distance himself from the traditional phenomenology of the image and with it, subvert Husserl's neutrality modification of perception,¹²³ as he will do in 1948, with the "disincarnation of reality," but also through the notion of *passivity* that will essentially characterize the image in 1948.

Of this, Levinas's comment on Eugen Fink's analysis of the perception of a painted tree in "Vergegenwärtigung und Bild"¹²⁴ is telling: "The intention is indeed directed to the tree itself through the perception of the painted tree, and it is true that we thus enter the world of the painting which is different from the real world;" in other words, Levinas does not dispute the basic premise of the theory of the "transparency of the image," i.e., what the painting depicts differs from the perceived world because it neutralizes it, whereby the aesthetic

122. DEE, 84.

123. See *infra* 118 and ss.

124. Eugen Fink, "Vergegenwärtigung und Bild. Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Unwirklichkeit," *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 11 (1930), 239-309.

function consists in this putting in suspense of the perceived world. Having said that, the philosopher does not, therefore, simply condone Fink's analysis; far from it. Rather, the object of his discord with Husserl's assistant (and, inevitably, with Husserl himself) lies in their "faulty" characterization of the world of painting as something "unreal, neutralized, suspended, and not as deeply stamped with exoticism, and thus extracted from its reference to an 'inside' – that is, as having lost its very character of being a world."¹²⁵ Still, the function of sensation in terms of modification of contemplation is already taken literally by Levinas: neither an unreal, suspended world nor, on the other hand, an object "of a higher power," the aesthetic sensation produces instead things *in themselves*, in the nakedness of their being, in their *elementality*; and it is, in fact, says Levinas, the very "limitation at work in a painting due to the material necessity of making something limited," in its extracting and setting aside a piece, a fragment, of the universe from the horizon of light, uncovering what the visible universe conceals, and thus in presenting it in "its exotic nakedness, as a worldless reality, arising from a shattered world," that constitutes the *positive* function of the aesthetic — a reckoning aimed not only at Husserl and Fink, but also at Bergson whom, at the beginning of the chapter, Levinas reproaches for viewing the image as "something less than the object, rather than seeing in it the more of what is aesthetic."¹²⁶

Yet, the exoticism of the artistic reality that escapes the polarity subject-object seems to be dissimulated, contradicted by the enveloping of an interiority — the inner life or soul of the objects that their material covering expresses ("a landscape is, as we say, a state of mind"), beyond which, there is also the "world of the artist" that the work of art, as a whole, expresses ("There is a world of Delacroix and a world of Victor Hugo. Artistic reality is a

125. DEE, 87-88.

126. "ce que Bergson appelle une vue prise sur l'objet, une abstraction, et qu'il estime être moins que l'objet au lieu de voir en lui le plus de l'esthétique." DEE, 83-84.

This insight is provided by Bergson in "Introduction à la Métaphysique" where the philosopher discusses the two ways that, according to metaphysics, we have of knowing an object: *absolute* and *relative*. In the first case, the knowledge of the object is absolute, insofar as the experience of it depends neither on a point or view, nor relies on any symbol since we grasp the object "from within, as it is in itself." In the second case, the one to which Levinas is referring, our experience of the object is relative because we only have a point of view of the object, or its translation made with certain symbols — either way, what we have is a representation of the object and not the object itself, whereby we are unable to know the object *absolutely* (from within the object, intuitively), but only *relatively* (from outside the object, analytically); hence, no matter how realistic and faithful the representation, it will always be, in Bergson's words, "imperfect in relation to the object about which the view was taken or which the symbols attempt to express." Henri Bergson, "Introduction à la métaphysique," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 11:1 (1903), 3.

soul's mean of expression")¹²⁷ — whereby this exotic fragment of reality that is the work of art is “restored” to our world; losing its strangeness, its novelty, it is made accessible to us, turns into “a familiar everyday thing.” But how? By *sympathy*, argues Levinas: “Through sympathy for this soul of things or of the artist the exoticism of the work is integrated into our world. That will be so inasmuch as the alterity of the other remains an *alter ego*, accessible through sympathy.”¹²⁸

The nod to Husserl does not go unnoticed; if you recall, in in the 1940 “L’Œuvre d’Edmund Husserl,” Levinas had pointed out the inherent ethical limitation in Husserl’s construction of intersubjectivity as *alter-ego*, which proceeding from the solipsism of the monad, establishes a relationship on the basis of a common essence and an identification of oneself and the other — empathy [*Einfühlung*] as a *sympathy* —, reducing the other to the sphere of ownness, where his transcendence is lost.¹²⁹ But, as J. Taminioux points out, and rightly so: “it is not a question for Levinas of denying the permanent resumption of the raw fact of the ‘*il y a*’ by the worldliness; it is above all a question of contesting that this resumption is the positive aesthetic function of the work.”¹³⁰ Thus, Levinas’s allusion to the theory of *Einfühlung* to account for the integration of the exoticism of art into our world is anything but meaningless; indeed, it inspires a radical insight that Levinas will expound in “La réalité et son ombre,” namely, that the movement of transcendence is not only (or not

127. “Il existe un monde de Delacroix comme il existe un monde de Victor Hugo. La réalité artistique est le moyen d’expression d’une âme.” DEE, 89

128. “Par la sympathie avec cette âme des choses ou de l’artiste, l’exotisme de l’œuvre est intégré dans notre monde. Et il en est ainsi tant que l’altérité d’autrui demeure un *alter ego*, accessible à la sympathie.” DEE, 89.

129. “In the fifth chapter of the work Husserl devotes to Descartes’s *Meditations* ... Husserl shows how intersubjectivity is constituted starting from the monad’s solipsism. This solipsism does not deny the existence of others, but it does describe an existence that in principle can be considered as if it were alone. [Dans la cinquième section de l’ouvrage que Husserl leur consacre [*Les Méditations Cartésiennes*] ... Husserl montre comment se constitue l’intersubjectivité à partir du solipsisme de la monade. Solipsisme qui ne nie pas l’existence d’autrui, mais décrit une existence qui, en principe, peut se considérer comme si elle était seule.]” EDE, 47-48.

Interestingly, in “Notes philosophiques diverses” of his *Carnets de captivité*, Levinas returns to this theme, though in a more nuanced manner; subverting the Husserlian terms, he proposes thinking the theory of empathy otherwise: “Therefore the relationship with others does not have the abstract structure of coexistence – but is the fact of giving. The other is not for me – the alter ego – it is the poor. The end of the theory of *Einfühlung* as sympathy. Or rather sympathy – it is sympathy with the poor. [Dès lors la relation avec autrui n’a pas la structure abstraite de la coexistence – mais est le fait de donner. Autrui n’est pas pour moi – l’alter ego – c’est le pauvre. La fin de la théorie de l’*Einfühlung* comme d’une sympathie. Ou plutôt la sympathie – c’est la sympathie avec le pauvre.]” OC1, 387.

130. Jacques Taminioux, “Exotisme esthétique et ontologie,” *Cités*, 25(1): 2006, 97.

necessarily) towards the *au-delà*, but also towards the *en-deçà*; and even though one ought to distinguish between the two, the denial of the “il y a,” gets entangled with the denial of the alterity of other,¹³¹ which is why Levinas cannot avoid the question of art, and why he salutes modern art and its artists who, in their struggle against the beauty of forms, and vision, against the, so-called soul of objects, perspective, continuity and representation (and, I daresay, the “suspension of disbelief”), strive to preserve the exoticism of artistic reality, to preserve its center outside of us, their alterity — alterity which is precisely Levinas’s way of thinking otherwise than in terms of light. That being said, the positivity of this alterity *en-deçà*, thus revealed by art, is marred by an ambiguity that surfaces in “La réalité et son ombre” in which, expanding on the modification of contemplation engendered by the image, Levinas will seek to show that the image amounts not only to a *deconceptualization* of reality, but furthermore, to a *desubjectivation* of the subject.

Restating the “most elementary procedure of art” right at the opening of “L’imaginaire, le sensible, le musical,” Levinas equates aesthetic disinterestedness to a conceptual blindness, only to immediately call into question the very notion of *disinterestedness* insofar as, and I quote, “it excludes freedom that the notion of disinterestedness implies. Strictly speaking, it also excludes enslavement, which presupposes freedom.”¹³² The work of art is here (as in 1947) posited in terms of its unintelligibility though in more stringent manner; contrasting the image to scientific knowledge and truth, Levinas claims that the image does not generate a *conception*, the fundamental activity that characterizes our existence in the world, the way we relate to objects in the world, as it does not “involve Heidegger’s ‘letting be,’ *Sein-lassen*, in which objectivity is transmuted into power.”¹³³ Thus, rather than our

131. Taminiaux, *Exotisme*, 97-98.

Which reminds me of what Levinas once wrote about Jean Wahl: “The inter-changeability of the beyond and the below – of the *very high* and the *very low* – is a permanent temptation to which Wahl always yields and which belongs to the deepest part of his thought. [L’interchangeabilité de l’*au-delà* et de l’*en-deçà* – du *très haut* et du *très bas* – est une tentation permanente à laquelle Wahl cédera toujours et qui appartient au plus profonde de sa pensée.]” Levinas, “Jean Wahl: Sans avoir ni être,” in HS, 102.

132 “Mais le désintéressement de l’artiste mérite à peine ce nom. Il exclut précisément la liberté que la notion du désintéressement implique. A parler rigoureusement, il exclut aussi l’asservissement qui suppose liberté.” RO, 110-111.

133 “L’image n’engendre pas, comme la connaissance scientifique et la vérité, une *conception* – ne comporte pas le ‘laisser être’, le *Sein-lassen* de Heidegger où s’effectue la transmutation de l’objectivité en pouvoir.” RO, 111.

hold over the image, it is instead the image that takes hold over us: it imposes itself on us as a *rhythm*: “*The image is musical.*”¹³⁴

Much like in 1944 and 1947, the notion of rhythm is taken from its usual context, that is, music or sound arts, and raised to a “general aesthetic category” to characterize the very function(ing) of aesthetic sensation, that pure sensation freed from all conception (which is thus not an adjective as would be a sensation converted into a perception), that appears with the image.¹³⁵ But if in the earlier works the notion of rhythm (or musicality) was meant to describe the inner functioning of sensation which, in its detachment from objective signification, functioned “as the very fact of signifying,” with the (ontological) broadening of the 1948 analysis of sensibility, said notion is meant furthermore, and primordially, to account for the way the image affects us, as is indeed claimed by Levinas himself: “The idea of rhythm ... designates the way the poetic order affects us, more than an inner law of said order,”¹³⁶ by which “the whole of our world, with its elementary and intellectually elaborated givens, can touch us musically, can become an image.”¹³⁷ I cannot stress enough the significance of this passage in the characterization of the image in 1948, which carries profound implications for Levinas’s appraisal of art not only in “*La réalité et son ombre*,” but in the texts that follow it. Beyond the equivocation to which it is naturally prone to — i.e., deducing from this musicality of the image, and therefore of art, an implicit thought of music, something that could induce the consideration that Levinas confers some sort of prerogative to music regarding all other arts and would, thus, maybe, endorse a proposition along the lines of ‘music reveals the essence of art,’ a thought that as seductive as it may be (and it is!) would inevitably contradict the philosopher’s unequivocal separation of the concepts of rhythm and musical from the field of musicology — this musicality of the image, this rhythm that characterizes “the exceptional structure of aesthetic existence” leads Levinas

134. My emphasis. “L’image marque une emprise sur nous, plutôt que notre initiative... L’image est musicale.” RO, 111.

135. “What is today called being-in-the-world is an existence with concepts. Sensibility takes place as a distinct ontological event but is realized only by the imagination. [L’être-au-monde, comme on le dit aujourd’hui, est une existence avec concepts. La sensibilité se pose comme un événement ontologique distinct, mais ne s’accomplit que par l’imagination.]” RO, 113.

136. “L’idée de rythme ... indique la façon dont l’ordre poétique nous affecte plutôt qu’une loi interne de cet ordre.” RO, 111.

137. “L’ensemble de notre monde, avec ces données et élémentaires et intellectuellement élaborées, peut nous toucher musicalement, devenir image.” RO, 113.

to a notion (that will come to be one of the most prominent of his entire work) — that of *passivity*¹³⁸ — a fundamental passivity that characterizes our “relationship” with the image, the hold it has over us, and which having in the ear, and not in the eye, its “sensible organ,” leads to the dispossession of the self which is not a mere absence of the self: “rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it,”¹³⁹ and it is so “not even *in spite of himself*, for in rhythm there is no longer a *oneself* [*soi*], but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity.”¹⁴⁰

As in *De l'Existence à l'Existant*, Levinas evokes Lévy-Bruhl's notion of “[mystical] participation” to account for this dispossession of subjectivity caused by rhythm, the proper function of sensation, by which assent, power, is inverted into participation, that is, the taking part by the subject in his or her own representation, in which one cannot fail to recognize (as indeed, the philosopher himself did in 1947)¹⁴¹ the menacing, because anonymous, exposition of being to the *il y a*. In an essay devoted to the French anthropologist, dated 1957, Levinas will delve into this distinct (ontological) event of sensibility through the sensing [*le sentir*] which he claims:

138. Particularly in *Autrement qu'être* whose 1st chapter, “Essence et Désintéressement,” opens with a remarkable nested quotation about passivity: “There is something to be said, Novalis wrote, in favor of passivity. It is significant that one of Novalis's contemporaries, Maine de Biran, who wished to be the philosopher of activity, will remain essentially the philosopher of two passivities, the lower and the higher. But is the lower, lower than the higher? [Il y a quelque chose à dire, écrivait Novalis, en faveur de la passivité. Il est significatif qu'un contemporain de Novalis, Maine de Biran, qui a voulu être le philosophe de l'activité, restera essentiellement comme celui des deux passivités: l'inférieure et la supérieure. Mais l'inférieure est-elle inférieure à la supérieure?]” AE, 13.

See *infra* 244 and 248-49.

139. “Le rythme représente la situation unique où l'on ne puisse parler de consentement, d'assomption, d'initiative, de liberté – parce que le sujet en est saisi et emporté.” RO, 111.

140. “Pas même *malgré lui*, car dans le rythme il n'y a plus de *soi*, mais comme un passage de soi à l'anonymat.” RO, 111.

141. “Mystical participation is completely different from the Platonic participation in a genus; in it the identity of the terms is lost. They are divested of what constituted their very substantivity. The participation of one term in another does not consist in sharing an attribute; one term *is the other*. The *private* existence of each term, mastered by a subject that is, loses this private character and returns to an undifferentiated background; the existence of one submerges the other, and is thus no longer an existence of the one. We recognize here the *il y a*. [Dans la participation mystique, foncièrement distincte de la participation platonicienne à un genre, l'identité des termes se perd. Ils se dépouillent de ce qui constitue leur substantivité même. La participation d'un terme à l'autre n'est pas dans la communauté d'un attribut, un terme *est l'autre*. L'existence *privée* de chaque terme, maîtrisée par le sujet qui est, perd ce caractère privé, retourne à un fond indistinct; l'existence de l'un submerge l'autre et, par là même, n'est plus l'existence de l'un. Nous reconnaissons en elle l'*il y a*.]” DEE, 99.

is neither a lame *thinking* nor a shortcut – it works in another dimension. It is a way of undergoing a force... Sensing is not an empty form of knowledge, but a bewitchment, an exposure to the diffuse threat of sorcery, a presence in a climate, in the night of being that lurks and frightens, and not a presence *facing* things. [n'est pas un *penser* estropié ni un raccourci – il va dans une autre dimension. Il est une façon de subir une puissance... Le sentir n'est pas une forme vide de connaissance, mais un envoûtement, une exposition à la menace diffuse de la sorcellerie, présence dans un climat, dans la nuit de l'être qui guette et effraie, et non point présence *en face* de choses.]¹⁴²

Aesthetic existence brings forth this particular mode of being that cannot be described neither in terms of consciousness (for the I is powerless), nor of unconsciousness (because everything is *present*), but is likened instead to the experience of a “waking dream” [*rêve éveillé*], an automatism of sorts that leads Levinas to reprise and expound on his earlier wariness of the term “disinterestedness,” claiming that it would instead be more appropriate to talk about “interest” when it comes to the image: the image “is interesting, without the slightest sense of utility, interesting in the sense of ‘entraining’”¹⁴³ Not as uncommon in Levinas’s lexicon as one would think,¹⁴⁴ the term “magic” is deployed here to spell out the effect, or rather, the *affection* of the image on the subject who entrapped in an ecstatic posture to the present of a contemplation, becomes other than himself — a spectator, “among things as a thing,” since he is himself part of the spectacle: he is, Levinas writes, “*exterior to himself*.”¹⁴⁵ This exteriority other than that of a body, and outside of the sphere both of the conscious and the unconscious, that the philosopher names “exteriority of the inward” [*extériorité de l'intime*], and which he protests was never taken into account by phenomenological analysis, is where lies a pivotal antithesis between Levinas’s and Sartre’s theories of the imagination.

As with all things Sartrian, his theory of the imagination is a philosophy of freedom. After carrying a critical analysis of the theories of the mental image in *L'Imagination* (1936), Sartre publishes in 1940, *L'Imaginaire*, where, building on his earlier analysis, he advances a phenomenological description of the image, aimed at defining the “*irrealizing* function” of consciousness and the imaginary — its noematic correlate. In a nutshell, Sartre claims

142. Levinas, “Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine,” in EN, 62.

143. “Elle est intéressante, sans aucun esprit d’utilité, au sens d’entraînante.” RO, 112.

144. See *Levinas Concordance*, eds. Cristian Ciocan & Georges Hansel (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 445.

145. My emphasis. RO, 112.

that every image is the product of a free conscious activity, a spontaneous mental process by way of which an intentional relationship with the (absent or non-existent, yet always *irreal*) object is established: the “imaging consciousness gives itself to itself ... as a spontaneity that produces and preserves the object as imaged.” Ultimately, for Sartre, there cannot be an image without consciousness, and consciousness is always free, since being always consciousness of something, it “constitutes itself in the face of the real and surpasses it at each moment, because it cannot be other than ‘being-in-the-world.’” And because consciousness (which remains in the world) produces the *irreal* (which is outside the world), it follows then that the possibility of imagining derives from our “condition” of being transcendently free. That said, the freedom of consciousness is a *sine qua non* of any creation of the imaginary, from which derives the impossibility of the subject to be (as in Levinas) powerless, i.e., hostage of the imaginary spectacle; according to Sartre, it is, on the contrary, the image that is fettered to the desire and spontaneity of consciousness, which is one with the consciousness of that spontaneity. Arguing as the double condition for the conscience to be able to imagine, the ability “to posit the world in its synthetic totality”, and simultaneously, the ability “to posit the world as a nothingness [*néant*] in relation to the image,” Sartre argues (against Levinas) that

all creation of the imaginary would be totally impossible to a consciousness whose nature was precisely to be ‘in-the-midst-of-the-world’... This consciousness could therefore contain only real modifications provoked by real actions and all imagination would be prohibited to it, precisely to the extent to which it was bogged down [*enlisée*] in the real... We can affirm without fear that, if consciousness is a succession of determined psychical facts, it is totally impossible for it ever to produce anything other than the real. For consciousness to be able to imagine, it must be able to escape from the world by its very nature, it must be able to stand back from the world by its own efforts. In a word, *it must be free*.¹⁴⁶

After this hopefully clarifying little run-in with Sartre, allow me to return to our protagonist and to his analysis of the image on which it is now time, at long last, to introduce the second term of its characterization: *resemblance*. Not explicitly mentioned in *De l’Existence à l’Existant*, resemblance is, I feel, shyly implied in the following saying, which is platonically precise in accounting for the dichotomous mode of being of the image: “art both imitates

146. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Imaginaire. Psychologie phénoménologique de l’imagination* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940/1986), 353.

nature and diverges from it as far as possible”¹⁴⁷ — resemblance and exoticism. That being said, it is as noted before in “La réalité et son ombre” where this notion is explicitly brought to our attention, namely in the third section of the article, precisely titled “Ressemblance et image” which Levinas introduces as follows:

A represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object; the image as such enters into categories proper to it which we would like to bring out here. The disincarnation of reality by an image is not equivalent to a simple diminution in degree. It belongs to an ontological dimension that does not extend between us and a reality to be captured, a dimension where commerce with reality is a rhythm. [L’objet représenté, par le simple fait de devenir image, se convertit en non-objet; l’image, comme telle, entre dans les catégories que nous voudrions exposer ici. La désincarnation de la réalité par l’image n’équivaut pas à une simple diminution de degré. Elle ressort d’une dimension ontologique qui ne s’étend pas entre nous et une réalité à saisir mais là où le commerce avec la réalité est un rythme.]¹⁴⁸

Questioning, once again, the phenomenological consensus regarding the alleged transparency of the image that affirms, through the neutralization of the position of the perceived reality, the irreality of the imaginary and that, Levinas claims, emerged as a reaction to the theory of mental images, the philosopher suggests that the image is, on the contrary, an *opacity*, upon which contemplation stops, fixes itself. Instead of going through the image (as through a window) directly at the object, intention and thought stop at the image and thus, at the non-object it depicts; why? Because of resemblance. Unlike the sign that does not resemble that of which it is the sign of, and thus nohow counts only for itself, it is pure transparency or, as Sartre puts it, its matter is “completely indifferent to the object signified,”¹⁴⁹ the image resembles what it is the image of. Does that make the image “an inner tableau which the perception of an object would leave in us”? A platonic reality, independent of the original? Not for Levinas, but neither for Sartre; however, and despite an apparent affinity between their conceptions of resemblance (which stems mainly from Sartre’s lack of clarity in his analysis), its significance is, in Levinas, as we are about to see, far more profound.

147. DEE, 85.

148. RO, 114.

149. Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, 49. It should be noted that, for Sartre, image and sign, despite belonging to the same “family”, are not to be confused, residing the main difference between the two in the fact that the image, unlike the sign, gives us its object.

In *L'Imaginaire*, Sartre characterizes resemblance as a “tendency” of neutral (but expressive) nature that the painting as a whole possesses; now, this *expressive tendency* or *value* consists in the internal (though asymmetrical) relationship between the depiction and depicted, that elicits an *affective response* on the part of the spectator (or as Sartre puts it, “the person in the painting solicits me gently to take him for a man”), and it is this stimulus, this invitation, this expressive value of the physical elements of the portrait that without disappearing, enters into the imagined synthesis where it functions as the *analogon* by which the intention is directed at the person in flesh and blood. So, according to this summarized explanation, the expressive tendency, i.e., resemblance, would seem to somehow precede our assumption of the imaging attitude which (given the sparse explanation on Sartre’s part), would contradict the philosopher’s thesis, earlier discussed, on the unconditional necessity of a conscious act for the becoming of any imaging. Yet, it is precisely this apparent contradiction in Sartre’s theory, arising from the concept of “resemblance,” that somewhat justifies the present attempted parallel with Levinas, for whom resemblance would also appear to precede and, to some extent, be independent of consciousness. Levinas’s peculiar conception of resemblance proceeds from a subversion of its typical movement, for he understands resemblance “not as the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but as the very movement that engenders the image.” In a single turn of phrase, Levinas tells us the quintessential of resemblance: that the image is not an independent reality that resembles that of which it is the image, since resemblance precedes the image — it is because there is resemblance that there is imaging, and not the other way round whereby there is not, on one side, the original, and on the other, its copy: the original is itself dual, *the original resembles itself*. As such, resemblance also pre-exists consciousness, insofar as it arises neither by virtue of a conscious activity, of what the thought finds in the sensuous matter, nor from the mere recognition of a relationship between the image and the object. Not only is Levinas position on resemblance much clearer than that of Sartre, but more importantly, there is much more at stake in it for Levinas since his opposing of resemblance to the theory of transparency jeopardizes the alleged irreality of the imaginary, because this ontological movement of resemblance befalls *within reality itself*: resemblance is the relationship between what it is and its image, whereby “reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image.” The onus put by Levinas on resemblance is aimed at showing that the commerce with reality

through the image, “after” the disincarnation of reality, is not with a lesser being, but with what in being doubles it, because “being is not only itself, it escapes itself.”¹⁵⁰ Beyond what being is, in the “identity of its substance,” there are a number of traits that escape from under that identity — “gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin” — that cannot be contained in its definition, in its absolute being as I: “And so, the person bears on its face, alongside of its being with which it coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness. The picturesque is always to some extent a caricature.”¹⁵¹ This “picturesque” is thus not something *in addition* to the person, to the self of the ego, coming from the outside, but the other in oneself, the shadow of the real that realism fails to capture, whereby there is a duality within being — its temporal transcendence —, by which being is itself (its identity) and is also a stranger to itself (its image or caricature).

And the same holds true of every object, of every tool, definable in its function:

Here is a familiar everyday thing, perfectly adapted to the hand which is accustomed to it, but its qualities, color, form, and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the ‘old garments’ of a soul which had withdrawn from that thing, like a ‘still life.’ [Voici une chose familière, quotidienne, adaptée parfaitement à la main qui en a l’habitude – mais ses qualités, sa couleur, sa forme, sa position restent à la fois comme en arrière de son être, comme des ‘nippes’ d’un âme qui s’est retirée de cette chose, comme une ‘nature morte.’]¹⁵²

We can see how Levinas’s analysis of the work of art in *De l’Existence à l’Existant* is developed here not in a different sense, but at a *deeper level*; the possibility of “withdrawing from the world” therein announced, that supposes an “interval in existence,” produces this doubling in the thing, between what it is, and its image. Now, this duality that one could at first sight, as Taminiaux appositely notes, “be tempted to consider ... as a dichotomy, a clear-cut opposition between the identity of the thing and its image, and to apply to this duality a Platonic grid of reading,”¹⁵³ that is, between intelligibility (of identity) and appearance (of

150. “L’être n’est pas seulement lui-même; il s’échappe.” RO, 115.

151. “Et c’est ainsi que la personne porte sur sa face, à côté de son être avec lequel elle coïncide, sa propre caricature, son pittoresque. Le pittoresque est toujours légèrement caricature.” RO, 115.

152. RO, 115.

153. Jacques Taminiaux, “Art et destin. Le débat de Levinas avec la phénoménologie dans ‘La réalité et son ombre,’” in *Maillons Herméneutiques. Études de Poétique, de Phénoménologie et de Politique* (Paris : PUF, 2009), 257.

the image), is actually not so at all, as Levinas swiftly shows; first, he designates the terms of this duality as “moments ” (which by itself presupposes some kind of succession, of coexistence), between which there is indeed a relation, and this relation between the thing and its image is nothing more and nothing less than *resemblance*; in addition, he likens this duality to the fable,¹⁵⁴ because the fable, he claims, encapsulates all the yield and originality of the *allegory* which is by no means “a poor man’s symbol,” but is instead “like an ambiguous commerce with reality in which reality does not refer to itself but to its reflection, its shadow” that thus “represents what in the object itself doubles it up.”¹⁵⁵ But what is this “something” that “in a being [is] delayed behind being”? What is this “shadow” of which the philosopher speaks? Well, Levinas does not give a direct answer, for how could he? How does one bring up the shadow without turning it into light? How does one speak of the shadow without essentially effacing it? So, he seeks to show it, this diachrony, in the contemplation of the image, insofar as he claims: “in utilizing images, art not only reflects, but *accomplishes the allegory of being.*”

Levinas’s conception of the image and of its particular *affectivity* is, as earlier mentioned, essentially different from Husserl’s image-consciousness that he analyzes as an example of the *neutrality of modification of perception*. Posing, against Husserl and the phenomenological tradition, the essential *in-transparency* of the image, Levinas claims that “the consciousness of the absence of the object that characterizes an image is not equivalent to a simple neutralization of the thesis as Husserl would have it, but to an alteration of the very being of the object.” The time has now come to approach this divergence. Let us begin with Husserl’s theory of image-consciousness which I will do my best to abbreviate, sticking to its nuclear aspects.

154. “Those animals that portray men give the fable its particular color inasmuch as men are seen *as* these animals and not only *through* these animals; because the animals stop and fill up thought. [Ces animaux qui figurent des hommes donnent à la fable sa couleur propre parce qu’ils sont vus *comme* ces animaux et non pas *à travers* les animaux seulement; parce que les animaux arrêtent et remplissent la pensée.]” Levinas, 1994, 115-116; or as he writes in “La transcendance des mots”: “As animals in a fable are not just there to suggest morality but through their physical presence enrich the idea put forward, so a thought at the moment of its erasure still influences through its erased meaning. [Comme des animaux dans la fable ne sont pas là uniquement pour suggérer la moralité, mais, par leur présence sensible, enrichissent l’idée suggérée, la pensée à l’instant de sa biffure compte encore par son sens biffé.]” TM, 199.

The appeal to the “fable” is recurrent throughout Levinas’s work; from the *Carnets de Captivité* to *Entre Nous*, the philosopher refers to the fable as the intermediate order between succession and simultaneity, that announces the transcendence not as anticipation, or precedence, but as present.

155. RO, 116.

Image consciousness [*Bildbewusstsein*] is the term used by Husserl to describe our (intentional) experience of the image — the awareness of an image qua image — that, in his earlier writings, he believed to be necessarily depictive (though he later revised this aspect in accounting for theatrical representation), and also in distinguishing phantasy as a non-depictive type of apprehension. The act of image consciousness bears a three-dimensional structure, insofar as it is constituted by three “objects” and thus three levels of apprehension: 1) the physical image [*das physische Bild*]: the perceptive materiality; 2) the image object [*Bildobjekt*]: the appearing image; and 3) the image subject [*Bildsujet*]: the depicted subject in the image (or the object meant by the presentation). Depending upon both perception and physical reality, image consciousness reinterprets the apprehended sensuous content as something else, as an absent subject (an image) which requires an act of neutralization of the perception of the apprehended content that, though neutralized, remains physically present; thus, image consciousness must point beyond the image-object, to the image-subject which bears a resemblance to it.¹⁵⁶ Now this resemblance cannot be either too “perfect” (since we would be unable to distinguish between the “real subject” and the “depicted subject,” and thus, we would no longer be beholding an image, but would instead “have a normal perception and no consciousness of conflict, no image-object appearance”), nor too weak (in which case the apprehension of the image would fail); from which follows that, in order to apprehend the image-subject (through the image-object), this act involves the *consciousness of conflict* both between the image-object and the physical reality, and between the image-object and the image-subject: that is, one must be aware that the *actual present* and the represented (the image-subject) are not the same, that what one experiences is an *image* and not reality, from which arises the *consciousness of its inactuality*, i.e., the consciousness of the image as a present “nothing.” That said, let us turn to the concept of neutralization.

156. As Husserl claims in his 1904/05 lecture “Phantasie und Bildbewusstsein” (Hua XXIII/1): “The making intuitive in the image, which *in* the image-appearing possesses the consciousness of the image *subject*, is not an arbitrary characteristic that adheres to the image. Rather, the intuition of the image object awakens precisely a new consciousness, a presentation of a new object, which has an internal affinity with, a resemblance to, the image object as a whole and, as far as particular details are concerned, with respect to certain of its points... Yet this new presentation does not lie *next to* the presentation of the image object either; on the contrary, it coincides with it, permeates it, and in this permeation gives it the characteristic of the image object. The coinciding relates to the moments of resemblance. We look *into* the image object, we look at that *by means of which* it is an image object at these moments of resemblance. And the subject presents itself to us *in them*: through them we look into the subject.” Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, ed. Rudolf Bernet and trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 32-33. Orig. pub. as *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung: Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigungen* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980).

Developed for the most part in *Ideen I*, the notion of neutralization in Husserl is, as Y. Murakami's nicely phrases it, "a suspension of the position which implies a methodical indifference to the ontological status of reality,"¹⁵⁷ that does not, as such, involve a transformative operation or privation of any kind; it is instead, a modification that, as we read in §109,

does not cross out, [that] "accomplishes" [*leisten*] nothing; it is the counterpart in consciousness to all accomplishing ... It is implied every time one refrains from accomplishing something, putting-it-out-of-action, "bracketing"-it, "leaving-it-undecided," [*dahingestellt-sein-lassen*], and then ... "thinking-oneself-into"-the accomplished or "merely thinking" the accomplished, without 'adding to'-it [*mitzutun*].¹⁵⁸

In what is perhaps the most famous application of his theory, Husserl resorts, still in *Ideen I*, to Albrecht Dürer's master engraving *Knight, Death, and the Devil* [*Ritter, Tod und Teufel*] (1513), in an attempt to show that "the *neutrality modification of normal perception* is tantamount to the neutral consciousness of a pictorial object." So, based at first on the elementary perceptive act by which we distinguish the physical image (in this case, "the print of the copperplate engraving"), and then on the perceptual consciousness that enables the depiction, i.e. we focus on what is *presented*, the depicted reality, "the knight of flesh and blood, and so forth" (image subject), it then becomes properly aesthetic: we focus on what *presents itself as it presents itself* (image object), apprehending it as a "mere image" (a *fictum*), freed from the positions implied by the two acts on which it is based. We thus relate to it in a *purely aesthetical* manner in which the black figures, taken as objects of an aesthetic consideration, offer themselves "*neither as being, nor as not-being, nor in any other sort of modality of positing.*" The image is the neutralization of the depicted object (image subject), residing the difference between image object and image subject in their ontological status: while the image subject is posed in terms of being or not-being (we are conscious of it as being, "but being as though it were the case, in the neutrality modification of being"), the image object does not bear "the stamp of being or not-being,"¹⁵⁹ it is a *quasi-existence*, a

157. Yasuhiko Murakami, *Lévinas Phénoménologue* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 2002), 90.

158. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 247. (Orig. pub. in 1913). I am quoting (with a number of modifications), Daniel O. Dahlstrom's translation: *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett, 2014), 213.

159. Husserl, *Ideen*, 252 (orig.); 217 (trans.)

nonexistence. Then, unlike perception (that posits the appearance of something, the object itself “in person,” i.e., as actually existing), or memory (that re-presentifies what was previously perceived, again, as actually existing), image consciousness neutralizes any existential positing, whereby Husserl’s neutrality modification leaves the ontological status of reality suspended, but *intact*.

In light of this very brief account of Husserl’s theory, and of what was said earlier about Levinas’s theory of imagination, and the ontology of resemblance on which it rests, we can already see how the status and functioning of the image is, for the French philosopher fundamentally different from that of his German master, whose “indifferent” neutralization falls short of the “disincarnation of reality” that Levinas acknowledges to it, in which the very being of the object is not left intact but is itself modified. But what exactly does this modification consist of? And why does the philosopher claim that “to contemplate an image is to contemplate a picture”? “[That] it is from the phenomenology of pictures that we must understand the image and not vice versa”¹⁶⁰?

According to Levinas, the awareness of the absence of the object is not bound up with its unreality, but rather with its *death*. He claims that when we contemplate a picture, a painting, we are conscious of the absence of the depicted object precisely because the painting, the support of the represented object is not invisible to the gaze, it is not concealed, but on the contrary has “a density of its own,” *it retains our attention* — “it is itself an object of the gaze,” a reality of its own right — which is why he claims that it does not open onto the “world of the image” as Fink would have it and, in this sense, moves away from a typical phenomenology of art. Levinas’s use of the term “phenomenology of the picture” and the inversion he posits is meant precisely to oppose its alleged transparency, and the consequential irreality of the consciousness of the image since, in the picture, the perceived elements are not the object, but instead, “like its old garments,” the forms that the object leaves behind when it withdraws — “spots of color, chunks of marble or bronze” — that do not serve as symbols for something else, but “by their presence insist on its [the object] absence.” These undifferentiated elements that occupy the place of the object itself, as though the object had died, as though it “were degraded, were disincarnated in its own

160. “Contempler une image, c’est contempler un tableau. C’est à partir de la phénoménologie du tableau qu’il faut comprendre l’image et non pas inversement.” RO, 116.

reflection,”¹⁶¹ point then not to the world of the image, to the beyond of reality, but rather to the hither side [*en deçà*] of it to which the picture leads us; like a symbol in reverse, the image not only reflects, but brings about the allegory that the whole of reality bears on its face, its caricature, for the allegory “extends to the light itself, to thought, to the inner life.” Thus, to understand the image from the picture amounts to acknowledging the image and the resemblance that it entails as the caricature of the real. In art, Levinas writes:

Allegory is introduced into the world, as truth is accomplished in cognition. These are two contemporary possibilities of being. Alongside of the simultaneity of the idea and the soul ... there is the simultaneity of a being and its reflection. The absolute at the same time reveals itself to reason and lends itself to a sort of erosion, outside of all causality. Non-truth is not an obscure residue of being, but is its sensible character itself, by which there is resemblance and images in the world. [L’allégorie s’introduit dans le monde comme par la connaissance s’accomplit la vérité. Deux possibilités contemporaines de l’être. À côté de la simultanéité de l’idée et de l’âme ... il y a simultanéité de l’être et de son reflet. L’absolu, à la fois, se révèle à la raison et se prête à une espèce d’érosion, extérieure à toute causalité. La non-vérité n’est pas un résidu obscur de l’être, mais son caractère sensible même par lequel il y a dans le monde ressemblance et image.]¹⁶²

If truth and image are two contemporary possibilities of being, then one can say that reality *is* its shadow, just like being *is* its image and non-truth *is*. Levinas’s “unpredictable dialectic adventure,” as Françoise Armengaud calls it, makes clear once again that the essential (and general) doubling of reality by its image is a non-dualistic and non-hierarchical diachronic ambiguity; against the Platonic dualism of sensible and intelligible, and the Husserlian “demotion” of the sensible to hyletic data for perception, Levinas affirms resemblance as “the very structure of the sensible as such”:

The sensible is being insofar as it resembles itself, insofar as, outside of its triumphal work of being, it casts a shadow, emits that obscure and elusive essence, that phantom essence which cannot be identified with the essence revealed in truth... the neutralization of position in an image is precisely this resemblance. [Le sensible – c’est l’être dans la mesure où il se ressemble, où, en dehors de son œuvre triomphale d’être, il jette une ombre, dégage cette essence obscure et insaisissable, cette essence fantomatique que rien

161. “Ces éléments ne servent pas de symboles et, dans l’absence de l’objet, ils ne forcent pas sa présence, mais, par leur présence, insistent sur son absence. Ils occupent entièrement sa place pour marquer son éloignement, comme si l’objet représenté mourait, se dégradait, se désincarnait dans son propre reflet.” RO, 116.

162. RO, 117.

ne permet d'identifier avec l'essence révélé dans la vérité... la neutralisation de la position dans l'image est précisément cette ressemblance.]¹⁶³

Alongside of its revelation and its truth, the whole of reality carries its own allegory, drags a shadow, a permanent and unavoidable obscuring light (not darkness), that not only lags behind being, but in front of it, preceding it, in its own face. Alongside the simultaneity of the idea and revelation, art brings forth the simultaneity (or rather, the diachrony) of being and its reflection in which the absolute lends itself to a sort of erosion or degradation. But this degradation of the absolute, being visible in images, is not therefore to be found in it (as it is in Plato), but rather *in being itself* — in being “which is imaged, which lets itself be imaged, even which images itself, ineluctably, from the inside.”¹⁶⁴ The derealization of oneself pursued within being itself is then only made manifest by art which does not, as such, come from the outside, as an intruder, that is, does not come in addition to the perception and the understanding of the world; artistic creation is rather “the other side of this same receptivity” by which art is located at the “very heart of ontology or of the understanding of being. Artistic creation is part of perception, the access to being;”¹⁶⁵ which is why Levinas writes in “La réalité et son ombre”:

The poet and the painter who have discovered the “mystery” and “strangeness” of the world they inhabit every day are free to think that they have gone beyond the real. The mystery of being is not its myth. *The artist moves in a universe that precedes ... the world of creation*, a universe that the artist has already gone beyond by his thought and his everyday actions. [Libre au poète et au peintre qui a découvert le “mystère” et “l'étrangeté” du monde qu'il habite tous les jours de croire qu'il a dépassé le réel. Le mystère de l'être n'est pas son mythe. *L'artiste se meut dans un univers qui précède ... le monde de la création*, dans un univers que l'artiste a déjà dépassé par sa pensée et ses actes quotidiens.]¹⁶⁶

163. RO, 117-118.

164. Françoise Armengaud, “Faire ou ne pas faire images. Emmanuel Levinas et l'art de l'oblitération,” *Noesis* 3 (2000), par. 26.

165. OC2, 362 (“La signification”). As the philosopher writes about Proust: “The poet's theory – like everything he says – conceals an ambiguity, for it is not a matter of expressing but of creating the object. [La théorie du poète – comme tout ce qu'il dit – recèle une ambiguïté, car il ne s'agit pas d'exprimer mais de créer l'objet.]” AP, 118.

166. My emphasis. RO, 116-117.

The universe of the artist, of artistic creation, is an ambiguous universe: ambiguous insofar as strange, exotic, it is foreign to our world, but ambiguous also because it is situated on the outer edge of good and evil — it is *amoral*: “like a fantastic Sabbath, as soon as ethics are over.”¹⁶⁷ Both the aesthetic experience and the artistic creation pose the possibility of transcending the Heideggerian being as being-in-the-world, not toward an ideal beyond of being, but toward its hither side as the impossibility of not being, which is also the impossibility of death: the *il y a*. This downward movement, this “reversed” transcendence which corresponds to the return to the *il y a* and thus to a mythic time “before the Revelation, before the light comes”¹⁶⁸ — the *en-deçà* of being — is then, as said earlier, essentially ambiguous, for if on the one hand, it allows for the deliverance of the immanence of the Heideggerian Being, posing a transcendence other than knowledge and light, on the other, it is a transcendence that in marking the return to the *il y a*, turns away from ethics. This *en-deçà* of being which hitherto Levinas had identified as *il y a* takes on in 1948, instead, the name “*transdescendence*,” a term that the philosopher appropriates from Jean Wahl. In “Sur l’idée de transcendance,”¹⁶⁹ Wahl accounts for and distinguishes two (apparently opposed) movements of transcendence: *transascendence* and *transdescendence*, a distinction he will ultimately erase. If the first concerns a movement toward the beyond, and thus, the Good (though Wahl contests that it be necessarily so), the latter concerns the putting in contact with the “unknown God” in the depths of being; *transdescendence* designates the descent — neither degenerative, evil nor immoral —, to the depths of the self, and to nature. It is then,

167. “Comme un Sabbat fantastique, dès que l’éthique est finie.” AP, 119. Levinas’s rendering of “Sabbat” over its usual spelling, i.e., “Shabbat” is not coincidental. A perversion of sorts of the essential Institution in Jewish religious life (Shabbat), the term sabbat is used in a non-Jewish (Christian) context, in reference to practices of occultism, witchcraft or sorcery; a number of (artistic) works bear this reference, for instance, Leconte de Lisle’s poem “Effect de Lune”: “Tous les démons de l’Atlantique, / Cheveux épars et bras tordus, / Dansent un sabbat fantastique / Autour des marins éperdus,” or Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique: Épisode de la vie d’un artiste ... en cinq parties* whose 5th movement is titled “Songe d’une nuit du sabbat” [“Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath”].

In “Désacralisation et désensorcellent,” Levinas approaches this distinction, whose significance has to do with the very disentangling of the sacred from the Holy (which in turn, I daresay, “corresponds” to the two movements of transcendence, coined by Jean Wahl as “*transdescendence*” and “*transascendence*,” respectively); in his Talmudic commentary, Levinas writes: “That sorcery could be compared to the transgression of the Shabbat – contrary to those who delicately called the rendezvous of witches a sabbat! – is quite remarkable. [Que la sorcellerie puisse être comparée à la transgression du Shabbat – à l’opposé de ceux qui appelèrent délicatement sabbat les rendez-vous des sorcières! – est assez remarquable.]” Levinas, *Du Sacré au Saint. Cinq Nouvelles Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977), 105.

168. DEE, 99.

169. Originally published in 1937; republished in *Existence Humaine et Transcendance* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1944).

this other dimension of transcendence that Levinas adopts from Wahl though, as he himself stresses, in a “rigorously ontological sense,” that is, separated from the ethical significance that, he claims, it holds in Wahl, to account for the movement of becoming image, to account for the ontological event of art.

That being said, it is Levinas himself who admonishes: “To say that an image is a shadow of being would in turn be only a metaphor if we did not show where to find the hither side we are speaking of.”¹⁷⁰ Which is to say, it is now time to speak about... *time*.

2.3 Art’s (im)mortal coil

It is taking me a long time to write this chapter; it could be taking less (it certainly should), but that’s the thing about effort: it takes time. Effort has a duration, a duration that is made up of stops, of instants. Effort involves fatigue, alas, even lassitude! It entails a commitment, an irredeemable commitment that goes beyond the goal to be reached, that persists in spite of the fatigue, the pain and the suffering that arise from it; a compromise in which it is already involved. Effort bears within itself a condemnation that defies its very freedom. Through effort, one does not magically get the work done, but follows it, step by step; one is *involved* in it, and not at a distance, as if performing a magical act, because while magic is indifferent to duration, effort is not: “Effort it is the very accomplishment of the instant.”¹⁷¹

It is through, or rather *in* effort, where we can catch sight of the articulation of the instant. Why is this of interest to us? Why it is precisely as an “instant” how Levinas characterizes the puzzling life or temporal existence of the work of art; a peculiar instant, paradoxical, to be sure, but an instant, nonetheless. Which means that we must, at once, attend to this notion that the philosopher discusses thoroughly in *De l’Existence à l’Existant*, where it appears as doubly configured, as being endowed with an inner duality (much like the concept of subject), by which its analysis goes beyond the simple characterization of being in becoming.

First accounted for in Levinas’s analysis of effort and work in “La fatigue et l’instant” (Ch. 2: “La relation avec l’existence et l’instant”), the instant is then further considered in

170. “Dire que l’image est un ombre de l’être ne serait à son tour, qu’une métaphore, si on ne montrait pas où se situe l’en-deçà dont nous parlons.” RO, 118.

171. “l’effort est l’accomplissement même de l’instant.” DEE, 48.

its relation to the present and position in the fifth chapter of the 1947 work, titled “L’Hypostase,” where following a brief discussion of insomnia as one among other limit situations that express the paradoxical character of the experience of *il y a*, whose disruption entails not only the disappearance of all objects, but the very death of the subject, Levinas sets out to unravel the advent (and the event) of subjectivity that will thus enable the deliverance from the *il y a*. As we know, the solution offered at the time by the philosopher as the “escape route” from being was the *positing* of the existent, the contraction of existence by the existent — its *hypostasis*: “the passage from *being* to *something*, from the state of verb to the state of thing,” that is, the substantivization of the verbality of being:

Being which is posited, I thought, is ‘saved.’ [L’être qui se pose, pensais-je, est ‘sauvé’.]¹⁷²

And, precisely, this contraction of existence, this ontological event that is *position* (the necessary condition for any interiority) is none other than the “very event of the instant as a present” whose independence from any past and any future, from any heritage or continuity, and it alone, enables the original possession of being, its *mastery*:

Because the present refers only to itself, starts with itself, it refracts the future. Its evanescence, its swoon, is something that belongs to its very notion. If it lasted, it would make a legacy of itself... Its evanescence is the ransom paid for its subjectivity, that is, for the transmutation, within the pure event of being, of an event into a substantive – a hypostasis. Of itself time resists any hypostasis ... Time does not flow like a river. But the present brings about the exceptional situation where we can give to an instant a name and conceive it as a substantive. [Parce que le présent ne se réfère qu’à soi, part de soi, il est réfractaire à l’avenir. S’il durait, il se lèguerait... Son évanescence est la rançon de sa subjectivité, c’est-à-dire de la transmutation au sein du pur événement d’être, de l’événement en substantif, de l’hypostase. Le temps par lui-même se refuse à toute

172. EI, 42. One cannot help but notice the fact that Levinas exemplifies the advent of subjectivity by resorting (once again) to Rodin’s sculptures. Although not without precedent, since in the *Carnets de Captivité* the philosopher resorts several times to this very example (cf. pp. 52, 57, 58), it is nonetheless significant, to the extent that in 1948, as we shall see below, the statue (though not explicitly Rodin’s) will epitomize the immobile existence of the work of art as a semblant of the existence of being. As in his notebooks, where the philosopher affirms the idiosyncrasy and non-indifference of the pedestal in Rodin’s sculptures, which being both its support and its world, is what allows its position, its event of statue to be known internally, in its existential meaning, here he writes: “This is one of the strongest impressions we get in looking at Rodin’s sculpture. His beings are never set on a conventional or abstract pedestal. The event his statues realize is much more in their relationship with the base, in their position, than in their relationship with a soul, a knowing or thought, which they would have to express. [C’est une des plus fortes impressions qu’on retient de la sculpture de Rodin. Ses êtres ne se trouvent jamais sur un socle conventionnel ou abstrait. L’événement qu’accomplissent ses statues réside beaucoup plus dans leur relation avec la base, dans leur position, que dans leur relation avec un âme – savoir ou pensée, qu’ils auraient à exprimer.]” DEE, 124.

hypostase ... Le temps ne coule pas comme un fleuve. Mais le présent réalise la situation exceptionnelle où l'on peut donner à l'instant un nom, le penser comme substantif.]¹⁷³

It is clear from these words that Levinas does not conceive the instant along the lines of the modern philosophers whom he overtly criticizes for having based their understanding of the instant entirely on the dialectics (and the ontology) of time, thereby refusing the instant a dialectics and an ontological function of its own. In so doing, he claims, modern philosophy showed nothing but contempt for the instant, seeing in it “only the illusion of scientific time, divested of all dynamism, of all becoming” whereby “reality would be composed of the concrete élan of duration turned to, and ever biting into, the future.” Against this “degradation” of the instant, this reduction of its existence to a pure abstraction as a limit between two times and moving away from a strictly “physicist” understanding of this notion, Levinas conceives the instant as being endowed with an internal articulation, which differentiates it from a point without extension in space, that is, from a “a simple and inert element of time.” And it is this internal duality of the instant that Levinas claims enables the subjective existence to both contract (its existence) and detach from its anonymity: “of itself, the instant is a relationship, a conquest ... an instant qua beginning and birth is a *sui generis* relationship with and initiation into being.” The instant then, according to Levinas, harbors a paradoxical duality which characterizes the movement it performs — the diastasis of subjectivity; like a “rebound movement” (since “its point of departure is contained in its point of arrival”), the instant concludes its own beginning, that is, it traverses not an interval of time, but its own inner distance of “coming to itself without having started from nowhere,” by which being is taken hold of, by which also existence is both born and dies in the instant. As such, what is essential about the instant, what constitutes its presence (and its density, so to speak) is not some kind of duration separating and leading one instant to the other¹⁷⁴

173. DEE, 125.

174. The difference between an instant and an interval between instants brings inevitably to mind Bergson, for whom this difference designates the whole distinction between simultaneity and real time; hence the concept of “pure duration,” whose ideal modeling from the melody Levinas rebuts: “the instants of a melody are there only to die. A wrong note is a sound that refuses to die... unlike the case of real being, in music there can be no reproduction of it which would not be its very reality, reproduced with its rhythm and duration. Music is preeminently something played... To reproduce it is to play it again mentally.” (DEE, 46-47. A well-known, though understated, admirer of Bergson, whose *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* he once hailed as one of the finest books in the history of philosophy (EI, 28), most of Levinas’s allusions to the

(because an instant has no duration), but instead, its *stance* which is, paradoxically, its *evanescence* — the fact that it is fragile, that it vanishes, that it does not endure, that it poses no expectation, and thanks to which “being is never inherited but always won in the heat of struggle” — is the necessary condition for the engagement with being in its fullness, for the effectuation of a subject: whereby the instant, we might say, constitutes the proper place and dimension of the subject.

It is necessary to insist on the evanescence of the instant, that being its most essential trait — an instant is *essentially* an evanescence —, is what distinguishes an instant from eternity, it is that by which an instant is the very negation of eternity. Because, as said earlier, it is paradoxically in its evanescence where lies the density, that is, the autonomy of the instant, that by which it is an absolute though instantaneous *present*, that by which the present is, point of fact, present; so, while the instant is neither duration, nor any fraction, however small, of it, and precisely because of it, the event it harbors, the beginning of subjectivity, acquires a gravity and a weight that could not be justified neither by habit nor by tension towards the future in expectation; rather, it is its evanescent character that guarantees its solidity, its presence, the fact that it is an absolute point. Yet, this stop, this halt that is the very stance of the instant ought not, so Levinas tells us, be taken as “an expanse of immobilized time, whose duration a scientific psychology would be able to measure from behind;” because the instant is not a lump, a protuberance, a block of sorts by which it would be, like the eternal, “simple and foreign to events”: the fact that it is articulated, is what distinguishes the instant from the eternal which is beyond the sphere of activity and events, because in its upsurge, in its being bereft of heritage, the instant cuts on the duration in which we grasp being, it interrupts the time stream of the pure anonymous continuity of becoming,

author of *L'Évolution Créative* are however, mostly rebuttals or else dissents regarding some of his best-known conceptions, such as those of “disorder,” and of “*élan vital*” which Levinas criticizes in *Le Temps et l'Autre*: “Bergson’s notion of *élan vital* which conflates artistic creation and generation – what we call fecundity – in the same movement does not account for death, but most importantly is bound to an impersonalist pantheism since it does not sufficiently account for the crispation and the isolation of subjectivity.” (TA, 88-87). That said, and while it is true that, as Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron states, “the work [of Levinas] is *apparently* not influenced by the Bergsonian thought,” the Levinasian notions of “*dia-chronicity*” and, to some extent, of the “*immemorial*,” despite the obvious distances, would seem to draw if not directly from Bergson’s teachings, certainly from the audacity, or as Levinas prefers to call it (with a dose of bergsonian metaphysical humor), his reedition of “the divine gesture of Jupiter” when he dared to attack “the notion of uniform and inhuman time – Saturn devouring his children — [which] dominated the universe”: the scientific time. With Bergson, Levinas goes on to say, “*La philosophie ressuscitée.*” OC1, 2018. Cf. Vieillard-Baron, “Levinas et Bergson”, *Revue Philosophique*, 4 (2010), 455:478.

it suspends the obsessive buzzing of the anonymous *il y a*, posing the possibility of a genuinely new beginning. Having said that, can we conceive of an instant without its evanescence? — yes; according to Levinas, that is precisely what art brings about: *an instant devoid of evanescence*.

The paradoxical nature of the aesthetic instant lies in its perpetuity: it is “an instant that endures without a future. Its duration is not really an instant... the instant endures infinitely.”¹⁷⁵ As if the suspension that characterizes the instant endured forever, promising a future, a becoming that is never accomplished, that is never fulfilled, an “eternally suspended future ... a future forever to come;” as if the instant was never taken up by a present, which then never really became one, duration is held captive of the instant, the present is captive of itself, hence Levinas saying that “the life of the work does not go beyond the limit of an instant.” At issue here is not primarily the duration of the work itself as an object of contemplation, as a physical thing in a gallery or library; it is not the lifespan of the work that concerns the philosopher, but rather, and if I may put it so, the *span* of its life which is something of an arrested moment on the verge of release, perpetuated in its very stasis: a “lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself.” Unlike the instant accounted for earlier that was essentially an evanescence, a moment in a duration that overflows it, by which it harbors the effectuation of being accomplished by the recovery of a past and the opening to a future, but free with regard to both, and thus taking itself upon itself, the aesthetic instant, because barren of evanescence, is impersonal, anonymous, harbors no event, posits no beginning, no stance but its own enslavement, its own petrification, its own *death*, as it were. In its insubordination to temporality, this instant that does not give itself as the sum of the moments of its duration is, quite on the contrary, bestowed with a propensity to last infinitely: “it has in its own way a quasi-eternal duration;” as such it does not, like the “instant of a flash,” thwart the infinity of time, but instead immobilizes it, perpetuating itself because it lasts ... and because it lasts,

it appears as older than itself, as if it inherited itself, so that, if it refers to itself, this reference, instead of being a conquest and a mastery of itself, is from the outset a subjugation to itself and a petrification in itself – a petrification in which, in reality, there is no self, since the self cannot assume itself.¹⁷⁶

175. “... le paradoxe d’un instant qui dure sans avenir. L’instant n’est pas réellement sa durée ... il a, à sa façon, une durée quasi éternelle.” RO, 119.

176. Rodolphe Calin, “La non-transcendance de l’image,” in *Le Souci de l’Art chez Levinas*, 46.

This impossibility of the instant to assume itself whose freedom thus “congeals into impotence,” is most acute and visible, says Levinas, in the *statue*.

Appealing to the statuary of Ancient Greece which, it is worth reminding, was hailed by Hegel as being the expression of the Spirit and the Divine and the epitome of ideal beauty, and for Heidegger, in his footsteps, held an inaugural and exemplary status due to its ontological superfluity,¹⁷⁷ Levinas speaks of it instead as a sort of corrective art, in the sense that its ideal forms are there to “correct the caricature of being,” in the sense that beauty, he writes, “is being dissimulating its caricature, covering over or absorbing its shadow;” but how come? Surely you recall that a fair share of our earlier discussion of the image was directed at the vital concept of resemblance, which was said to be the very structure of the image, to be what engenders the image, to be the duality between being and its image, its shadow; we thus spoke of the picturesque, of the caricature of being as that which escapes being, as what does not stick to it, as a crack between being and its essence, which allowed us then to question the irreality of the image, and to appreciate that its commerce with reality is not really with a lesser being, but with what in being doubles it, because the image, we said, begot an alteration to the very being of things. But ergo, how to understand Levinas’s present claim that beauty conceals the alteration brought about by the image? How to reconcile the erosion of being by the image with the assertion that in its sublimity, in its perfection, this *artifice of eternity* — Beauty, “the perfect form ... the form *par excellence*,” — absorbs and expunges this blemish that is the shadow doubling being? One does not, for as Levinas explains:

The insurmountable caricature in the most perfect image manifests itself in its stupidity of idol. The image qua idol leads us to the ontological significance of its irreality. This time the work of being itself, the very *existing* of a being, is doubled up with a semblance of existing. [Le caricature insurmontable de l’image la plus parfaite se manifeste dans sa stupidité d’idole. L’image comme idole nous amène à la signification ontologique de son irréalité. Cette fois-ci, l’œuvre d’être elle-même, l’*exister* lui-même de l’être se double d’un semblant d’exister.]¹⁷⁸

177. The *work* of the Greek temple bears considerable weight in Heidegger’s theory of art, not least in his interpretation of the work of art as the authentic site for the originary event of truth [*aletheia*], elicited precisely through the ruins of the Greek temple.

178. RO, 119.

The art of the beautiful forms fails to absorb the shadow not because it is not perfect enough, but because the “most perfect image” is at once “an insurmountable caricature.” In its pretension to suppress the picturesque of reality, to present reality free of its shadow, it does in fact *attest to* it, and ostentatiously so: how? By presenting itself as a being, a luminous being, the image cloaks itself in a false humanity — it pretends to exist, but this “existence” is not really one, because the thing is stripped of its essence, its eventfulness, so to speak, whereby it is plastic, immobile and, thus, only an *appearance*, a “semblance of existing” which is how Levinas defines the *idol*: as something that seems to “manifest itself for good,” that is, in person, but whose presence is nothing more than a *façade*, an appearance which is the “inevitable veil of its own apparition”.¹⁷⁹

The possibility of their [the things] fall to the state of images or veils codetermines their apparition as a pure spectacle, and betrays the recess that harbors the evil genius... This possibility is constitutive of *apparition* as such, whether produced in sensible experience or in mathematical evidence. [La possibilité de leur [les choses] chute au rang d’images ou de voiles, codétermine leur apparition comme pur spectacle et annonce le repli où s’abrite le malin génie... Cette possibilité est constitutive de *l’apparition* comme telle, qu’elle se produise dans l’expérience sensible ou dans l’évidence mathématique.]¹⁸⁰

At issue in this excerpt from *Totalité et Infini*, where Levinas offers a phenomenological formulation of the Cartesian hypothesis of the “evil genius” is the lingering susceptibility of the appearing of the phenomenon as (only) appearance, which the philosopher claims to be constitutive of appearing as such.¹⁸¹ This being so, we are compelled to ask: but if all apparition, all manifestation of phenomena, can degrade into appearance, does that not mean that all experience, all expression is inevitably spectacular? Indeed, such will be the crux that will accompany Levinas’s riddling positing of the Face as a non-object, yet as not to be confused with the elemental, and thus, as an excess with regards to phenomenality. But the question that concerns us here is rather why the idol attests to the ontological significance of its own irreality, and thus, why it stands for Levinas as a semblance of existence. Insofar as irreality does not lie anymore in the alteration of being by its image, as the crack between the thing and its essence, but is here understood instead in the inscription of appearance in

179. TI, 100.

180. TI, 90.

181. Cf. Levinas, “Don Quichotte, l’ensorcellement et la faim” in *Dieu, la Mort et le Temps* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993 [e-book edition]).

itself, as the alteration of appearance by itself, because it is the *existing itself* of being that is doubled by this semblant of existing that is its appearance, the idol accomplishes just that: in it, apparition is indeed a veil, a dissimulation — appearance: “a frozen form from which one has already withdrawn ... plastic, as any appearance;” in the idol, every apparition is indeed a veil or a dissimulation, it is what it is but, at once, the infinity of what it excludes, because in it, commencement is lacking, or rather, it is perpetually beginning. Levinas’s account of the paradoxical instant of art finds here its *raison d’être* since it is through its positing that we can understand the sense of this existence that the philosopher acknowledges to art. If human existence, accomplished in the world, entails the opening to a future, by which it is essentially temporal, the instant of art, in being bereft of evanescence, of temporality, is therefore powerless to do just that, to open up to a future. Despite its pretension of being an existence without double, a supreme existence unattainable to “mere mortals,” the idol, as it turns out, is not a higher reality, not even as real as reality, but in fact, less so; for it is merely an appearance of an existence, a semblance of one. Thus, the idol attests to the ontological significance of its own incorrigible irreality, hence the philosopher’s qualification of its “stupidity” which ought not be read as a disqualification of polytheism, but as a testimony of its chronic immobility or plasticity; the idol is the paroxysm of the completion (and degradation) of the work of art, whereby:

To say that an image is an idol is to affirm that every image is in the last analysis plastic, and that every artwork is in the end a statue – a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself. [Dire que l’image est idole – c’est affirmer que toute image est, en fin de compte, plastique et que toute œuvre d’art est, en fin de compte, statue – un arrêt du temps ou plutôt son retard sur lui-même.]¹⁸²

It should be emphasized that while the statue, to be sure, suits Levinas well as the model of this plastic immobility of art, sculpture does not, in truth, claim for the philosopher any privilege over other art forms; what holds true for the statue holds true for every work of art, even, as we will see in a moment, for the “non-plastic” arts in which “time is apparently introduced into the image,” because this plastic fixity is the paradigm of the image itself, which no semblant of time is able to shatter. So, next to the picture as the paragon of the work of art, there is in the levinasian reasoning also the statue whereby, as the philosopher will write in *Totalité et Infini*: “Every work of art is picture *and* statue, immobilized in the

182. RO, 119.

instant or in its periodic return.”¹⁸³ And so, just as Laocoön will forever be, with his mute heavy sigh of heroic pain, snared in the grip of the sea snakes, unbeknownst to us whether in the very next moment his strained muscles will break free from the snakes’ stranglehold or shrivel instead, Gioconda will forever hint a smile — a self-amused or sublime or ice-cold or downcast smile that threatens to wide but does not, and most likely never will, just as we will never know for sure what she is smiling about.

There is something tragic about this; about a present that is impotent to force and assume a future, about an “almost eternal duration,” without imminent change; about a life that is prevented, that stops at the aspiration to be one, for it means a helplessness, an impuissance with regard to the origin in which human finitude is experienced. The tragic, as Levinas writes in *De l’Existence à l’Existant*, “does not come from a conflict between freedom and fate, but from the turning of freedom into fate”¹⁸⁴ which is nothing other than “this present, impotent to force the future,” that is, “a freedom that discovers itself a prisoner.” Fate, says the philosopher, has no place in life for it does not correspond to the conflict of freedom and necessity which instead has its place in human reflection; “source of the only real tragedy of human existence,”¹⁸⁵ fate is the simultaneity of freedom and necessity, that is, *the turning of freedom into necessity*, whereby “the power of freedom congeals into impotence.” Levinas is, to be sure, not claiming that the beings represented in the works of art are necessarily crushed or, as he writes, “*accablés*” by fate, but rather that they are locked up in it because they are represented, that is, they are captive of their perpetual fixed present which is their fate; because precisely the place that fate finds not in life, in reality, it finds instead in the irreality of art — art which is “the falling movement on the hither side of time, into fate.”¹⁸⁶

Here, then, is the answer, or at least part of the answer we have been after since the beginning of this discussion: the downward movement of art — the *transcendence* — leads us to the *en-deçà* of time, that is, *fate*. It is then this determination that, according to Levinas, explains the insubstantiality or the illusory character of the distinction between

183. My emphasis. “Toute œuvre d’art est tableau et statue, immobilisés dans l’instant ou dans son retour périodique.” TI, 294-295.

184. “Le tragique ne vient pas d’une lutte entre liberté et destin, mais du virement de la liberté en destin.” DEE, 136.

185. Guy Petitdemange, “L’art, ombre de l’être ou voix vers l’autre? Un regard philosophique sur l’art. Emmanuel Levinas,” *Revue d’Esthétique*, no. 36 (1999), 86.

186. “le mouvement de la chute en deçà du temps, dans le destin.” RO, 121.

plastic and non-plastic arts, even though the latter seem to reproduce temporality as a movement from a past to a future, and not like the plastic arts, immobilize a specific instant; hence the solemn verse of the author of *Totalité et Infini*: “all art is plastic.”¹⁸⁷ But a closer look into this argument is warranted, among other things because it brings to light the notion of “in-between times” [*entretemps*] that will allow us to complete the above answer and thereby comprehend why Levinas ultimately regards art, in its degeneration of temporality, as a passage onto “something inhuman and monstrous.”¹⁸⁸

Though the philosopher mentions music, literature, theater, and cinema as examples of non-plastic arts, his explanation relies exclusively on literature and the literary examples of Proust, Dostoevsky, Dickens, and Poe, through which he attempts to show that the time apparently introduced by the novelist is, precisely, only that — apparent, that is, a semblant of time, that therefore fails to shatter the fixity of the image or, in this case, the narrative, whose plastic character Levinas brings to the fore. Doomed to the “infinite repetition of the same acts and the same thoughts,” the characters of a novel, he writes, are “beings that are shut up, prisoners,” which is explained, he argues, not by the narrative form itself (a mere contingent fact and thus “exterior to the characters”), but by their reflection in the narrative, meaning that the very possibility of narrating the characters is owed not to their temporal existence, but to the fact that their being “*resembles* itself, doubles itself and immobilizes.” Yet, the fixity that characterizes the being of the characters in the novel bears no relation with the fixity or eternity of concepts and ideas that “initiates life, offers reality to our

187. TI, 149. As such, it makes no sense neither to speak of time-based arts insofar as these are also, as much as a painting or a sculpture, spatial. This assertion brings inevitably to mind “La transcendance des mots” of which we spoke about briefly earlier on. If you recall, in it, Levinas draws a parallel between Leiris’s *biffures* and Lapicque’s paintings, stressing the spatial or visual dimension of the *biffures*.

188. RO, 124. Though the notion of “*entretemps*” is not the object of an explicit theorization in Levinas’s work (with the exception, of course, of the essay presently under consideration), it is nonetheless not only present throughout it, but is instrumental to understand the question of temporality in Levinas, from his critique of the preeminence of the present, to his conceptualization of the “immemorial past.” As we read in “Énigme et Phénomène”: “In the *entretemps*, the expected event turns into the past, without being lived – or equaled – in any present. Something happens between Twilight, when the most ecstatic intentionality is lost (or recollected), but the aim is always too short – and Dawn, when consciousness returns to itself, but it’s already too late for the receding event. The great ‘experiences’ of our lives have never really been lived... Their greatness lies in this excess, which exceeds the capacity of the phenomenon, the present and the memory. [Dans l’*entretemps*, l’événement attendu vire en passé sans être vécu — sans être égalé — dans aucun présent. Quelque chose se passe entre le Crépuscule où se perd (ou se recueille) l’intentionnalité la plus extatique, mais qui vise toujours trop court — et l’Aube où la conscience revient à soi, mais déjà trop tard pour l’événement qui s’éloigne. Les grandes ‘expériences’ de notre vie n’ont jamais été à proprement parler vécues... Leur grandeur tient à cette démesure excédant la capacité du phénomène, du présent et du souvenir.]” EDE, 211.

Cf. Pierre Hayat, “La critique de la prééminence du présent. Subjectivité et *entretemps* d’après Levinas.” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 107, no. 2 (2009): 301-317.

powers, to truth, opens a dialectic,” and thus allows for intelligibility; it is instead, a non-dialectical fixity, one that “stops dialectics and time” which is this “unique way for time to temporalize.”

An unreal time, a semblant of time, the time of the novel, the time of the work of art is what Levinas terms the “*entretemps*” — the meanwhile or in-between-time, the perpetual interval that separates life from death which is posed at each instant as pure exhibition. In repeating themselves infinitely, in the perennial finitude of their reduced reality, the future of the characters never arrives, for while “their history is never finished [it] makes no headway,” and thus fate covers over them — a novel, Levinas writes, “shuts beings up in a fate despite their freedom;” and this sudden immobilization of gestures which thus freeze into images brings Levinas to speak of the plasticity of the history as the very definition of *myth*:

Something somehow completed arises in it, as though a whole set of facts were immobilized and formed a series. They are described between two well-determined moments, in the space of a time existence had traversed as through a tunnel. The events related form a *situation* – akin to a plastic ideal. That is what myth is: the plasticity of a history. What we call the artist’s choice is the natural selection of facts and traits which are fixed in a rhythm and transform time into images. [Un je ne sais quoi d’achevé surgit en elle, comme si toute une suite de faits s’immobilisaient et formaient série. On les décrit entre deux moments bien déterminés, l’espace d’un temps où l’existence avait traversé comme un tunnel. Les événements racontés forment une *situation* – s’apparentent à un idéal plastique. Le mythe – c’est cela: la plasticité d’une histoire. Ce qu’on appelle le choix de l’artiste traduit la sélection naturelle des faits et des traits qui se fixent en un rythme, transforment le temps en image.]¹⁸⁹

What better word to account for this plastic denouement of the work of art, if not *myth*, whose most profound definition, if any, may well be the one Levi-Strauss inferred from the words of Wagner’s hero, Gurnemanz, as that by or in which *time turns into space*.¹⁹⁰ In its superb simplicity, this definition catches remarkably well the “situation” described above by Levinas that constitutes the plastic issue of the literary work, and of the other so-called non-plastic arts in which the ceaseless fluidity of time is given a shape, immobilized into an exemplary form and reveals itself already absent from its manifestation, that is, *plastically*.

189. RO, 121-122.

190. “You see my son, / Here, time becomes space.” [“Du siehst, mein Sohn, / zum Raum wird hier die Zeit.”] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, I Act. Cf. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Le regard éloigné* (Paris: Plon, 1983), 301.

It is thus made into an object not just of regard, but of *exhibition* — a work of art whose façade passes for a face; but while the face reveals itself in its essential and irreducible nudity which is also its depth and openness, the thing, by its façade, exposes itself without revealing itself — it exposes itself enclosed in its form, “in its monumental essence and in its myth where it shines like a splendor. It subjugates by its grace like a magic but does not reveal itself,”¹⁹¹ because while art appears to present itself as a real being, and thus, constitute itself in a face-to-face, it is however a being without a face: it has no identity, it does not speak. The work of art makes itself present but does not reveal itself; *the work of art is way*, i.e., it is me who goes to it, it is me who asks the questions, and not it that confronts me: “not only does it not answer — but it does not raise questions. It gives itself in a silent rapture.”¹⁹² For art, like the myth, is destitute of language, language as *logos*; yet it *chants* in an obscure voice that says nothing other than itself or, in the words of Blanchot, “what it says is exclusively this: that it is – and nothing more.”¹⁹³ And this is why, precisely, by the end of his text, Levinas will argue for the intervention of a “philosophical criticism” whose task would be to interrupt the silent fascination of the work, to put in motion the immobile statue and to make it speak precisely by measuring “the distance that separates the myth from the real being,”¹⁹⁴ and in so doing, to show the *work of being* itself in its truth. That said, this is not yet the time, nor the place, to go in that subject whose contours and paradoxes will be dealt with in the final section of this chapter.

Thus, returning to the issue of plasticity that Proust, Levinas says, remarkably brings out in a page of *La Prisonnière* in which speaking of Dostoevsky, he retains neither the religious ideas, metaphysics, or psychology but “some profiles of girls, a few images: the house of the crime with its stairway and its *dvornik* in *Crime and Punishment*, Grushenka’s silhouette in *Brothers Karamazov*,” leads Levinas to suggest the “plastic element of reality” as being, ultimately, “the very goal of the psychological novel.” It is this exterior vision, he claims, that the novelist sets up as a method that brings him to speak of *atmosphere* as the quintessential of the novelist’s vision.

191. TI, 210.

192. OC2, 210 (“L’écrit et l’oral”).

193. Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace Littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 8.

194. RO, 126.

The radical exteriority that in *De l'Existence à l'Existant* Levinas accounted for, under the term “exoticism,” appears here as this ambiance, this atmosphere, opposing however its common understanding and interpretation by art criticism as introspection — “one supposes that things and nature can enter into a book only when they are enveloped in an atmosphere composed of human emanations,” that is, the thematization of images to be read as signs and symbols, the anthropomorphizing of objects and landscapes —, and employing it instead in the sense of total exteriority, “where the subject itself is exterior to itself”: atmosphere, he claims “is the very obscurity of images.”¹⁹⁵

Despite the precision of line and the depth of character type, the contours of events, persons and things remain absolutely indeterminate... It is a world that is never definitive and where one course of action does not preclude other possibilities. [Les contours des événements, des personnes et des choses, malgré la précision des traits, malgré le relief des caractères et des types, demeurent dans l'indétermination absolue... Monde jamais définitif où la réalisation ne sacrifie pas de possibles.]¹⁹⁶

It is a rarefied, lofty atmosphere, made of images that draw attention to their own irreality, to their own *intransparency*, whereby a strange new “reality” appears — the reality of the unreal, one could say, made of inimitable, inexpressible and untranslatable rhythms that do not come from a dwelling, from one’s limited and perhaps inaccurate perspective, from looking inwards, but instead, from seeing inwardness from the outside, because, more than the inner event itself, what really counts is “the way in which the self seizes it and is turned upside down by it, as though it were encountered in another. It is this way of grasping an event that constitutes the very event.”¹⁹⁷ Thus, the modern novel, the modern work of art, forms a situation where the limit between the represented object and oneself is effaced whereby one enters its own representation “as into a world that the painting opens by steeping over the frame that delimits the world,” in which one is carried along as in a dream, reaching a previously unknown plan of phenomena.¹⁹⁸ This, says Levinas, is what the magic of the modern work of art consists of, its art-magic — its power. But does this mean that the

195. RO, 122.

196. AP, 119.

197. “Ce n’est pas l’événement intérieur qui compte, mais la façon dont le moi s’en saisit et en est bouleversé, comme s’il le rencontrait chez un autre. C’est cette façon de saisir l’événement qui constitue l’événement même.” AP, 121.

198. OC2, 210 (“L’écrit et l’oral”).

temporality of the modern work is somehow other than that instant without evanescence of the Greek statue? That modern art does not achieve the quasi-eternal duration of the interval where the shadow of being is immobilized? Not at all. Be it classical or modern, the work of art operates in a time of its own, removed from the temporal flow of the lived world, and finished in itself, whereby it cannot but always repeat itself,¹⁹⁹ and this perpetual repetition of itself determines the closure of the work on itself — its *completion* [*achèvement*] which induces its *self-sufficiency*. It is this self-sufficiency, more than its completeness, that will be, throughout Levinas's work, the subject of *a sort of* reassessment.²⁰⁰

Levinas's professing of the essential incompleteness of modern art, as we saw in "La Transcendance des mots,"²⁰¹ is not undermined, nor does it undermine this understanding of the work's formal completion that is in itself inescapable, unsurpassable, a condition of its production, without which "it would not belong to art." The modern work of art is no less closed in on itself, completed in its incompleteness or incompletely complete. It is, if I may say so, a false paradox, for at issue is, as said, not so much the formal completeness of the work which is, ultimately, unavoidable, but its *self-sufficiency*, and the reliance on such sufficiency. Now, this sufficiency characterizes less the formal completion of the work, than it does its reception and thus the reckoning of its idolatrous sufficiency. Which is why, what distinguishes the modern work of art is not a different temporality, or a different formal structure, but rather what, by the end of his text, Levinas will identify in modern literature as "an increasingly clear awareness of the fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry"

199. That said, several contemporary artistic practices challenge this seemingly inexorable repetition of the work of art, insofar as they proceed and operate on the basis of chance, randomness, or indeterminacy. A paradigmatic example are the Fluxus's *event scores* in the early 1960s. The first international proto-conceptual (and proto-internet) art movement, which can be said to be the predecessor of both conceptual art and performance in the field of visual arts, the fluid group Fluxus (name coined by George Maciunas in 1961) was heavily influenced by both Dada and John Cage and is mostly known by its so-called *event scores*: propositional pieces or instructions for action that can be performed by anyone, at any time, and in any given context. Take for instance Georges Brecht's seminal *Drip music* (1959-1962): "A source of dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into the vessel." or his 1963 *Exercise*: "Determine the limit of an object or event. / Determine the limits more precisely. / Repeat until further precision is impossible." La Monte Young's *Composition #10* (1961): "Draw a straight line and follow it." Or still Allison Knowles's *#2 Proposition* (1962) and *#2a Variation #1 on Proposition* (1964), respectively: "Make a salad." and "Make a soup." Based on a logic of the "dematerialization of the object" as well as the focus on the "singularity of the event," the execution of these actions (which amounts to the completion of their event scores), depending on the conditions, the performer, and the interpretation of the instruction itself, will always be different, and consequently, the work can be said to never repeat itself.

200. See *infra* 246.

201. See *supra* 95.

which taken thus far to be consubstantial to the work, the modern artist will seek to overturn in lieu of a more self-reflective approach, as a need “to interpret his myths himself,”²⁰² that is, as a reflection on his work as an integral part of the work itself, and thus a sort of philosophical approach to his own work. But this awareness that the philosopher will only point to later on is already, I would say, quite implicit in the following, earlier, passage where in recognizing the value of the instant of art, of its movement beneath time, into its interstices where it endures, and by which it is, and remains, essentially disengaged from the world, the philosopher lays out its ambiguity that though proper to all art, seems to find particular expression in the modern work of art:

But in introducing the death of each instant into being – it achieves its eternal duration in the meanwhile – its uniqueness, its value. Its value then is ambiguous – unique because it is impossible to go beyond it because, being unable to end, it cannot go toward the *better*. It does not have the quality of the living instant which is open to the salvation of becoming, in which it can end and be surpassed. The value of this instant is thus made of its misfortune. This sad value is indeed the beautiful of modern art, opposed to the happy beauty of classical art. [Mais en introduisant dans l’être la mort de chaque instant – il accomplit sa durée éternelle dans l’entretemps – son unicité, sa valeur. Valeur ambiguë: unique parce que non dépassable, parce que, incapable de finir, il ne peut aller vers le *mieux*, il n’a pas la qualité de l’instant vivant auquel le salut du devenir est ouvert et où il peut finir et se dépasser. La valeur de cet instant est ainsi faite de son malheur. Cette valeur triste est certes le beau de l’art moderne oppose à la beauté heureuse de l’art classique.]²⁰³

Immobilized in its instant deprived of present, and therefore barren of future, the work of art is doomed to a captivity in the meanwhile where it cannot “die” whereby it could be redeemed, saved — it cannot do better, *be better*; but it cannot do so, precisely because it is *unique*, that is, unsurpassable. Hence why Levinas claims that its misfortune is also its value, because its misfortunate captivity is, at the same, its seal of uniqueness, its value. This instant counts, and very much so; as Petitdemange well puts it “for there to be a better, the instant must already count. Art knows how to make this instant shine.”²⁰⁴ It follows then that the

202. “La littérature modern, décriée pour son intellectualisme et qui remonte d’ailleurs à Shakespeare, au Molière du *Don Juan*, à Goethe, à Dostoyevsky – manifeste certainement une conscience de plus en plus nette de cette insuffisance foncière de l’idolâtrie artistique. Par cet intellectualisme l’artiste refuse d’être artiste seulement; non pas parce qu’il veut défendre une thèse ou une cause, mais parce qu’il a besoin d’interpréter lui-même ses mythes.” RO, 127.

203. RO, 125.

204. Petitdemange, “L’art, ombre de l’être,” 88.

ambiguity of this unique value of art is linked with the question of beauty which, as noted above, further sets apart classical and modern art, given their respectively different stances toward it. Whereas classical art strives to enshroud its flaw, its derisory life, by immortalizing itself behind a mask of ideal beauty, an eternally serene dress of sublimely spurious gestures and geometric perfection, beauty is no longer, not only an encumbrance for modern art, but it is not even an aspiration of the modernist artist who seeks instead to destroy it,²⁰⁵ replacing harmony with dissonance in a work where “on all sides fissures appear.” Deformed, deranged, “degenerate” (as some have called it),²⁰⁶ its misfortune is accepted, embraced, and its derisory life treated as such; as for the ever-present threat of the future, its presentment, and the anxiety it arouses are not blended into its line as part of a whole, but creeping up through broken lines, are captured in all their menacing indeterminacy. Levinas’s evocation of Edgar Allen Poe’s tales, recurrent moreover in his

205. As claimed by Barnett Newman in his 1948 seminal essay “The Sublime Is Now”: “The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty.” Arguing against romantic art and the rhetoric of exaltation in European culture, the American painter addresses the confusion between beauty and the sublime in philosophy and art history, claiming that the former with its emphasis on the figurative, the perfection of form, and the ‘reality of sensation,’ prevents the artist from realizing the latter. Newman thus pursues a sublime which being free from “the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend [and] myth” is grounded on a temporal event, rather than on a manipulation of space or image. Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now.” In *Documents of Contemporary Art: The Sublime*. Edited by Simon Morley. 25, 27. (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press; Whitechapel Gallery, 2010); as claimed by Lyotard: “Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that’s what is sublime.” J.-F. Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.” In *The Sublime*, 30. First published 1985.

206. Although the concept of degenerate art is generally attributed to the Nazi party, it was theorized earlier by Max Nordeau in his work *Entartung* (1892), in which based on biomedical arguments from the theory of degeneracy, he devised a new theory suggesting an association of modernist art (which he regarded as a contempt for morality) with mental pathologies, whereby he argued that the degeneration of society was reflected and influenced by modernist art. Whilst Nordeau was never credited by the Nazi party (probably due to his Jewish heritage, and his preeminent role in the Zionist Movement), it is very likely that his theory influenced the rhetoric of degeneracy of modernist art cultivated by the Reich. Regarded as decadent, subversive, and antagonistic to the “German spirit,” modernist art was the main target of a thorough cultural cleansing in the Weimar Republic. A commission led by Adolf Ziegler compiled an inventory of some 20,000 “degenerate” avant-garde works that were then confiscated from the German state museums and subsequently exhibited across the country in defamatory shows — the so-called “exhibitions of shame” or “chamber of horrors” —, often side by side with drawings made by psychiatric patients. The most notable of this shows was the *Degenerate Art [Entartete Kunst]* exhibition that took place in Munich in 1937 and featured works by Nolde, Marc Chagall, Picasso and the Dada (particularly despised by the Reich for their willful derision); this infamous exhibition opened on July 19 of that year, not coincidentally, the day immediately following the inauguration in an adjacent building — a newly built monumental temple called “House of the German Art” [*Haus der Deutschen Kunst*] — of the *Great German Art Exhibition* featuring works promoting the values of the Nazi Orthodoxy, that is, executed in an academic style, close to the “Greek classicism” (of which Hitler thought that the Spirit of the German people was the only heir), depicting typical Nazi themes of motherhood, heroism and duty and, most importantly, displaying the “spiritual direction” that would lead the people of Germany to salvation. Opening the show was Hitler himself who in his long speech claimed: “Never has mankind been closer to antiquity, in appearance or in feeling, than it is today.” Fritz Kaiser, *Degenerate Art: The Exhibition Guide in German and English* (Berlin: Ostara, 1937), 64.

captivity notebooks, is meant to illustrate this (fantastic) atmosphere of the modern work of art that is able to capture its own misfortune as “the infinite time of the approaching imminent that one cannot escape,”²⁰⁷ as though “death were never dead enough” which inverts Heidegger’s death as “impossibility of possibility” into possibility of impossibility — “*le n’en pas finir de finir*”²⁰⁸ — the sad beauty of the modern work that lies, behind the perfection of the image and the joys of the beautiful, at a deeper, more elemental level: at the level of sensation, of the sensible; this sad beauty is then, to some extent, a (more) real beauty, because not sought after, it emanates from a sincerity, perhaps otherwise lost in the pursuit of its perfection. But by the same token, of its essential disengagement, art, Levinas argues, constitutes a dimension of evasion through the experience of aesthetic enjoyment, by which the disinterestedness of contemplation is, it turns out, but the reverse of its irresponsibility:

On the other hand, essentially disengaged, art constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion... It brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as a lightness and grace. It frees. To make or to appreciate a novel or a painting – is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace – such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. [D’autre part, essentiellement dégagé, l’art constitue, dans un monde de l’initiative et de la responsabilité, une dimension d’évasion... Il apporte dans le monde l’obscurité du fatum, mais surtout l’irresponsabilité qui flatte comme la légèreté et la grâce. Il délivre. Faire ou goûter un roman et un tableau – c’est ne plus avoir à concevoir, c’est renoncer à l’effort de la science, de la philosophie et de l’acte. Ne parlez pas, ne réfléchissez pas, admirez en silence et en paix – tels sont les conseils de la sagesse satisfaite devant le beau.]²⁰⁹

It is here that Levinas’s wariness of art and aesthetic enjoyment reaches its highest, most severe expression.

Art, the philosopher claims, fosters irresponsibility, insofar as in its transformation of the world into the imaginary, it substitutes mystery with myth and in so doing, brings into the

207. “... le temps infini de l’approche de l’imminent qu’on ne peut pas fuir” OC1, 163.

208. “Death is not the end, it is the *never-ending ending*. As in certain of Edgar Poe’s tales in which the threat gets closer and closer and the helpless gaze measures this ever still distant approach. [La mort, ce n’est pas la fin, c’est le *n’en pas finir de finir*. Comme dans certains contes d’Edgar Poe où la menace s’approche de plus et plus et où le regard impuissant mesure cette approche toujours encore distante.]” SMB, 16-17.

209. My emphasis. RO, 124-125.

world, as Pierre Hayat finely observes, “*l’amour du fait*,”²¹⁰ whereby “the world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow.”²¹¹ Source of pleasure and enjoyment, art constitutes a dimension of evasion, insofar as lulled and intoxicated by its entrancing rhythms and riveting visions, we are plunged into it as into a dream — a waking dream²¹² — and dream away from our accountability and engagement in and to real life, away from the afflictions and ills of the world that urge us to commitment and action; instead, art invites us to the impassibility of contemplation and enjoyment, to the silence of non-reflection and indolence.

A cascade of similarly caustic expressions (in which nevertheless one cannot fail to notice a certain dose of irony on the part of our author whose lexicon ranges from “revenge” to “evil powers” and “conjured up” in the same phrase) comes to complete Levinas’s seemingly summary judgment: that the constitutive disengagement of art, and the irresponsibility that its “disinterestedness” elicits lead to its “ethical disqualification.”²¹³ But does it really? Is it fair, it is *wise*, to reduce art to a mere source of pleasure? A beacon of irresponsibility? Are we supposed to believe that Levinas holds such a shallow view of art? Should we not see, rather, in his insistence on the disengaged nature of art, the very possibility of art to disengage itself from itself, to escape itself, its closure on itself — to overcome, as suggested earlier, its sufficiency and, thus, to break free from its idolatrous burden? On the other hand, do not Levinas’s words say more about us than they do about art? Is art bound to answer for life? Or are we?

One could argue (and to some extent Levinas does), that perhaps the context of the aftermath of World War II in which “*La réalité et son ombre*” appeared, called for another kind of commitment than that of making or enjoying art; one could argue that with the freedom of survival comes a responsibility that would perhaps be better put to use elsewhere than on making or enjoying a novel or a painting *if* such actions mean a mere display of vanity, a blindness, a yielding to illusions, a falling victim to the “sleep merchants,”²¹⁴ to

210. Hayat, “Épreuves de l’histoire,” 13.

211. “Le monde à achever est remplacé par l’achèvement essentiel de son ombre.” RO, 125.

212. See *supra* 113.

213. Armengaud, “Faire ou ne pas faire d’images,” par. 30.

214. Alain (Émile Chartier), “Les marchands de sommeil” in *Vigiles de l’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), [7-18].

believing without understanding, to welcoming the absurd without question, over the sobering up and wakefulness that life in a world of plentiful suffering demands of each of us. Choosing pleasure, the contentment of aesthetic enjoyment over practical action may, admittedly, leave one with a guilty conscience, as it may be reason to feel ashamed (yet, is it not Levinas himself who claims that “a freedom that can be ashamed of itself founds the truth?”²¹⁵) That may well be true but it would be, in my view, a surrender to cynicism (and Levinas is anything but cynical) to take it as an adage; hence my “if” — for all art is not necessarily a source of distraction or enjoyment, a product of pure rhetoric, just as it is not perforce an instrument of propaganda, even though the distinction may at times be slippery. Levinas’s earlier dismissal of the competing dogmas of “art for art’s sake” and “committed art” (to which I will return very shortly) as similarly false and his subsequent insistence on the constitutive disengagement of the work of art tells us precisely that such formulas overlook the essential ambiguity of the work under their respective (false) and truistic claims, and that both ultimately fail insofar as they confine art to the realm of objective representation that leads to tranquility.

I would like, nonetheless, to insist on this argument about the irresponsibility that the disengaged nature of art allegedly brings about, by evoking one of the most memorable aphorisms from “La réalité et son ombre” in which, after charging artistic enjoyment with wickedness, selfishness, and cowardice, Levinas claims: “There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.”²¹⁶ The second clause of this sentence is, by all accounts, a direct reference to a play by Alexander Pushkin titled, precisely, *A Feast During the Plague* (*Пир во время чумы*),²¹⁷ an allusion that appears also in the philosopher’s *Carnets de captivité*, in a note dated approximately 1961, that reads:

Intoxication – *privatissime* – pure sensible = the lifting of all responsibility – the charm of private parties about which Simone de Beauvoir speaks in *La Force de l’âge* when one stayed with friends prevented from returning by the curfew, where in the middle of the occupation one lived unique nights in private. The sense of Пир во время чумы (A Feast

215. TI, 82: “La liberté pouvant avoir honte d’elle-même fonde la vérité (et ainsi la vérité ne se déduit pas de la vérité).” See *infra* section 2.4.

216. “Il y a des époques où l’on peut en avoir honte, comme de festoyer en pleine peste.” RO, 125.

217. Completed on November 8, 1830, and published two years later, *A Feast During the Plague* is the fourth and last of Pushkin’s short-verse plays “The Little Tragedies,” yet, unlike the other three — *The Miserly Knight*, *Mozart and Salieri* and *The Stone Guest* — it is not an entirely original work but consists rather of a modified translation of a single scene of John Wilson’s 1816 play *The City of the Plague*.

during the Plague). [Ivresse – le privatissime – sensible pur = la levée de toute responsabilité – le charme de fêtes privées dont parle Simone de Beauvoir dans *La Force de l'âge* lorsqu'on restait entre amis empêché de rentrer par le couvre-feu où au milieu de l'occupation on vivait des nuits uniques dans le privé. Le sens de Пир во время чумы.]²¹⁸

At the risk of overstating Levinas's double reference to Pushkin's work, it seems to me that there is nothing fortuitous nor shallow about it; on the contrary, this reference strikes me for its precision and significance, for at stake in this work by the Russian poet is precisely the ethical issue of the individual response to the collective, the dilemma of survival and memory, and the problematization of art and its enjoyment in the face of tragedy, something that, no doubt, finds echo in Levinas's own thinking.

A dramatic recreation of a feast by a group of revelers in the midst of a catastrophe that envelops the surrounding community, *A Feast during the Plague* epitomizes, at once, the human need for society (however small and restrict), and its egoistic nature that translates into the characters' apparent indifference to the suffering of others. The entire scene is dominated by the inner conflict between enjoyment and responsibility, as reflected in the attitude and words of the characters who revel in their safety and seek pleasure as a way of abstracting themselves not only from the suffering around them but perhaps, even more so, from their own personal dread — the dread of their own death. And so they feast, they sing drinking tunes, indeed one of them, Walsingham, hymns the plague, and even Mary's mournfully melancholic song that conjures up memories of her village in bygone days, the voices of children and the peaceful chiming of the belfry, that tells dolefully the silence, death and havoc bequeathed by the plague, does not spring from solidarity or compassion for the suffering others as indeed the Chairman's own words inviting Mary to sing make at once clear:

Sing, Mary, something sad and haunting,
To make us turn again to our merrymaking
With a wilder spirit, like one who is seized
And carried away by some unearthly vision.²¹⁹

218. OC1, 320. The German term “privatissime” that can be roughly translated to English as “private and confidential,” is mainly used in the academic context to designate private lectures for a select group of attendees chosen by the lecturer.

219. Alexander Pushkin, *A Feast during the Plague* in *The Little Tragedies*, trans. Nancy K. Anderson (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000), 96.

Mary's song is not meant to encumber her feasting peers with the misery that affects all but themselves, but rather to alleviate their disquiet, to uplift their spirits, to heighten their enjoyment of their own safety and well-being through the artistic contemplation of suffering. Naturally, we are made to wonder: is any enjoyment possible from the depiction of suffering?

The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however remotely, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this even for a second, slides off into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic stylistic principle, and even the chorus' solemn prayer, make the unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, *something of its horror removed*.²²⁰

This passage from Adorno's 1962 "Engagement oder künstlerische Autonomie?" brings to the fore, in a most forceful way, the principle of aestheticization that jeopardizes the ethical condition of art for it enables the turning of pain into spectacle, of horror into beauty, and of its actuality into memory; the irrepresentable is made into an intelligible object and, therefore, into an object of contemplation which as any such object has the potential to elicit pleasure, enjoyment or at least an affective experience of arresting intrigue. Suffering is turned into a content like any other, given a context and, thus, a vindication of sorts; it is retained, qualified, endorsed, insofar as inserted into a meaningful whole and, as such, its scandal is tamed, normalized, or yet *banalized*, by which art's willful protest against evil "renders one indifferent to the world's suffering, and *settles* in this indifference."²²¹

While Levinas's locution does not refer explicitly to the depiction of suffering, his saying that "there are times when one can be ashamed of it..." cannot but be read as a reference to the "ultimate source of war," to the "paradigm of gratuitous human suffering where evil appears in its diabolical horror,"²²² where "the disproportion between suffering

220. My emphasis. Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment" in *Notes to Literature vol. 2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1992), 88. Orig. publ. as "Engagement oder künstlerische Autonomie?", *Die Neue Rundschau*, 73 no. 1 (1962).

221. My emphasis. "... rend indifférent à la souffrance du monde et installe dans cette indifférence DO, 8.

222. Levinas, "Les dommages causés par le feu" in *Du sacré au saint*, 155.

and every theodicy”²²³ was revealed in all its acuity — to *Auschwitz*, “whose cries will echo until the end of time.”²²⁴

Indeed both of Levinas’s allusions to Pushkin’s play refer to the context of the second World War and implicitly (because necessarily) to its overriding event to which the philosopher refers directly only sporadically, and even in those instances does so deliberately through different terms, “proceeding, indeed jumping, from one synonym to the next”²²⁵ — “the Final Solution, the Holocaust, the Shoah,” “Nazi Persecution,” “Nazi Horrors,” “Hitlerian Massacres,” “Genocides of Auschwitz” — in an unremitting movement of unsaying, in a single breath with no pauses, without spells, because to settle on a single term, on a single *said*, would be to thematize it, to silence it, to exhaust the meaning of an event that marks the interruption, the caesura of history, an event in which the non-place would as a result become place, and “would thus exceptionally enter the spaces of history;”²²⁶ when precisely the Holocaust is, for Levinas, as he will later confess, “an event of still inexhaustible meaning.”²²⁷ But does this mean that this apocalyptic event that tolerates no forgetting but whose acuity, he warns, “is dulled in memory”²²⁸ cannot be inscribed in aesthetic representation and imagination? Is suffering not entitled to expression? The question is sensitive, and the answer precarious, but Levinas would, I feel, tentatively agree with Adorno when he says that “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream.”²²⁹ The question is not so much whether or not Auschwitz, as the paragon of human suffering, can be (materially) re-presented, for that is ultimately inevitable; the question is rather how to do so without degrading into dramatization and

223. Levinas, “La souffrance inutile” in EN, 114.

224. “Mais les appels du terroir peuvent-ils faire taire les cris d’Auschwitz qui retentiront jusqu’à la fin des temps?” Levinas, “La poésie et l’impossible,” in DL, 203.

225. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1997), 51.

226. AE, 282.

227. E. Levinas, “Le Philosophe et la mort” (Interview with Christian Chabanis, “La mort, un terme ou un commencement?”), Fayard, 1982), in AT, 164.

228. “The acuity of the apocalyptic experience lived between 1933 and 1945 is dulled in memory. The extraordinary returns to order. There have been too many novels, too much suffering transformed on paper, too many sociological explanations.” E. Levinas, “Par-delà le dialogue,” in AT, 98. Orig. published in *Journal des communautés*, 1967.

229. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1974), 362. Orig. pub. as *Negative Dialektik* in 1966 by Suhrkamp.

futility, without falling prey to rhetoric and pure courtesy, to rationalization and to a systematization of language — ultimately, without extorting from “useless suffering” a metaphysical meaning.

Allow me to illustrate my point by taking a brief look into three well-known, utterly distinct cinematic approaches to the Holocaust, namely, Alain Resnais’s 1956 *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*), Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 *Shoah*, and Steven Spielberg’s 1993 *Schindler’s List*.

Interlacing black-and-white archive images with contemporary color footage of the abandoned death camps, *Nuit et Brouillard* weaves an unsettling dialogue between past and present; unsettling both for what it shows (and for *how* it shows it) and for what it does not. At barely 32 minutes long, Resnais’s documental piece is conscious of its own impossibility — it knows the limits of the image and of language, of its medium and of art itself, and reflects such awareness in its formal choices: of duration, of a minimal aesthetics and of a *contretemps* montage in which the numerous discrepancies between what we see and what we hear (between the macabre images of the victims and Hanns Eisler’s expressive symphonic yet atonal score that “frustrates any emotional paraphrasing of the images”²³⁰ or between Jean Cayrol’s lyrical yet sarcastic words and Michel Bouquet’s frigid, dispassionate narration) — manifest the oxymoron, the absurdness of the Holocaust. *Shoah* which is knowingly indebted to *Nuit et Brouillard* despite Lanzmann’s fierce criticism of Resnais over his use of archival footage, presents itself as its opposite. Premised on the inexistence of images and on the disappearance of all traces of the Holocaust, *Shoah* is “made from this nothingness,”²³¹ having in the present its single dimension. Operating on the amphibology of the word “tragedy,” Lanzmann’s film holds open the abyss between “Tragedy” and “tragedy,” between the event and its re-presentation — an abyss it pledges (to us, the viewer) never to cross; in return, we are asked, *forced* to imagine the unimaginable, to represent for ourselves what the film claims to be unrepresentable, asked to do, to perform, what the film says it cannot. For 9 and 1/2 hours we are “face-to-face” with those who were *there*, and whose faces are *here* the site (and the sight) of the violence and horror they witnessed,

230. “... la musique de Hanns Eisler met en échec toute paraphrase pathétique des images.” Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003), 164.

231. “What was at the outset of the film was on the one hand the disappearance of the traces: there is nothing left, it is nothingness, and a film had to be made from this nothingness.” Claude Lanzmann, “Le lieu et la parole,” in *Au sujet de Shoah. Le film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2010), 295.

suffered or, in some cases, perpetrated. Unlike *Nuit et Brouillard* where the sense of space (the slow desubjectivized tracking shots of fields and of the interiors of the concentration camps blocks), and touch (that unspeakable sequence of stills and pan-shots of bodily remains and objects seized by force from the victims) are paramount, *Shoah* exploits speech or, more precisely, the spoken word, through the numerous real-life testimonies in which the faces speak in the place of images, and *time* — less its passing than its suspension which it takes (and us) to the limits of endurance.

In the end, each provides, I believe, a unique and legitimate means of access, of responsibly approaching something that, reversely, *Schindler's List* turns into lighthearted entertainment. From its “realistic” use of black and white, its unrepentant kitsch of which the girl in the red coat is only the most glaring example, the distasteful symbology (the smoke everywhere), and the fabrication of suspense from real terror (that foul shower scene), Spielberg's film is irresponsible not only towards the victims, but towards the spectators themselves whom the director does not trust to think and feel, and thus manipulates at will, feeding them a fictional, sentimental and biased narrative under the delusional (and overall bad) guise of historical authenticity, where the Jews are not only reduced to stereotypes but to mere extras in a tale that is really about the redemption of the film's hero and “their” savior, who happens to be a Nazi. And that is how, adding insult to injury, *Schindler's List* ingenuously prides itself on encapsulating *the totality of the Holocaust experience* in a sort of “master narrative” of the event (and thus also, implicitly, on providing its ultimate representation) which film critic Terrence Rafferty claimed in the *New Yorker*, finally “after 50 years, becomes overwhelmingly immediate, *undeniable*,” as if it took a Hollywood melodrama to prove that the Holocaust existed. Words fail, indeed ...

Which brings me to the other dimension of the question that is not properly speaking aesthetic, but moral. And this moral dimension that necessarily transcends the aesthetic one, has to do with whether or not, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, art has a right to existence and if so, what kind of (material and operative) existence can that be, a question that has perhaps nowhere else been so memorably articulated as in Adorno's often misquoted dictum on *Lyrik nach Auschwitz*²³² whose fundamental claim, as I understand it, is not that it is

232. “The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and

impossible (in the sense of prohibitive, reprehensible, or even futile) to write poetry after Auschwitz, but that in its wake, art finds itself in the paradoxical situation of having to do it justice without condoning it, of having to voice its suffering without becoming its accomplice. And this because Auschwitz showed the failure of culture, it meant the regression of civilization to barbarism, a predicament that cannot be passed over as if art, poetry, had emerged unscathed from it, but that must, on the contrary, be understood as inextricable to the very possibility of art whose right to existence hinges on its *transformation* through a confrontation with, and challenge of, *semblance*; through the resistance to expected forms and conventional means, the emancipation from harmony and illusion, and the refusal to reification and commodification; a challenge that, in the very last phrase of his essay, Adorno argues, cannot be equaled by critical intelligence “as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.”

It seems clear to me that on this particular issue, there is (or rather, would be) convergence between the two thinkers for whom the Holocaust was not just one event among others in history, but one that marked a catastrophic change — the defeat of a humanism based on reason and freedom and with it, the very collapse of civilization — after which nothing could remain the same, including art; but the world to be rebuilt (and in it, art) should not, therefore, be pictured as a blank page, as some would have it, but more like a palimpsest, for it would have to bear the trace of that event for which one would have to answer not qua good conscience which is *never good enough*, but as *bad conscience*. The expression “after Auschwitz” is as much Adornian as it is Levinasian where it acquires its most profound meaning in the challenge of *having to answer for one’s right to be*.²³³

barbarism. To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.” T. W. Adorno, “Cultural criticism and society,” in *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*, trans. Samuel and S. Weber (Cambridge; Mass: MIT Press: 1981), 34. Orig. pub. as “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” in 1951.

233. “being as bad conscience; being put in question, but also put to the question, having to answer - the birth of language; having to speak, having to say ‘I,’ being in the first person, being precisely myself; but, henceforth, in the assertion of its being as myself, having to answer for its right to be. [être comme mauvaise conscience; être en question, mais aussi à la question, avoir à répondre – naissance du langage; avoir à parler, avoir à dire je, être à la première personne, être moi précisément ; mais, dès lors, dans l’affirmation de son être de moi, avoir à répondre de son droit à l’être.]” Levinas, “La conscience non-intentionnelle,” in EN, [128].

2.4 Commitment issues

Now, the word “disengagement” [*dégagement*] is not just one word among the other I do-not-know-how-many in “La réalité et son ombre” nor was it randomly chosen by Levinas: it is, as noted earlier, the watchword of this text, as it is also the unsubtle retort to the, at the time, popular foe — “commitment” [*engagement*] — the catchphrase, in turn, of Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la Littérature?* published the year immediately before. Though Levinas’s article proposes, as I have strived to show, an authentic thought of art and is thus much more than a mere reply or re-elaboration of Sartre’s ideas on art and literature, we cannot therefore turn a blind eye to what is at once a striking and troublesome affinity with the theory of the author of *L’Imaginaire*. Both start versus the representation of the image from its reverse, its irreality, and characterize it against transparency in terms of detachment, affirming its magical workings; notwithstanding their different aims, they are also moved by similar concerns — the difficulty of artistic communication, the solitude of the artist, the eidos of the work of art (its objectivity and materiality), the remoteness of the aesthetic event and the freedom of the artist’s consciousness; finally, they share a largely unexplicit common background of references that includes the likes of Fink, Husserl, Heidegger and Nietzsche. And yet, they come to seemingly opposite conclusions.

Well, Levinas’s defiance of the “darling” of the Parisian intellectuals and co-founding director of *Les Temps Modernes* did not go unnoticed by his editorial board which graced “La réalité et son ombre” with an unprecedented (and immodest) introduction, a sort of disclaimer, upon its publication.²³⁴ At barely 2 pages long, this text authored, we now know, by Merleau-Ponty²³⁵ is by its mere existence the hard proof (as if one were needed) of Sartre’s prepotency in the French cultural scene and of the sway of his ideas in the wake of Liberation; consequently, it also bears witness to how Levinas’s own words were perceived as potentially problematic given their eerily unfamiliarity to the readers of *Les Temps Modernes*, making them difficult perhaps to understand, and certainly to appreciate in that particular milieu.

234. *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 38 (1948): 769-770. Available at https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2040470?child_oid=1157830

235. The text signed “T.M.” was later published in Merleau-Ponty’s *Parcours 1935–1951* (Lagrasse: Éditions Verdier, 1997), 122–24.

The relative obscurity of “La réalité et son ombre” and of its author at the time given the little echo it made with no known additional reactions seem to suggest as much: that Levinas like the other disbelievers in Sartre’s “committed literature” did not know “*in the name of what*” he was condemning it, and like them too, refused to do “the most reasonable thing” which “would have been to support [his] condemnation on the old theory of art for art’s sake.”²³⁶ What is disturbing, no matter what Sartre might say, is that writing about art and literature in the postwar period meant having to choose a side, a place among “the Sartrean goats [or] the Valeryan sheep,” as Adorno queerly puts it,²³⁷ an irreducible *au taut* between an art that would be “serious” and “committed” against one that would be “gratuitous” and “irresponsible” whereby to question the former was as good as endorsing the latter. Despite his proclaimed atheism, Sartre may have actually skimmed through the Gospel of Matthew.

But the reality is that there is nothing neither purist nor erratic about Levinas’s skepticism regarding the idea of “committed art,” as he knew exactly what he was doing, and in the name of what he was doing it when he called into question Sartre’s *engagement*; whereas for Merleau-Ponty, Levinas’s article not only did not add anything new to what Sartre had to say about the “magical conduct” of the image in *L’Imaginaire* but, worse, only half-examined his ideas on the commitment of literature which, while not entirely untrue, is telling of just how much more concerned Merleau-Ponty was with championing Sartre by meticulously demarking the distance between the two authors, than with what Levinas himself had to say in his article. In fact, right in first paragraph the editor tries to undermine Levinas’s challenge on the Sartrian “commitment” by appealing to the also Sartrian notion of “generosity” which, he claims, the author of “La réalité et son ombre” all but disregards: “If he respects the indifference of the artist’s conscience, he does not agree to call it generosity, and there is contempt in this respect. It is to philosophy and action that he reserves the truth.”²³⁸ This is the crux of the editorial for it is here that, according to its author, lies the big divide between Sartre’s “optimism” and Levinas’s “pessimism” in their respective efforts to save the artist’s conscience from itself which he claims to be the ultimate aim of both.

236. J.-P. Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), 32.

237. T. W. Adorno, “Commitment,” 4.

238. T.M., “La réalité et son ombre [introduction],” 769.

An operative concept in Sartre's 1947 essay, generosity designates the pact of confidence between the author and his reader ("each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself")²³⁹ insofar as all that is asked of the reader is a generous attitude — a "gift of his whole person" — toward, in turn, the generosity unleashed by the work which, in Sartre's words, "is never a natural datum, but an exigency, and a gift"²⁴⁰: a categorical imperative. As such, generosity has both its origin and its end in freedom: the creative freedom of the author, the gift which his work requires in order to exist, and the freedom of the reader — the aesthetic pleasure, or aesthetic joy as Sartre prefers to call it (the feeling of security; it is this which stamps the strongest aesthetic emotions with a sovereign calm) — that in recognizing the creative freedom of the author, solicits it "by a symmetrical and inverse appeal,"²⁴¹ whereby as Merleau-Ponty writes "the freedom of the work of art finds accomplices in every man." A sort of vicious circle of freedom, generosity constitutes the "original source of the work of art [as] the unconditioned appeal to the reader,"²⁴² it is that by which the work of art is not lost to the world but remains in it because reestablished in signification, presenting "the world as a whole": generosity is that by which the artist's consciousness can be saved from itself. The work of art is then for Sartre an end in itself, or rather, *the end itself*: "this absolute end, this transcendent yet consented imperative which freedom itself adopts as its own, is what we call a value. The work of art is a value because it is an appeal."²⁴³ Sartre's solution to the problem of artistic and literary communication owes then its "optimism" essentially to the absolute self-sufficiency of art and literature whereby they can save themselves without the need for the intervention of a non-artistic expression such as the philosophical criticism to which Levinas instead, according to the editor, hands over "the responsibility [*soin*] of recovering art for truth, to reestablish links between the 'disengaged' thought and the other, between the game of art and the seriousness of life;"²⁴⁴ hence, the "pessimism" in Levinas's approach which

239. Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 62.

240. Sartre, 69.

241. Sartre, 58.

242. Sartre, 152.

243. Sartre, 55.

244. T.M., "introduction," 770.

lies, by contrast to Sartre's, in its ineptitude (or his unwillingness) to acknowledge to art and literature the ability to save themselves. But "isms" aside, what Merleau-Ponty seems to have missed in the text he introduced was that Levinas recognized how precarious Sartre's notion of "commitment" was, and not just "committed literature," but "commitment" as an *existentiell*, as it were.

So, according to Sartre, the revealing that writing promotes is intended as *praxis* — not merely as synonymous with action, but as its highest, loftiest form — *action by disclosure*: "we no longer have time to *describe* or *narrate*; neither can we limit ourselves to *explaining* ... we must reveal to the reader this power, in each concrete case, of doing and undoing, in short of acting."²⁴⁵ Commitment then hinges primarily on this (supposedly) indivisible bond between word (and thus, work) and action; a bond that poses, however, a number of difficulties among which is the one raised by Levinas himself which, if you recall, concerns the temporality of the work. In asserting that work and action are intrinsically linked, and therefore that the work (understood as art-language) is an act, committed art finds itself in a paradox straddling two temporalities (and two durations) that are, in theory, antagonistic, namely, the temporality of action and the temporality of the work [*œuvre*]. One, action, is temporal insofar as, inserted in the living present, it has, so to speak, an infiniteness to it in the sense that it bears consequences, that it is irreversible for all those involved, including its agent on which it relies completely, and without which it loses its meaning. The work, on the other hand, is finite, complete or as Levinas puts it, "appears saturated," and though it cannot come into existence without an agent (an author), it stands on its own without losing its meaning, that is, it can perfectly well continue to exist and to be meaningful without its author, which is why Levinas claims that "art is not engaged by virtue of being art," and thus cannot be, as Sartre would have it, regarding literature, intrinsically political.²⁴⁶

Levinas's contention with the notion of committed art has thus to do with the latter's underestimation of the character of completeness of the work of art by which it is foreign to

245. Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 288.

246. According to Anna Boschetti, author of the terrific study *L'impresa intellettuale, Sartre e Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre's assertion of the intrinsically political nature of literature was a move to free "it from the narrow sense of the political to which others would like to bind it." Similarly, she claims, his "reason for so vehemently repudiating irresponsibility and gratuity is not so much to oppose the devotees of formalism ... as to rid literature of suspicion and establish its absolute self-sufficiency." Boschetti, *The Intellectual Enterprise. Sartre and Les Temps Modernes*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press, 1988), 109-110. Orig. publ. by Edizioni Dedalo in 1985.

the course of the world, by which it is detached from ordinary time and thus from representational and ideological interests; the work of art bears witness to a decisive separation (what Blanchot called the “essential solitude of the work”²⁴⁷) whereby it stands on its own, fixed on the hither side of reality, “like the forever bygone past of ruins, like the elusive strangeness of the exotic” — it presents things as coming from a deep then, “a deep past. Once upon a time...”²⁴⁸ —, and whose power, as noted earlier, reverted into participation designates a “fundamental passivity.” Now, the notion of passivity is precisely what, in “Être Juif,” Levinas claims, the existentialist view aims to contest when it asserts that the passivity of commitment turns into freedom of choice:

There is a move in this thinking that allows the transformation of supreme commitment into a supreme freedom: not to commit oneself would still be to commit oneself; not to choose would still be to choose... let us emphasize that in the case in point the existentialist view aims at nothing less than to put into question the very notion of passivity. In fact, this view begins from the idea of a fact such that activity and passivity turn into each other.²⁴⁹

At stake in this essay written only a year before the *Les Temps Modernes* article is evidently not “committed art” but the very notion of “commitment” through which Levinas calls into question the negative and mythicized definition of Jewish identity provided by Sartre in the aforementioned *Réflexions sur la question juive* published in 1946 and (curiously) delivered, in its central arguments albeit in a more lenient tone, as a lecture at the AIU on June 3, 1947, at Levinas’s own invitation.

As one of the earliest acknowledgments in the postwar of antisemitism by the French, *Réflexions* marked, as noted earlier, a turning point in French public discourse on the subject in the immediate postwar period, to which Levinas was evidently attentive, praising Sartre for the breath of his “utter amicable truths,” and for the originality of his “weapons” against antisemitism that “is attacked with existentialist arguments. And this is not simply an event for the Café de Flore crowd.”²⁵⁰ Sartre’s thesis on Judaism, however, was met with

247. Cf. Blanchot, “La solitude essential” in *L’Espace Littéraire*, 6-33.

248. “... un profond jadis. ‘Il y avait une fois’...” DO, 32.

249. Levinas, *Être Juif* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2015), 61-62. Orig. pub. in the journal *Confluences* in 1947.

250. E. Levinas, “Existentialisme et Antisémitisme,” in IH, 104. Orig. publ. in *Les Cahiers de l’Alliance israélite universelle* in 1948.

disappointment by Levinas who in both “Existentialisme et Antisémisme” and “Être Juif” expressed his objection to the application of the definition of subjectivity propounded in *L’Être et le Néant* to Jewish identity, that is, of understanding the Jew as a bare existence, without origin and simply present — as a facticity left at the mercy of the gaze of the anti-Semite — and thus *free* to make or chose an essence for itself, either by fleeing or by assuming the situation it finds itself in, in the case of antisemitism, “the role of Jew,” a framework that for Levinas is ill-suited to apprehend the originary dimension of Jewish existence whose facticity, inconceivable without election (without being chosen before being able to choose or to assume such choice) “cannot be fit into the set of distinctions by which Sartre ... attempts to grasp it.”²⁵¹

Against the reversal put forward by Sartre in which the passivity of commitment is turned into freedom of choice, Levinas argues that passivity does not turn into activity but rather reveals a being that “has been chosen, that is, elected.”²⁵² Which means that unlike Sartre, Levinas conceives Jewish facticity not as arising from the present, that is, cut off or without origin — as simply present —, but as having, beyond its power of choice, a past — the past of creation and election, that in imparting to the present the weight of an existence (that in Sartre’s “angelic present” is thrown onto the past),²⁵³ does not exclude the freedom of the present but, on the contrary, makes it possible. Levinas’s surpassing of the reversal of passivity to activity is achieved then through the imperative of creation, from which the solid basis that is outside the subject’s power, ceases to be (as it is in both Sartre and Heidegger)²⁵⁴ an obstacle to the subject’s power, a subjection or servitude to become “its condition, its

251. EJ, 60.

252. EJ, 62.

253. “There is some sort of angelical present in Sartre’s philosophy. The whole weight of existence being thrown back onto the past, the freedom of the present is already situated above matter. [Il y a dans la philosophie de Sartre je ne sais quel présent angélique. Tout le poids de l’existence étant rejeté sur le passé, la liberté du présent se situe déjà au-dessus de la matière.” TA, 44. In a way, engagement was an action meant to make up for this lack of existential gravity; in the case of committed literature, for instance, Sartre’s emphasis on the literary act seems no doubt meant to give to its author an existential gravity otherwise lacking.

254. “For Heidegger, *Geworfenheit* is the fact that some possibilities are in the state of the grasped already at once, imposed already at once; for Sartre, the present is stronger than the past of *Geworfenheit* and can be assumed in a voluntary commitment: one can on the past.” OC2, 88.

privilege; its refuge and somehow its glory. It is that through which the subject is other than a phenomenon, than a play of light.”²⁵⁵

Here we come back to what we discussed in the first section of this chapter, namely, Levinas’s critique of the idealist myth in “Parole et Silence,” of his rejection of idealism as total understanding, of a subject understood as thought and power; a critique that is not, however, restricted to idealism but applies just as much to the philosophy of existence which replaces thought with existence but which, nevertheless, remains a philosophy of light and truth as power insofar as it “reserves to existence opposed to thought – the function of power that characterizes thought.”²⁵⁶ Heidegger’s *existential Geworfenheit* [thrownness]²⁵⁷ does, as Levinas claims, impose a limit on intellection, acknowledging the powerlessness of the subject to assume itself entirely, but in failing to conceive the beginning otherwise than as a question of “power or no power?,” and the future as otherwise than a “project” [*Entwurf*] which can be assumed only in its power of dying, being remains locked in the tragedy of finitude — the finitude of its dereliction, the curse of the *Geworfenheit*.²⁵⁸ Ultimately, Levinas’s reversal of the *Geworfenheit* from curse to glory means conceiving the essence of time not as finitude, but as infinitude, and its apprehension not in anxiety toward one’s death, but in the relationship with others.

255. “cette assise du pouvoir dans l’être, n’est pas un obstacle au pouvoir, mais sa condition, son privilège; son refuge et en quelque façon son gloire. C’est ce par quoi le sujet est autre chose qu’un phénomène, qu’un jeu de lumière.” OC2, 88

256. E. Levinas, “De la description à l’existence,” in EDE, 104.

257. The reception of Heideggerian philosophy in France and, consequently, its interpretation (notably by Sartre) is highly influenced by the “liberties” taken by Henry Corbin in his translations whose most emblematic example (approved by Heidegger himself) is the rendering of *Dasein* as *réalité-humaine* which according to Ethan Kleinberg “led to the inference that Heidegger was a ‘humanist’ and that his was primarily an investigation into human being;” and he continues: “By this logic, Heidegger’s concern was with the freedom of the individual.” Consequently, Sartre’s appropriation of Heidegger’s *Geworfenheit* [thrownness] as *délaissement* [abandonment] in *L’Être et le Néant* is a modification of Corbin’s translation of the term as “*sa déréliction*” that gives a subjective or particularistic tone to its original connotation which Sartre’s rendering as *délaissement* not only keeps but further modifies adding to it a sense of “helplessness”: “we are ... thrown into freedom, or, as Heidegger says, ‘abandoned.’ [‘*délaissés*’].” Sartre, *L’être et le néant. Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 530. For a compelling account of the reception of Heidegger’s work in France see Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential. Heidegger’s Philosophy in France 1927-1961* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

258. “In the *Geworfenheit* and without freeing itself from the fatality of dereliction, *Dasein* by its understanding is beyond itself. The German terminology *Geworfenheit-Entwurf* shows well the opposition of the dereliction to the project. [Dans la *Geworfenheit* et sans s’affranchir de la fatalité de la déréliction, le *Dasein* par sa compréhension est au delà de soi. La terminologie allemande *Geworfenheit-Entwurf* montre bien l’opposition de la déréliction au projet.]” EDE, 69.

It is, at last, this fundamental understanding from which we can appreciate a particularly fine passage from “La réalité et son ombre” that has been, quite faithlessly, touted as the ultimate proof of the author’s *iconoclasm*:

Inertia and matter do not account for the peculiar death of the shadow. Inert matter already refers to a substance to which its qualities cling. In a statue matter knows the death of idols. The proscription of images is truly the supreme command of monotheism, a doctrine that overcomes fate, that creation and revelation in reverse. [Inertie et matière ne rendent pas compte de la mort particulière de l’ombre. La matière inerte se réfère déjà à une substance à laquelle s’accrochent ses qualités. Dans la statue, la matière connaît la mort de l’idole. La proscription des images est véritablement le suprême commandement du monothéisme, d’une doctrine qui surmonte le destin – cette création et cette révélation à rebours.]²⁵⁹

There is no shortage of scholars who argue that the proscription of images taught in the Second Commandment underlies Levinas’s reflection on art, thereby justifying the alleged pious prejudice of the philosopher against art, particularly, against the visual arts. But if it is true, *absolutely*, that Judaism inspires in Levinas the heedfulness and questioning of the distinction between image and reality, between truth and appearance, and a conspicuous discretion with regard to the seductiveness of the image, this wide-awakeness cannot be, I believe, simply equated to a submissiveness to the Jewish *Bilderverbot*. To insist on such an interpretation amounts not only to a failure to understand the internal logic of “La réalité et son ombre” but, I daresay, of the entire Levinasian project. For at stake in the above passage which is, not by chance, the last of the section “L’entretemps,” is not the projection on art of some religious dogma from which would derive its condemnation and the call for its interdiction (or, God forbid, its destruction),²⁶⁰ but rather the confrontation of two different temporalities — the temporality of monotheism “as a doctrine that overcomes fate,” and the *ecstatic-horizontal temporality* of Dasein, notably developed by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. Now, this confrontation does not arise “spontaneously,” isolated in this passage from Levinas’s article, but rather pervades it entirely, particularly the section “L’entretemps”

259. RO, 124.

260. Levinas tells us this himself when asked by Françoise Armengaud about a possible link between obliteration and the destruction of idols: “I’ve ruled it out in advance! Obviously, there are sensitive or pious monotheists who think that museums are full of figures that one should not have drawn nor especially sculpted... But I do not fear idols in this sense!” DO, 26.

Also, in an interview with Bertrand Révillon, Levinas makes it clear that he rejects such interpretation: “I don’t want to denounce the image. What I see is that there is a great deal of distraction in the audiovisual...” E. Levinas, “De l’utilité des insomnies (Entretien avec Bertrand Révillon),” in IH, 178.

where the recurrence of terms such as *entretemps*, interval, fate, anxiety, destiny, and later, death, as well as the reference to Bergson²⁶¹ leave, in spite of the absence of any direct reference to the German philosopher, little room for doubt about whom and what Levinas is alluding to.

In the ecstatic temporality of Dasein, that makes the being of being-here, the future has pre-eminence over past and present in the threefold ecstatic structure of time; yet, this prominence does not derive from an idea of sequentiality, of a successive sequence of events or, in this case, ecstasies (“The future is *not later* than having been, and having-been is *not earlier* than the present”), but rather from the fact that the future *takes the lead*: Dasein is a “thrown project” — it is both futurity (not yet) and having-been-ness (what it was) — *always already not-yet*. Dasein is *ahead-of-itself* which is grounded in the future (the “futurity” of projecting) that presences the past, the “having-been” of coming to itself, back to its thrownness, and determines how we encounter the present situation, the being-among-beings: “Temporality temporalizes itself as a present-being future [*als gewesende-gegenwärtigende Zukunft.*]”²⁶² Thus, despite its prominence, the ecstasy of the future is no more original than those of past and present which, according to Levinas, means that “the future does not manage to overcome the finite character of the *Geworfenheit*, but only assumes it through its power to die.”²⁶³

Inherently, equiprimordially connected, the three ecstasis, the three temporal horizons, are dependent on one another, as they ecstatically (i.e. futurally) reach out to each other and stand out towards a horizon of possibilities; and in their connectedness — the ecstatic-horizontal unity — they constitute the “original horizontal schema” that enables any and all understanding of being, the very *being of being-here*, the sense of existence as the ways that being-here relates to beings and possibilities. But if on the ontic plane, in the everyday life existence, the relationship with a possibility consists in being out for something possible (things at hand and objectively present), and taking care of them *in order to* actualize them

261. Cf. RO 123.

262. Martin Heidegger, *Essere e Tempo*. Trans. Pietro Chiodi. (Milano: Longanesi, 1995), 420. First published 1927 as *Sein und Zeit* by Max Niemeyer.

263. “L’extase de l’avenir a chez Heidegger une prééminence sur les deux autres. Et cette extase est une extase d’un être fini – en même temps que Heidegger affirme sa prééminence il insiste sur le fait que les trois extases n’en demeurent pas moins originelles au même titre, c’est-à-dire que l’extase de l’avenir n’arrive pas à surmonter le caractère fini de la *Geworfenheit*, mais à l’assumer seulement par son pouvoir de mourir.” Levinas, “De la description à l’existence,” in EDE, 105.

which ends up destroying the very possibility of a possible in order to make it available, that is, real, in the ontological plane, where the relationship of existence with the possible is the very possibility of *existing it* as opposed to make it real, the impulse of existence (what Heidegger calls “*s’élancer vers le possible*”) is structured differently: it is not a being toward the possibility *in order to* make it possible, but a being toward the possibility *in anticipation of* this possibility — hence being-toward-death; because death is not a possible thing at hand and objectively present: it is that which remains further away from realization in the rush toward its possibility, insofar as death as an eminent (and imminent) possibility offers the Dasein “nothing ‘to be achieved’ and nothing that it could *be* as an actual reality.”²⁶⁴ It is a *possibility-of-being of Dasein*, its ownmost possibility: “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein.”²⁶⁵ Existence then cannot but be a being-toward-death, insofar as being-toward-death, as anticipation of possibility, is what “first makes this possibility possible and sets it free as possibility:”

Being-toward-death is the anticipation of a potentiality-of-being *of that being* whose mode of being has the anticipation itself. In the anticipatory revealing of this potentiality-of-being, Dasein discloses itself to itself with regard to its most extreme possibility. But to project oneself upon one’s ownmost potentiality of being means: to be able to understand oneself in the Being [*Sein*] of the being [*Seienden*] thus revealed: to exist. Anticipation shows itself as the possibility of understanding one’s *ownmost* and extreme potentiality-of-being, that is, as the possibility of *authentic existence*.²⁶⁶

The condition of existence is therefore its very finitude: “existence is an adventure of its own impossibility;”²⁶⁷ an adventure that consists in assuming its existence, which is the same as saying, *understanding it*, by being at every moment toward its death. Hence “Being [and this, Levinas claims, is perhaps the only thesis of *Sein und Zeit*] is inseparable from the understanding of being, Being is already the invocation of subjectivity.”²⁶⁸ Death as the

264. Heidegger, *Essere e Tempo*, 319.

265. Heidegger, 306.

266. Heidegger, 319.

267. “L’existence est une aventure de sa prôpre impossibilité.” Levinas, “L’ontologie dans le temporel,” in EDE, 86.

268. “*Sein und Zeit*, l’œuvre première et principale d’Heidegger, n’a peut-être jamais soutenu qu’une seule thèse: l’Être est inséparable de la compréhension de l’être, l’Être est déjà invocation de la subjectivité.” Levinas, “La philosophie et l’idée de l’infini,” in EDE, 170. Orig. publ. in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 3 (1957).

ownmost possibility of Dasein is nonrelational — it is the solitary and personal and, thus, incommutable condition of the itself of Dasein, — it is the locus of its ipseity, its possibility (of impossibility), its *power-to-be* whose anticipation entails the coming to itself of the Dasein, the relation to its ownmost possibility, and whose condition is the future. The original time is, thus, in Heidegger, this élan, this impulse from being to Being, from being to its existence, by which being is inscribed in Being and assumes it, not in duration but *in tension* which is temporalization: “to temporize oneself from the future is the proper of the authentic existence of being-toward-death.”²⁶⁹ As the source of the Heidegger’s analysis of time, being-toward-death leads to the thesis of the finitude of time, finitude as the very essence of time; but this finitude is not that of a continuum, of a constituted duration which would have a quantitative value and would, as such, have to refer to infinity; finitude here is qualitative (transitive), it is outside finality and is therefore not an act, but the relation with an end: it is a possibility that precisely does not become an act, insofar as it is accomplished by (and thereby, *in*) the very event of *ending* — of *dying*. It not an idea, it is existence.

Only being free *for* death offers Dasein its own end and installs existence in its finitude. Finitude, once grasped, removes existence from the chaotic multiplicity of possibilities offering themselves nearest by (the comforts, frivolities, and superficialities) and brings Dasein before the nakedness of its *fate* [*Schicksals*]. This is how we designate the primordial historicizing of Dasein that lies in authentic resoluteness [*Entschlossenheit*] in which Dasein, free to its death, *hands itself down to itself*, in an inherited yet chosen possibility. Dasein is exposed to the blows of fate only because, in the depths of its being, *it is* fate in the above sense.²⁷⁰

Levinas, as is well known, opposes this conception of time that he deems both tragic and solipsistic and whose resulting guilt has no ethical overtones, but only tragic ones. Not only does he reject it, but his own conception of time presents itself as its contradictory, its reverse. For Levinas, the essence of time lies in infinity, and not in finitude, as Heidegger thinks, from which follows that, for Levinas, “the death sentence does not approach as an end of being, but as an unknown, which as such suspends power. The constitution of the

269. “Se temporaliser à partir de l’avenir, est le propre de l’existence authentique de l’être pour la mort.” EDE, 88.

270. Heidegger, *Essere e Tempo*, 460.

interval that liberates being from the limitation of fate calls for death.”²⁷¹ Which is why he writes, in “La réalité et son ombre,” that

the fact that humanity could have provided itself with art reveals in time the uncertainty of time’s continuation and something like a death doubling the impulse of life... the insecurity of a being which has a presentiment of fate, is the great obsession of the artist’s world, the pagan world. [Le fait que l’humanité ait pu se donner un art révèle dans le temps l’incertitude de sa continuation et comme une mort doublant l’élan de la vie... l’insécurité de l’être pressentant le destin, la grande obsession du monde artiste, du monde païen.]²⁷²

And he continues,

Here we leave the limited problem of art. This presentiment of fate in death subsists, as paganism subsists. To be sure, one need only give oneself a constituted duration to remove from death the power to interrupt. Death is then sublated. To situate it in time is precisely to go beyond it, to already find oneself on the other side of the abyss, to have it behind oneself. *Death qua nothingness – is the death of the other, death for the survivor. The time of dying itself cannot give itself the other shore.* [Ce pressentiment du destin dans la mort subsiste, comme le paganisme subsiste. Certes, il suffit de se donner une durée constituée pour enlever à la mort la puissance de l’interrompre. Elle est alors dépassée. La placer dans le temps, c’est précisément la dépasser – déjà se trouver à l’autre bord de l’abîme, l’avoir derrière soi. *La mort-néant – est la mort de l’autre, la mort pour le survivant. Le temps même du “mourir” ne peut pas se donner l’autre rive.*]²⁷³

Levinas’s critique of Heidegger’s existential analytics of death with its insistence on the future as ownmost possibility comes forth clearly in these passages of the *Les Temps Modernes* article, being thus valuable to understand the initial quote; since the death of idol, that is, of the shadow that meets a “peculiar” death in the statue (peculiar insofar as “inertia and matter do not account for it”) — the time of dying itself, the very fact of ending, remains perpetually in the abyss of the *entretemps*, the empty interval of nothingness. Extracted from the duration of time, death is nothingness, “sheer nothingness” that is the death of Dasein, the nothingness that the being of being-toward-death discovers as that on which it rests,

271. “L’arrêt de la mort n’approche pas comme une fin d’être, mais comme une inconnue qui comme telle suspend le pouvoir. La constitution de l’intervalle qui libère l’être de la limitation du destin appelle la mort.” TI, 317.

272. RO, 123.

273. My emphases. RO, 123.

“which also means that it rests on nothing other than itself.”²⁷⁴ One needs to *situate death in time* so one can go beyond it — to a future *without me*, a future *beyond my death* — which demands the relationship with others, precisely what Heidegger’s solipsistic death precludes which thus, Levinas writes “acquires its most tragic accents and becomes the testimony of an era and a world that it will perhaps be possible to overcome tomorrow.”²⁷⁵

But the above passages also refer to another phenomenon that I would like to address very briefly since, I believe, it does not appear here by chance; I am speaking about *paganism*. Now, the association of Heidegger’s thought with paganism is not new. From Hans Jonas²⁷⁶ to Víctor Farias,²⁷⁷ to Levinas himself, some of Heidegger’s most eminent interpreters have detected the heathen inspiration behind the German philosopher’s theses. For Levinas, Heidegger’s exaltation of art, and his celebration of worldly gods, above all Hölderlin whom he “makes more important than the Bible... more important than anything else”²⁷⁸ is a symptom of an existence, that of Dasein, “*that accepts itself as natural*, for which its place in the sun, its soil, its place orient all meaning. *It is a pagan being.*”²⁷⁹ Indeed, paganism describes existence as a “being-at-home” [*chez soi*], a way of existence (that Levinas accounts for, notably in his essay “Heidegger, Gagarine et nous” written, he claims, with “Heidegger and Heideggerians” in mind) characterized by an *enrootness*, an attachment to the place in which being finds itself not freely, however, but enclosed, imprisoned; hence pagan existence is marked not by power, but by powerlessness, by a radical impotence to transgress the limits of the world where being is “shut up ... sufficient unto himself and

274. “Dans le temps originel, où dans l’être pour la mort, condition de tout être, elle découvre le néant sur lequel elle repose, ce qui signifie aussi qu’elle repose sur rien d’autre que sur soi.” EDE, 89.

275. “Royauté qui tient à notre indigence ; elle est sans triomphe et sans récompense. Par là, l’ontologie de Heidegger rend ses accents les plus tragiques et devient le témoignage d’une époque et d’un monde qu’il sera peut-être possible de dépasser demain.” EDE, 89.

276. Jonas points to the “essential immanentism of Heidegger’s thought” as evidence of his “profoundly pagan character.” Cf. “Heidegger and Theology,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, 18:2 (Dec., 1964): 207-233.

277. “Heidegger wants to create God out of being... it is a heathen philosophy ... Heidegger understood himself as a mixture of Christianity to come, the God of his time...but basically, he is a philosopher of the primordial, like Faust. He wants to call forth the spirits of the earth.” Víctor Farias interviewed by Jeffrey Van Davis to the 2009 documentary *Only a God can save us now*.

278. Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 294.

279. My emphasis. “Il s’agit d’une existence qui s’accepte comme naturelle, pour qui sa place au soleil, son sol, son lieu orientent toute signification. Il s’agit d’un exister païen.” EDE, 170.

closed upon himself,” and according to which “he orders his actions and his destiny.”²⁸⁰ Placing his fleeting gods in the world, the pagan being finds the divine in nature: in places, in works of art, and ideas — “*the Sacred filtering into the world*”²⁸¹ —, from which alone he derives his existence and his truth. Indeed, an earlier passage from the aforementioned essay cannot but bring to mind Heidegger’s own claims about art: “The work of art – a blazing forth of being and not a human invention – makes this anti-human splendor glow.”²⁸²

Now, Heidegger’s “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” (“The Origin of the Work of Art”) was, as we know, not published until 1950, in *Holzwege*, but this essay was the result of three lectures given between 1935 and 1936. While there is, to the best of my knowledge, no reference to this text in Levinas’s work, nor any indication on his part that he was cognizant of its contents prior to publication, I could not, nevertheless, refrain from noting how “La réalité et son ombre” at times gives the (possibly specious) impression of replying directly to Heidegger. Without going into detail, I will limit myself to highlighting some passages that, considering our discussion of Levinas’s own premises, strike me as particularly significant. For instance, the figure of the Greek temple (which is of itself meaningful) that Heidegger claims, “allows the god himself to presence and *is*, therefore, the god himself;” his reiterated upholding of the self-sufficiency of the work of art which makes the art critic, the art historian and the even the artist himself not only inconsequential, but accountable for the displacement of the work of art, that is, of its extraction from *its* world, outside of which it is no longer a *work-being* but only an *object-being*; his emphasis on the historical nature of the work as the site for the rejuvenation of the historical Dasein of the German people; or yet, the suggestion that the work of art *speaks*: “*It is this* [Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant shoes] *that spoke*. In proximity to the work we were suddenly somewhere other than we are usually accustomed to be.” Finally, it is worth noting that the founding [*Stzftung*] of truth as the essence of poetry (in turn, the essence of art), bears a threefold-structure — *bestowing*, *grounding*, and *beginning*, and becomes actual in

280. E. Levinas, “L’actualité de Maïmonide,” in AA.VV. *Cahier de l’Herne: Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: L’Herne, 1991), 144. Orig. publ. in *Paix et Droit (Revue d’Alliance Israélite Universelle)* in April 1935.

281. “*Le sacré filtrant à travers le monde.*” E. Levinas, “Heidegger, Gagarine et nous,” in DL, 349. Orig. publ. 1961 in *Information Juive*.

282. “L’œuvre d’art – éclat de l’être et non pas invention humaine – fait resplendir cette splendeur antihumaine.” DL, 349.

preserving — that corresponds to the three ecstasies of the original horizontal schema elaborated in *Sein und Zeit*, to which I now return.

So, to Heidegger's ecstatic, original time, or being for death in which the future is given in horizon, as coming-to-be, "but the promise of a new present is refused," for it is always a protended present, and where the relationship with others, reduced to an objectivation, to a modality of being itself, is undone in the authenticity of the ownmost possibility of being, Levinas opposes a dia-chronic (and anachronic) temporality in which the relationship with others is precisely what opens up time, a time *beyond my death*; a temporality in which the future is not a coming to be — it is announced, but not given as a horizon, nor lived in anxiety for my death, nor accomplished by fate nor destiny, but lived in *fear for the other*: a temporality of the "beyond being" that already *infuses* his work from this period, namely, the contemporaneous *Le Temps et l'Autre* which anticipates time, he writes,

not as the ontological horizon of *the Being of a being*, but as a mode of the *beyond being*, as the relationship of 'thought' to the other ... the Wholly other, the Transcendent, the Infinite. A relation or religion that is not structured like knowing, that is, as intentionality. Knowing conceals re-presentation and reduces *the other* to presence and co-presence. Time, on the contrary, in its dia-chrony, would signify a relationship that does not compromise the other's alterity. [non pas comme horizon ontologique de *l'être de l'étant*, mais comme mode de *l'au-delà de l'être*, comme relation de la 'pensée' à l'Autre ... au Tout Autre, au Transcendant, à l'Infini. Relation ou religion qui n'est pas structurée comme savoir, c'est-à-dire comme intentionnalité. Celle-ci recèle la re-présentation et ramène *l'autre* à la présence et à la co-présence. Le temps, par contre, signifierait, dans sa dia-chronie, une relation qui ne compromet pas l'altérité de l'autre.]²⁸³

It is, at last, in light of this essentially moral relation to others that, ultimately, Levinas's appeal to criticism in the last few pages of "La réalité et son ombre," ought to be understood. Something that is indeed confirmed when in the very last breath of the article the philosopher writes that to understand the "logic" of such criticism or exegesis of art it would be necessary to introduce "the perspective of the relation to others – without which being could not be said in its reality, that is, *in its time*."²⁸⁴ But this is precisely where the article stops, leaving us with the expectation of a widening of its "intentionally limited perspective" that would

283. TA, 8-9.

284. My emphasis. "Mais nous ne pouvons pas aborder ici la 'logique' de l'exégèse philosophique de l'art. Cela exigerait un élargissement de la perspective, à dessein limité, de cette étude. Il s'agirait, en effet, de faire intervenir la perspective de la relation à autrui – sans laquelle l'être ne saurait être dit dans sa réalité, c'est-à-dire dans son temps." RO, 127.

enable us to fully understand the philosopher's appeal; an expectation we know in hindsight will as such and for a long time remain unfulfilled.

2.5 A critical detour

The good thing about frustrated expectations is that it encourages us to ask questions. Indeed, why did Levinas not pursue this discussion further? Why not, since he had, by 1948, already introduced that wanted perspective — the perspective of the relation with others — in both *De l'Existence à l'Existant* and *Le Temps et l'Autre* and, we might add, in the conference “Parole et Silence” sufficiently well as to theoretically allow him to elaborate on this philosophical criticism of art within the horizon the philosopher claims to be its rightful one: the horizon of ethics? What was it that made him stop at the threshold of “making intervene the perspective of the relationship with others”? On the other hand, what is this art that philosophical criticism will have “put in movement and made to speak”? And what exactly is this (its) “logic” that needs quotation marks?

Many are indeed the questions raised by the last section of the *Les Temps Modernes*' essay — “Pour une critique philosophique” — more I daresay than all the others in this article, but also more I am afraid than those I will be answering in what is left of this already too long a chapter. Suffice it to say that the notion of criticism — philosophical criticism or exegesis — to which the philosopher makes an indistinct appeal in the last pages of his article stems from the same impossibility of contemplating a work of art in silence, which is to say, from the same possibility that there is something more to be said about the work other than its very repetition which he had argued earlier is what precisely justifies the critic; doesn't this mean that, even if deprived of intelligible speech, of a living voice and, therefore, lacking in answerability, the work of art makes — *is* — in and of itself, an appeal to the word, an appeal, however *silent*, to its own interpretation? An appeal that does not extinguish the silence of the work, but finds it perhaps as *already coming from language*?

But what does it mean to interpret? Does it mean to approach the work technically, historically, contextually? To treat “the artist as a man at work” and to trace back his influences? No. Not according to Levinas, because even if such criticism is enough, he notes, to tear the work away from its irresponsibility and place the artist, this “free and proud man,”

he calls him, in real history, it is still a “preliminary” stage of interpretation, a preliminary criticism, insofar as it concerns the expression of the artistic event and not the event as such — “the obscuration of being in its image, its stoppage in the *entretemps*.”²⁸⁵ Such intellectual task is left to the philosopher that will, he claims, tackle the independent ontological event of art in its very obscurity which is nothing other than its irreducibility to cognition, constitutive of its phenomenon, whereby more than speak *about* the work, he is meant to *make the work itself speak*.²⁸⁶ Treating the work of art as a myth, the philosopher, Levinas argues, will measure and show all the distance separating the myth from real being which does not amount to “a simple reconstruction of the original from the copy,” but to an interpretation in the artistic event of this moment of resemblance — this *écart*, this distance that the real-in-its-truth bears in itself, that being-such-as-it-is takes from itself, that by which being is not only itself but escapes itself, withdraws from itself in an obscurity that is nothing ineffable, but its very sensible structure; that by which reality, being, is always-already becoming its image, its non-truth (its *an-alètheia*), that by which art, at once closed and open, at once frozen present and future forever to come, as if out of step with itself, is a “creation in reverse,” that by which, in sum, it can be called “inhuman” — and in so doing will search for *the work of being itself* in its truth which he articulates through “the concept that is like the muscle of the mind.”²⁸⁷

And this is why it is in the ambiguity of the image and in its situation between two times where its appeal and its value for the philosopher resides,²⁸⁸ whom unlike the artist or the writer, does not, as Blanchot would say, “live an event as an image,”²⁸⁹ but discovers rather,

285. “La critique l’arrache à son irresponsabilité déjà en abordant sa technique. Elle traite l’artiste comme un homme qui travaille. Déjà en recherchant les influences qu’il subit, elle rattache à l’histoire réelle cet homme dégagé et orgueilleux. Critique encore préliminaire. Elle ne s’attaque pas à l’événement artistique comme tel: à l’obscurcissement de l’être dans l’image, à son arrêt dans l’entretemps.” RO, 126.

286. “C’est dire que l’œuvre peut et doit être traitée comme un mythe: cette statue immobile, il faut la mettre en mouvement et la faire parler.” RO, 126.

287. “L’interprétation de la critique parle en pleine possession de soi, franchement, par le concept qui est comme le muscle de l’esprit.” RO, 127.

288. “La valeur de l’image pour la philosophie réside dans sa situation entre deux temps et dans sa ambiguïté.” RO, 126.

289. Blanchot, *L’espace littéraire*, 352-353.

“beyond the enchanted rock on which it [the image] stands, all its possibles swarming about it.”²⁹⁰

In short, the task of philosophical criticism will be to demystify the image, to *de-plastify* it, so the speak, to detach it from this pre-human and pre-mundane myth produced in the aesthetic event that, in the work of art, takes the place of mystery, for the philosophical word, the *Logos*, the loquacity of being, is demand for coherence, it is luminosity, serenity, lucidity, and thus the bearer of a “critical and demystifying potential,”²⁹¹ by which it is fundamentally opposed to the image and therefore to the obscurity of myth, whereby it would stand above the image as the *au-delà* to the *en-deçà*, as the servant to the master whom she surveils ... *but whose folly she nevertheless loves.*²⁹²

If, on the one hand, there is no doubt about the importance that Levinas attributes here to the *logos*, whose critical and demythologizing potential is plainly stated, it is no less clear his acknowledgement of the mythological roots of the philosophical word, or why else would he claim that “myth is at once non-truth and the source of philosophical truth”? Roots that cannot be simply effaced, and whose oblivion or detachment bears a price; hence, this acknowledgment is flanked by another one — one that perhaps justifies Levinas’s ostensibly unremarkable gesture of enclosing the word *logic* within quotation marks, and where one could perhaps find the very reason for the premature abandonment of this discussion — he knows the *logos* to be greedy, and that it can be carried away by that greediness of wanting to say it all “*even to its own failure;*”²⁹³ that the concept too, and not only the image, can

290. “Le philosophe découvre, au-delà du rocher ensorcelé où elle se tient – tous ses possible qui rampant autour.” RO, 126.

291. Francesco Paolo Ciglia, “Mito e diaconia etica. La ‘lettura’ di Emmanuel Levinas,” *Idee: rivista di filosofia*, 48 (2001), 69. Orig. publ. in 1994.

292. “It is like a servant who puts a plausible face on the extravagant behavior of her master, and who has a reputation for loving wisdom. She derives victory and presence from narrating the failures, absences and escapades of him whom she serves and spies on. She knows exactly what is contained in the hiding-places she cannot open, and keeps the keys to doors that have been destroyed. A housekeeper beyond reproach, she keeps careful check on the house she rules over, and disputes the existence of secret locks. Housekeeper or mistress? Marvelous hypocrite! For she loves the folly she surveils. [Elle raconte, d’une façon qui se tient, les extravagances du maître et passe pour aimer la sagesse. Elle tire victoire et présence en narrant les échecs, les absences et les fugues de celui qu’elle sert et épie. Elle connaît l’inventaire des cachettes qu’elle ne sait pas ouvrir et garde les clefs des portes détruites. Intendante sans rapproche, elle contrôle la maison qu’elle domine et conteste l’existence de secrètes fermetures. Intendante ou Maîtresse? Merveilleuse hypocrite! Car elle aime la folie qu’elle surveille.]” SMB (“La servante et son maître”), 42.

293. “The significance Blanchot attributes to literature challenges the arrogance of philosophical discourse – that all-encompassing discourse, capable of saying everything, *including its own failure*. [La signification

become an idol under the name of God;²⁹⁴ that there is a superbness and a solipsism to the philosophical word that make it violent, *murderous* even, which Levinas denounces without perhaps being aware of his own complicity in it.²⁹⁵ And so we wonder, as Levinas himself had long done: is the *logos* the *original* word? The *essential* word? The *final* word? That which will, better than the poem perhaps, “reveal what remains other in spite of its revelation”²⁹⁶? Well, in light of the essay’s last sentence alone one should assume that it is *not*; that however necessary, the *logos* is not the final word; something that is indeed confirmed when, a year later, in “La transcendance des mots,” without for once mentioning the terms “concept”, “*logos*” or “philosophy,” Levinas will surreptitiously relieve “criticism” from its previous “philosophical” burden, and deliver it simply as “the word of a living being speaking to a living being,”²⁹⁷ which he will then liken to a *prayer*.²⁹⁸

And so, what is to my mind essential to retain from these last few pages of “La réalité et son ombre” is this: *art is a question for philosophy. It makes itself a question.* An important one. A difficult one. Which is why the philosopher cannot and does not neglect it (even though he sometimes seems to want to, even tries to²⁹⁹), which is why also I cannot but emphatically protest against any reading alleging that Levinas downplays art and aesthetics *if only* in this 1948 work. For if this essay as a whole bears witness to a grave and

que Blanchot prête à la littérature, met en question la superbe du discours philosophique - ce discours englobant - capable de tout dire et *jusqu’à son propre échec.*]” SMB, 46.

294. Cf. AE, 192 n. 1.

295. According to F. P. Ciglia, Levinas’s research brings to light a “constitutive ambiguity” in the philosophical *logos* which although “not always consciously felt and made explicit by our thinker in the different stages of his speculative itinerary,” is crucial to decipher the philosopher’s understanding of the relationship between *mythos* and *logos* which has, the author claims, “an ‘heterofobic’ side to it, that tends to be murderous, insofar as it poses itself as a violent and totalitarian *identification* of the identical and the non-identical, as the destruction and dissolution of all effective *alterity*,” and an “heterofilic or, more radically, heteronomous” side which, by contrast with the first, “finds its homeland in the constrictively dialogical horizon of the interhuman ethical relation, preserving forever, and in spite of any bewilderment, always possible, a meaningful trace of it.” Ciglia, “Mito e diaconia,” 78.

296. “Le mode de révéler ce qui demeure *autre* malgré sa révélation n’est pas la pensée mais le langage du poème.” SMB, 14.

297. “la critique – parole d’un être vivat parlant à un être vivant” TM, 202.

298. “Par la parole proféré, le sujet qui se pose s’expose et, en quelque manière, prie.” TM, 203.

299. Not least in “La réalité et son ombre” where at a certain point Levinas declares: “Here we leave the limited problem of art” (RO, 123); but not only does he not leave it at all, he shows the opposite of what he says: that the question of art is precisely not “limited” because it is inseparable from (the question of) being.

uncompromising denunciation of the idolatry of art and beauty, it bears witness also, and in equal measure (though perhaps less dramatically so) to an appreciation of the unparalleled greatness, value, and ontological dignity of art, to its acknowledgment as this profound (rather than ineffable) knowledge that calls into question knowledge itself, insofar as not giving itself out to understanding, it reveals this possibility other for being, contemporaneous with its revelation, of *not revealing itself* — whereby art is this exceptional region of ambiguity that far from being dogmatic and ancillary in the economy of the philosopher’s work, is the bearer of a theoretical import that even if not always explicit (or explicitly acknowledged) will foster some of Levinas’s more “mature” questionings namely those of sensibility, temporalization, diachrony, language and, I daresay, transcendence itself, both in *Totalité et Infini* and *Autrement qu’être ou au de-delà de l’essence*.

On that note, I would like to (assuming you would too) move on at last from this remarkable yet early essay to “the *grand œuvre*” that is *Totalité et Infini* where art is, from a strictly thematic point of view, marginalized, which is not to say that it occupies a marginal place, but rather that it is given no place at all, but appears in multiple places at once, because it constantly insinuates itself, as if keeping in check the whole “metaphysics” that is deployed here, thus confirming what was said only a minute ago, that the problem of art is anything but limited.

That said, in his rare few explicit invocations of art in this work, Levinas seems to forgo the, albeit critical, more *nuanced* approach taken in 1948, for a singularly negative one that would appear to foreclose any metaphysical access to art. But before being accused of contradicting myself given what I said only moments ago, there is a (good) reason for that being so, insofar as this work, as we are told from the outset, conceives metaphysics as the relation with being [*étant*] accomplished concretely in ethics whose primacy it aims at establishing “beyond the functions of prudence or the canons of the beautiful,”³⁰⁰ before the scission of theory and practice, description and evaluation, as the very weft of the real — as the ultimate and “irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest (and in particular all those which seem to put us primordially in contact with an *impersonal sublimity*, aesthetic or ontological),”³⁰¹ that is, with an absolute that would give meaning to

300. TI, 6.

301. “L’établissement de ce primat de l’éthique . . . primat d’une structure irréductible à laquelle s’appuient toutes les autres (et en particulier toutes celles qui, d’une façon originelle, nous semblent mettre au contact d’un sublime impersonnel, esthétique ou ontologique), est l’un des buts du présent ouvrage.” TI, 77.

the real as *factum*, the imperialism of an abstract, impersonal or neutral universality, in a word: *totality*. Totality in which “individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves,” for their meaning “(invisible outside totality) is derived from this totality,” this all-encompassing objective order from which neither distance nor escape are possible, and into which their exteriority is therefore reabsorbed, and vanishes — to which Levinas will oppose, and affirm the philosophical primacy of, *the idea of infinity*, whose fundamental inadequacy brings about a rupture in totality, opening a space beyond it, a “signification without context,” a transcendence other than participation and whose intentionality is fundamentally distinct from objectivity.

But the negativity under which Levinas considers art and, broadly speaking, aesthetics, in *Totalité et Infini* (that extends just as much to, for instance, science or politics), does not mean that the analyses and the insights put forward in “La réalité et son ombre” and the earlier texts, and notably the essentially ambiguous character of art, are therefore outrightly rejected — not in the least; it seems to me that it is, instead, precisely on account of its ambiguity, and *not in spite of it*, that art is regarded in *Totalité et Infini* in a most unflattering light; why because the metaphysics deployed here *does not tolerate ambiguity*.

As such, art is reduced to its myth, to its plastic, mute and immovable character, assimilated to beauty, and distinguished by its equivocal and bewitching rhythms, emerging, thus, as the lingering threat of participation, as a spurious transcendence that submerges the transcendent being and keeps it “in its invisible meshes, as if doing violence to it.”³⁰² Art appears here as the (possible) inversion or counterfeit of the face, of language, and the ethical relation. And indeed, is not the image a *caricature*? And is not the anarchy of *il y* that art exposes (and us to it), with its degraded temporality that imprisons beings in their fate, with its frightening silence that sneers at the real word, with its enchanting rhythms that force beings into participation, rendering them mere characters in a drama — puppets with no control over their own strings —, everything from which the true transcendence of Ethics as the immediate relationship of face-to-face, as metaphysics itself, in its straightforwardness, is supposed to deliver us? And, thus, everything to which *Totalité et Infini* is meant to oppose? Absolutely. But then we read its opening line:

302. TI, 40.

‘True life is absent.’ But we are in the world. [‘La vraie vie est absent.’ Mais nous sommes au monde.]³⁰³

And so we are.

It is with this “rectified,” half-reversed, quote from Rimbaud that Levinas begins the opening chapter of *Totalité et Infini* whose intricate architecture unfolds between two poles, as it were: between totality *and* infinity,³⁰⁴ ontology *and* metaphysics, immanence *and* transcendence, the *en-deçà* *and* the *au-delà*,³⁰⁵ the Same *and* the Other, involution *and* hospitality, interiority *and* exteriority, anarchy *and* principle, caricature *and* holiness — these are the terms of the logic of opposition that steers this work, even though they express less a clear-cut dualism than the necessary intertwining leading to the “true transcendence” which here can only be that of the *au-delà*. Still, for there to be true transcendence there must first be pure immanence; principle only has sense if there is anarchy; the Face may well not be of this world, but it enters this world where, welcomed, it *signifies*, and where alone its transcendence is enacted.³⁰⁶ The distinctive movement of *Totalité et Infini* is thus this, maybe paradoxical, movement of regression to the depths of being, to the obscure recesses of the *il y a*, of the silent anarchy of the non-sense, and of the “nothingness of the future” [*le néant de l’avenir*] whose essential inquietude ultimately assures the separation of the I, as articulated in the interiority of enjoyment [*jouissance*], necessary to receive the idea of Infinity, and thus to enter into a relationship with the Other.

Yet let us not hasten to conclusions which might tempt us into further barbaric abridgments, and review instead the considerations (or insinuations) about art in *Totalité et Infini*, where there are essentially three instances wherein this problematic more or less explicitly emerges: in the analyses of sensibility and the elemental (II.B), in the account of the notion of Work [*Œuvre*] (II.E.2), and in the phenomenology of eros (IV.B) which I

303. TI, 21. The first sentence is a literal quote from Rimbaud’s “Délires I, Vierge folle, l’époux infernal,” while the second is a “correction” of the original verse, “Nous ne sommes pas au monde.” *Une saison en enfer* (1873), *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 229.

304. As argued by Jacques Rolland, “[*Totalité et Infini*] is knotted around its central ‘and’ which opposes ‘Totalité’ and ‘Infini’ by putting them in a certain way on the same level ... the *and* unites them and gathers them much more than it separates them.” Rolland, *Parcours de l’Autrement*, 12-13.

305. “Why is the beyond separated from the below? Why, to go unto the good, are evil, evolution, drama, separation necessary? [Pourquoi l’au-delà est-il séparé de l’en deçà? Pourquoi faut-il pour aller vers le bien le mal, l’évolution, le drame, la séparation ?]” TI, 317.

306. “La transcendance du visage ne se joue pas en dehors du monde.” TI, 187.

propose we now examine, not separately, but through the guiding “motif” of this work: the face of the other (*le visage d’autrui*); the face whose epiphany constitutes one of these events of being

whose ultimate signification, contrary to the Heideggerian conception, does not lie in *disclosure*. Philosophy does indeed dis-cover the signification of these events, but they are produced without discovery (or truth) being their destiny; without even any prior discovery illuminating the production of these *essentially nocturnal events*. [dont l’ultime signification contrairement à la conception heideggerienne ne revient pas à dévoiler. La philosophie dé-couvre certes la signification de ces événements, mais ces événements se produisent sans que la découverte (ou la vérité) soit leur destin; sans même qu’aucune découverte antérieure éclaire la production de ces *événements, essentiellement nocturnes*.]³⁰⁷

In its originary and pre-transcendental movement, consciousness overflows its own play of lights — the adequation of being to representation — by breaking-up “the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events that this structure dissimulates, but which sustain it and restore it [the noetic-noematic structure] to its concrete significance,” i.e., by accomplishing — *producing* (rather than constituting) — ultimate events that the author will expound in and through (though not reduced to) the categories of the face, eros and fecundity, whose “nocturnality” designates the opening of a dimension irreducible to the truth of being, to truth as representation or objective evidence, irreducible to the totalizing function of knowledge — in sum, to the powers of comprehension. Events whose signification phenomenology is, he argues, naturally apt to learn but only *a posteriori*, for these pre-exist such discovery by fundamental ontology (truth as unveiling) and by transcendental phenomenology (truth as adequation), insofar as in both these phenomenological schemes being is measured up and therefore confined to what light is able to discover — to truth as coming to light — while forgetting that “all knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, *non-adequation* par excellence;”³⁰⁸ hence Levinas’s subsequent claim that “phenomenology is a method for philosophy, but phenomenology ... does not constitute the ultimate event of being.”³⁰⁹

307. TI, 13. The second emphasis is mine.

308. “Tout savoir en tant qu’intentionnalité suppose déjà l’idée de l’infini, *l’inadéquation* par excellence.” TI, 12.

309. “La phénoménologie est une méthode philosophique, mais la phénoménologie compréhension de par la mise en lumière ne constitue pas l’événement ultime de l’être lui-même.” TI, 13.

Accomplished in a consciousness restored to its originary movement — that is, a consciousness capable of, at each moment, shattering its own horizons whereby it is open to, over and beyond adequation, receive the idea of infinity in its very *excessiveness*, i.e., as the production of its own *infinitude*, in its non-adequation to the powers of comprehension, which is therefore not a representation of infinity, but “transcendence itself ... the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it”³¹⁰ —, the ultimate event of being signifies an irreducible exteriority of being to the powers of comprehension and to truth understood as adequation of being to intellection. Hence, the original independence of the nocturnal events of being that are thus produced in consciousness, and by which being produces itself, do not ultimately (viz. originally), despite their discovery by phenomenology, have truth as their destiny — ergo, the inadequacy of being to the truth of being, to the regime of truth that does not exhaust the sense of being deployed in such events:³¹¹ it is not a question of substituting the true for the false, but “of separating the event of being and ontology, the event of being and truth – all the while designating a place for truth within the general economy of being.”³¹²

Levinas’s appeal to ethics³¹³ is born out of this questioning of the truth or light of being taken as the primordial event from which all being could be said in terms of disclosure, from which the meaning of being would be exhausted in the truth of being; hence the philosopher’s remark earlier in the preface, that “The face of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality that dominates Western philosophy,”³¹⁴ an observation that

310. “Le surplus de l’être sur la pensée qui prétend le contenir.” TI, 13.

311. “Truth, for Heidegger, – a primordial disclosure – conditions all errancy, and that is why all that is human can be said, in the final analysis, in terms of truth, be described as “disclosure of being” [Pour Heidegger la vérité – un dévoilement primordial – conditionne toute errance et c’est pourquoi tout l’humain peut se dire en fin de compte en termes de vérité, se décrire comme ‘dévoilement de l’être’]” SMB, 21.

312. “Il s’agit de séparer événement de l’être et ontologie, événement de l’être et vérité – tout en assignant à la vérité une place dans l’économie générale de l’être.” OC2 (“Pouvoirs et Origine”).

313. “The appeal to ethics runs contrary to the fundamental dogma of Heideggerian orthodoxy: priority of being over be-ing. Yet ethics does not replace the true for the false, but places man’s first breath not in the light of being but in the relation to a be-ing, prior to the thematization of that be-ing — such a relation in which the be-ing does not become my object is precisely justice. [La référence à l’éthique est à l’opposé du dogme premier de l’orthodoxie heideggerienne: antériorité de l’être par rapport à l’étant. Et cependant l’éthique ne substitue point le faux au vrai, mais situe le premier souffle de l’homme non pas dans la lumière de l’être, mais dans le rapport avec l’étant, antérieur à la thématization de cet étant – un tel rapport où l’étant ne devient pas mon objet est précisément la justice.]” SMB, 23.

314. TI, 6.

did not pass unnoticed under the eye of Gabriel Marcel who argued: “The face of being: there would thus be another face!”³¹⁵ Indeed, for what the deployment of the nocturnal events of being reveals is that clarity is not commensurate with these events, what it reveals is that there is another “face” of being, beyond its “enlightened face” — a “nocturnal face” if you will — and thus a constitutive dimension of being that is refractory to the powers of comprehension and truth, that escapes the light of thematization. And here is where an important, and thorny question arises: is this not the same constitutive dimension of being that in 1948 Levinas acknowledged to art? As the unique and separate ontological event irreducible to comprehension and truth of being, “the event of darkening of being, parallel with its revelation, its truth”? Indeed. This dimension irreducible to cognition and truth as disclosure that in *Totalité et Infini* Levinas puts forth as that of ethics seems to correspond to that which, 13 years earlier, he had found to be that of art which brings to light the non-truth of being. Having said that, this correspondence cannot be taken at face value, for one must be mindful not only of the disparity of scope and breadth of each text but also of the precise meaning that the term “truth of being” bears in one and the other which brings into play moreover the distinction, averted in 1948 whereas capital in 1961, between the notions of “revelation” and “disclosure.” To all this, and as Levinas will do his utmost to show, the categories of art as presented in the 1948 article and restated here in essence from which it will be claimed that “every work of art is painting and statuary, immobilized in the instant or in its periodic return”³¹⁶ are, maybe on account of their ambiguity, an inadequate basis from which to search for the originary sense of being (and the original sense of truth), whose eminently ethical character demands rather a living presence; neither figure nor metaphor, but a presence *in person*, in itself — *καθ’ αὐτό* — nudity without context³¹⁷ and therefore without any intermediaries, that is present inasmuch as it refuses to be contained, which in

315. “La face de l’être : il y aurait donc une autre face ! Si l’on s’engageait dans cette direction on serait conduit, semble-t-il, à admettre qu’il y a un versant de l’être qui est accessible à la pensée totalisante, c’est-à-dire à celle par laquelle l’altérité se résorbe en fin de compte dans le Même.” “Rapport de Gabriel Marcel,” in *Levinas: au-delà du visible*, 57.

316. “Toute œuvre d’art est tableau et statue, immobilisés dans l’instant ou dans son retour périodique.” TI, 294-295.

317. “The nakedness of the face is not a figure of speech – the face signifies by itself. We cannot even say that the face is an opening; that would be to render it relative to an environing plenitude. [La nudité du visage n’est pas une figure de style – elle signifie par elle-même. On ne peut même pas dire que le visage soit une ouverture; ce serait le rendre relatif à une plénitude environnante.]” Levinas, “L’ontologie est-elle fondamentale?,” 7.

Totalité et Infini Levinas will name face. Face? “but I recognize it”... indeed, “the name poses difficulties;”³¹⁸ difficulties that even its painstaking elaboration can only at a great linguistic effort circumvent yet not without, paradoxically, unearthing in the face a profound and novel ambivalence,³¹⁹ constitutive of its exceptional manifestation, bringing us to the first point of our analysis which I would like to begin by quoting one of the most unerring articulations of the face, provided in Section I.A.5, “La transcendance comme l’idée de l’infini”:

The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the Other in me*, we name, in fact, face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other destroys at each moment and overflows the plastic image it leaves me. [La manière dont se présente l’Autre, dépassant l’idée de l’Autre en moi, nous l’appelons, en effet, visage. Cette façon ne consiste pas à figurer comme thème sous mon regard, à s’étaler comme un ensemble de qualités formant une image. Le visage d’Autrui détruit à tout moment, et déborde l’image plastique qu’il me laisse.]³²⁰

It is interesting even if not, perhaps, awfully relevant to note that in the English language the term “visage” describes quite accurately the opposite of what Levinas means with the same word in French; because the Face (*Visage*) such as it is meant and described here is not only, nor primarily, a visage (*face*). Thankfully, both languages agree on the term *countenance*, so we may forgo a study on comparative linguistics or a treacherous transliteration to agree on what the Face of the Other is essentially not. *It is not countenance*. The face of the Other is not its appearance; it is not that set of eyes, a nose, a mouth and whatever more there is to a face; it is not that which can be seen, nor is it what can be touched like a surface or a matter; it is not what can be deemed handsome, hideous, or plain ordinary, for it is not that which *appears*.

318. “Le visage – mais je le reconnais, le nom fais difficulté.” Blanchot, *L’Entretien Infini*, 77.

319. This (paradoxical) ambivalence of the face which is accompanied by the difficulty in articulating it, comes to light quite clearly in section III.B.3, in what would appear as a blunder on the part of our author who writes: “The face in which the other, absolutely other, presents himself, does not negate the Same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. *It remains commensurate with him who welcomes*; it remains terrestrial. [Le visage où se présente l’Autre absolument autre ne nie pas le Même, ne le violente pas comme l’opinion ou l’autorité ou le surnaturel thaumaturgique. *Il reste à la mesure de celui qui accueille*, il reste terrestre.]” My emphasis. TI, 222.

320. TI, 43.

The fatal accumulation of “no’s” in attempting to describe the face is everything but meaningless considering that the Face is the very revelation of infinity (not its manifestation but its *descent*) whose perfection exceeds conception and all formal logic. The Face is, thus, inhabited by a certain *negativity*, but one whose antonym is not positivity but rather articulates the meaning of that perfection. The Face of the Other constitutes then a particular and unique kind of phenomenon, one that “is a certain non-phenomenality,” and whose “presence *is* a certain absence,”³²¹ which describes this singular “mode” of (not) appearing, or of appearing (*apparaître*) without appear (*paraître*) — precisely the way the Other presents itself to the I, without giving itself to me. As such, the face is beyond every attribute, quiddity, category, and form;³²² form “by which a being is turned toward the sun ... by which it comes forward,”³²³ by which reduced to a set of qualities, to an image or a concept, as the signifier of a signified, a being manifests itself and is thus given to a consciousness, that is, offered to assimilation to which the face as the paradoxical revelation of what cannot be disclosed — the exteriority of infinite being — is utter and infinite *resistance*; a resistance that is rendered concretely in the essential characteristic of the face: its *nudity* — a destitution, existence *καθ’ αὐτό* — that “destroys at each moment and overflows the plastic image it leaves me.”

Now, the term image calls immediately for a clarification, insofar as this “image” that naturally and irresistibly clings to the face, and from which Levinas yearns to detach it, is not, it must be said despite the evidence, meant to designate neither solely nor primarily the artistic image which is only a “secondary” type of representation in which a thought thinking the thing prevails; but rather the “image” as idea, the pure appearance as a phenomenon, to which representation as the privileged mode of thought among others, prior to any artistic representation, would reduce the face thereby destroying its uniqueness and restoring the individual to generality, insofar as representation, intentionality, amounts to a thematization of what lets itself be designated, in which “the thing thought [*le pensé*] is put at the disposal

321. Jacques Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d’Emmanuel Levinas,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 69, no. 3 (1964), 336.

322 “The face does not resemble the plastic form, always already betrayed by the being it reveals, like the marble from which the gods it manifests are already absent. [Le visage ne ressemble point à la forme plastique, toujours déjà désertée, trahie par l’être qu’elle révèle, comme le marbre dont, déjà, les dieux qu’il manifeste, s’absentent.]” Levinas, “La philosophie et l’idée de l’Infini,” in EDE, 173.

323. EE, 61.

and to the measure of thought [*la pensée*].”³²⁴ But even in the absence of any intentional imagery, be it artistic or representational, the image is already an inherent possibility of perception itself, for in the gaze that stares at the face of the other, its unicity and irreducible alterity can already be misunderstood, unrecognized.³²⁵ But even so, we would be disregarding one of the major contributions of the *Les Temps Modernes* article, if we failed to recall that even before the perceptual act, the doubling of being, its resembling and doubling is an imminent ontological possibility, one “that extends to light itself, to thought, to inner life,”³²⁶ that ontological process internal to the whole of reality, to being itself (because “there is duality in existence, an essential lack of simplicity”)³²⁷ by which being self-reflects, whereby it is itself *and* the image it casts, the shadow that tirelessly pursues it and clings to it “as a last and inalienable possession.”³²⁸ But then we would have to concede that the face *is* also an image, a caricature! Indeed. That is the other “possibility” of the face, the other pole of its ambivalent structure, contemporaneous with its revelation, with its *holiness*, its separation,³²⁹ that is, as Jacques Colléony puts it, “the possibility of detaching itself from the assimilative activity of the Same” is what “defines the face in its alterity as separation;”³³⁰ radical separation as an infinitely distant term (*totaliter aliter*) that precludes the reconstitution of totality: infinitely removed from the I and infinitely exterior to the sphere of the Same, it is present insofar as it refuses to be contained:

324. As such, and as Levinas will argue in “Interdit de la représentation et ‘droits de l’homme,” the ‘prohibition against representation’ is perhaps but the “denunciation of an *intelligibility* that one would like to reduce to knowledge, and that pretends to be original or ultimate, claiming, wrongly perhaps, the dignity of being the birthplace of, and bearer of, the indelible categories of the mind. [L’interdit de la représentation’ ne serait-il pas, dès lors, la dénonciation d’une *intelligibilité* qu’on voudrait réduire au savoir et qui se prétendrait originelle ou ultime, revendiquant, à tort peut-être, la dignité d’être le lieu de naissance et d’apporter les catégories ineffaçables de l’esprit?]]” AT, 130-131.

325. Levinas, AT, 131.

326. RO, 117.

327. EE, 37.

328. EE, 38

329. “Separation,” in *Totalité et Infini*, is the ethical signification of “holiness;” hence Levinas’s definition of ethics in a 1989 interview as “the possible holiness”: “je appelle éthique la sainteté possible” (quoted by Alain David, “Levinas et la phénoménologie,” op cit, 117). Holiness that as A. David reminds us, is what “is the closest and farthest from sacredness.” A. David and Fernanda Bernardo “Les ‘Carnets de Captivité’, par-delà la mort, une ouverture sur le visage de Levinas,” *Revista Filosófica de Coimbra* 21:41 (2012), 180-181.

330. Jacques Colléony, “Levinas et l’art. La réalité et son ombre,” *La part de l’Œil*, 7: *Art et phénoménologie* (1991), 90.

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. Neither seen, nor touched, for in visual or tactile sensation, the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object which precisely becomes a content. [Le visage est présent dans son refus d'être contenu. Dans ce sens il ne saurait être compris, c'est-à-dire englobé. Ni vu, ni touché car dans la sensation visuelle ou tactile, l'identité du moi enveloppe l'altérité de l'objet qui précisément devient contenu.]³³¹

Now, if the face is only present in its “refusal to be contained,” this *refusal* that is articulated in the sensible, by which the face ensures its separation, its independence, is intrinsic to this unique dimension of the face which cannot but open in its sensible appearance, in the sensible which it at once rends. As analysis of sensibility is thus in order.

As hinted at earlier, sensibility as the mode of enjoyment [*jouissance*] plays a crucial part in *Totalité et Infini*, in terms of the effectuation of the I as independent and separated, and therefore predisposed to enter into a relation with the Other. Thus, in section II, “Interiority and Economy,” Levinas elaborates an arresting analysis of enjoyment whose I (the I of enjoyment) is not, he claims, “the *support* of enjoyment” but “the very contraction of sentiment, the pole of a spiral whose coiling and involution is drawn by enjoyment,” whereby the intentionality of enjoyment consists in “holding on to the exteriority which the transcendental method involved in representation suspends,”³³² because the intelligibility involved in representation, or rather, “intelligibility [as] the very occurrence of representation,” determines that the exteriority of the object represented appears as a meaning ascribed by the representing subject, as though it were a work of thought, constituted by thought itself, a noema, “a free exercise of the Same” which determines the other without being determined by it, whereby the I opposed to the non I disappears, is dissipated within the Same; such is the constitutive character of representation — not “to render present ‘anew’ [but] to reduce to the present an actual perception which flows on [...] not to reduce a past fact to an actual image but to reduce to the instantaneousness of thought everything that seems independent of it.”³³³

331. TI, 211.

332 “L’intentionnalité de la jouissance peut se décrire par opposition à l’intentionnalité de la représentation. Elle consiste à tenir à l’extériorité que suspend la méthode transcendantale incluse dans la représentation.” TI, 133. The transcendental method whose value and share of eternal truth “lies in the universal possibility of reducing the represented to its meaning, the be-ing to the noema, the most astonishing possibility of reducing to a noema the very being of be-ing. [la possibilité universelle de réduction du représenté à son sens, de l’étant au noème, sur la possibilité la plus étonnante de réduire au noème l’être même de l’étant.]” TI, 133.

It is thus by contrast with the intentionality of representation that Levinas defines the intentionality of enjoyment, as the very reversal of the movement of constitution that characterizes the former, and which conditions such constitution. Enjoyment, we are told, does not issue in some sort of ecstasy or projection starting from oneself which would delineate an inside-out movement, outside of oneself but, on the contrary, one of withdrawal, a movement toward itself — an *involution* — that, as such, entails a dependence upon an exteriority (an alterity) on the non-I that cannot be constituted, as it would in representation but only assumed; now, to assume an exteriority rather than constituting it means “to enter into a relation with it such that the Same determines the other while being determined by it”³³⁴ which is precisely the sense of “living from ...” [*vivre de ...*] which is accomplished by the body, by a corporeal positing such that, explains Levinas, “the touching finds itself already conditioned by the position, the foot settles into a real which this very action outlines or constitutes,” to which he adds a very curious final image: “as though a painter would notice that he is descending from the picture he is painting.”³³⁵ Thus, in enjoyment as the mode of “living from ...” the world is not reduced, as in representation, to an instant of a thought as its counterpart, whereby the things from which one lives are not reduced to represented realities, as the correlates of *noemas*, but anterior and irreducible to their knowledge, refer to a fathomless depth of the world in which things emerge, from which they come to representation, and to which beyond or, rather, beneath their use, finality or possession return in the enjoyment we can have of them.³³⁶ And this fathomless depth that

333. “Représenter, ce n’est pas seulement rendre ‘à nouveau’ présent, c’est ramener au présent même une perception actuelle qui s’écoule. Représenter, ce n’est pas ramener un fait passé à une image actuelle, mais ramener à l’instantanéité d’une pensée tout ce qui semble indépendant d’elle. C’est en cela que la représentation est constituante.” TI, 133.

334. “Assumer l’extériorité, c’est entrer avec elle dans une relation où le Même détermine l’autre, tout en étant déterminé par lui.” TI, 134.

335. “Se poser corporellement, c’est toucher une terre, mais de telle façon que la taction se trouve déjà conditionnée par la position, que le pied s’installe dans un réel que cette action dessine ou constitue, comme si un peintre s’apercevait qu’il descend du tableau qu’il est en train de peindre.” TI, 134.

336. “We live from ‘good soup,’ air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc... These are not objects of representations. We live from them. What we live from is no longer a ‘means of life’ [...] The things we live from are not tools, nor even implements, in the Heideggerian sense of the term. Their existence is not exhausted by the utilitarian schematism that delineates them as having the existence of hammers, needles, or machines. They are always in a certain measure, and even the hammers, needles, and machines are objects of enjoyment, offering themselves to ‘taste,’ already adorned, embellished. [Nous vivons de ‘bonne soupe,’ d’air, de lumière, de spectacles, de travail, d’idées, de sommeil, etc... Ce ne sont pas là objets de représentations. Nous en vivons. Ce dont nous vivons, n’est pas non plus ‘moyen de vie’ [...] Les choses dont nous vivons ne sont pas des outils,

provides the particular environment or milieu within which, through the mediation of corporeal sensibility, enjoyment is produced, and within which “every relation or possession is situated,” is what the philosopher names, to no great surprise,³³⁷ the “*element*” or the “*elemental*.”

Irreducible to a system of references or to some sort of “graspable totality,” the element is essentially non-possessable — it “envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped” — it has a thickness to it, but no forms that contain it and that would allow for it to be grasped, possessed; the element is *pure quality*, quality without substance and thus without support, whereby there are no sides to it either, nor any sort of beginning or end; of the elemental we are “offered” but one single dimension: that in which it unfolds, its *depth*, that prolongs it till it is lost in nowhere — but which, thus, determines nothing: neither a thing, nor an object, nor any sort of determinable “something,” the element is rebellious to all identification, it is “entirely anonymous” which is why one cannot face it, but only *bathe* in it, and “to bathe in the element is to be in an inside-out world,” whose reverse (which unlike the obverse is “without origin in a being”) it presents to us, in the familiarity of enjoyment, and where thus the essentially naïve sensibility touches, and already content, forgoes the obverse. And this because the element precedes the distinction between the finite and the infinite, and preceding it, remains inevitably outside of it, whereby in enjoyment we are separated from the infinite³³⁸ — because already content in the finite, in *finition*, the pure finality of sensibility:³³⁹ “To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure – this is the human.”³⁴⁰ And this enjoyment

ni même des ustensiles, au sens heideggerien du terme. Leur existence ne s'épuise pas par le schématisme utilitaire qui les dessine, comme l'existence des marteaux, des aiguilles ou des machines. Elles sont toujours, dans une certaine mesure, et même les marteaux, les aiguilles et les machines le sont objets de jouissance, s'offrant au 'goût' déjà ornées, embellies.]” TI, 112-113.

337. The correlation of sensibility with the “element” or “elemental” (and, consequently with the *il y a*) was, however precariously, already delineated by Levinas in 1947 through the analysis of the aesthetic event in the chapter “Existence sans monde” of EE (Cf. 83-92).

338 “L'élément bouche en quelque façon l'infini par rapport auquel il aurait fallu le penser et par rapport auquel le situe, en fait, la pensée scientifique qui a reçu d'ailleurs l'idée de l'infini. L'élément nous sépare de l'infini.” TI, 140.

339. “The finite without the infinite is possible only as contentment. The finite as contentment is sensibility. [Le fini sans l'infini, n'est possible que comme contentement. Le fini comme contentement est la sensibilité.]” TI, 143.

340. “Jouir sans utilité, en pure perte, gratuitement, sans renvoyer à rien d'autre, en pure dépense – voilà l'humain.” TI, 141.

accompanies and embraces all relations to all things, “even in a complex enterprise where the end of a labor alone absorbs the research;” every object and every thing offers itself to enjoyment, is subordinated to it, be it Heidegger’s *Zeugen* whose handing or recourse by an always-satiated-*Dasein* concludes nevertheless in enjoyment — this ultimate relation with the substantial plenitude of the materiality of being that the author of *Sein und Zeit* would appear to have neglected.³⁴¹ And indeed, Levinas’s account of enjoyment (and the subsequent analysis of habitation [*demeure*] and labor [*travail*]) can be thought of as something of an “alternative version” regarding the structure of the Heideggerian *Dasein* and its facticity, having as its starting point, the *rehabilitation of sensation* promoted by Levinas, from which he can posit this “here” [*ici*] of sensibility as fundamentally distinct from the “*Da*” of the Heideggerian understanding of the world,³⁴² and from which a whole parallel can be drawn between these two “pictures” of human existence: the “being-in-the-element” to the “being-in-the-world,” “involution” to “ecstasis” [*Ekstasis*], “immersion” to “thrownness” [*Geworfenheit*] or “enjoyment” to “care” [*Sorge*] — precisely, the “care of existence” from which Levinas longs to relief “his” being, hence:

The inversion of the instincts of nutrition, which have lost their biological finality, marks the very disinterestedness of man. The suspension or absence of the ultimate finality has a positive face – the disinterested joy of play. To live is to play, despite the finality and tension of instinct to live from something without this something having the sense of a goal or an ontological means. [L’inversion des instincts de nutrition qui ont perdu leur finalité biologique, marque le désintéressement même de l’homme. La suspension ou l’absence de la finalité dernière a une face positive, la joie désintéressée du jeu. Vivre, c’est jouer en dépit de la finalité et de la tension de l’instinct; vivre de quelque chose sans

341. “The for-the-sake-of-which signifies an in-order-to, the in-order-to signifies a what-for, the what-for signifies a what-in of letting something be relevant, and the latter a what-with of relevance. These relations are interlocked among themselves as a primordial totality. They are what they are as this signifying in which *Dasein* gives itself to understand its being-in-the-world beforehand. We shall call this relational totality of signification significance [*Bedeutsamkeit*]. It is what constitutes the structure of the world, of that in which *Dasein* as such always already is.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §18.

342. “I am myself, I am here, at home with myself, inhabitation, immanence in the world. My sensibility is here. In my position there is not the sentiment of localization, but the localization of my sensibility. Position, absolutely without transcendence, does not resemble the comprehension of the world by the Heideggerian *Da*. It is not a care for being, nor a relation with be-ing, nor even a negation of the world, but its accessibility in enjoyment. [Je suis moi-même, je suis ici, chez moi, habitation, immanence au monde. Ma sensibilité est ici. Il n’y a pas dans ma position le sentiment de la localisation, mais la localisation de ma sensibilité. La position, absolument sans transcendance, ne ressemble pas à la compréhension du monde par le *Da* heideggérien. Pas souci d’être, ni relation avec l’étant, pas même négation du monde, mais son accessibilité dans la jouissance.]” TI, 146.

que ce quelque chose ait le sens d'un but ou d'un moyen ontologique, simple jeu ou jouissance de la vie.]³⁴³

This suspension of ontological finality,³⁴⁴ this carelessness with regard to existence, whose prolongations do not beset the being-in-element thus disengaged from participation in a whole, from its very participation in being from which it is in fact independent, it exists, as it were, *en-deçà* or *au-delà*, behind the back of being, since it lives on nutrients, on objects returned to their elemental essence that have no other finality than their very enjoyment, by which sensibility is posited as the very “contentment of existence,” wherein the egoism of the I pulsates; egoism that is the original layer of constitution of the “I” as oneself, is only made possible through the aforementioned “rehabilitation” of sensation from its traditional interpretation in terms of objectification.

The philosophical tradition has, Levinas claims, “failed to recognize the plane on which the sensible life is lived as enjoyment” which should not, he argues, be interpreted in terms of objectification insofar as “sensibility is not a fumbling objectification. Enjoyment, by essence satisfied, characterizes all sensations whose representational content dissolves into their affective content.”³⁴⁵ The interpretation of sensation in function of objectification that derives from the “constructed character” of sensation as held by the “classical analysis” was, Levinas claims, subsequently assumed by the idea of intentionality, according to which

343. TI, 141. Enjoyment should not, on the other hand, as Levinas notes in *Le Temps et l'Autre*, be considered “in terms of profits or losses,” which is why he claims that his conception of enjoyment, “as a departure from the self is opposed to Platonism,” as is “the entire experience of youth,” insofar as Plato, he claims, “makes a calculation when he denounces the mixed pleasures; they are impure since they presuppose a lack that is filled without any real gain being recorded.” Instead, argues the philosopher, enjoyment should be viewed “in its becoming, its event, in relationship to the drama of the ego inscribed in being. [Cette conception de la jouissance comme d'une sortie de soi s'oppose au platonisme. Platon fait un calcul quand il dénonce les plaisirs mélangés ; impurs puisqu'ils supposent un manque qui se comble sans qu'aucun gain réel ne soit enregistré- Ce n'est pas en termes de profits et de pertes qu'il convient de juger la jouissance ; il faut l'envisager dans son devenir, dans son événement, par rapport au drame du moi s'inscrivant dans l'être ... toute l'expérience de la jeunesse s'oppose au calcul platonicien.]” TA, 91-92 (note 3).

344. “To be I is to exist in such a way as to be already beyond being, in happiness. For the I to be means neither to oppose nor to represent something to itself, nor to use something, nor to aspire to something, but to enjoy something [Être moi, c'est exister de telle manière qu'on soit déjà au-delà de l'être dans le bonheur. Pour le moi être ne signifie ni s'opposer, ni se représenter quelque chose, ni se servir de quelque chose, ni aspirer à quelque chose, mais en jouir.]” TI, 124.

345 “Cette critique de la sensation méconnaît le plan où la vie sensible se vit comme jouissance. Ce mode de vie ne devrait pas s'interpréter en fonction de l'objectivation. La sensibilité n'est pas une objectivation qui se cherche. La jouissance, satisfaite par essence, caractérise toutes les sensations dont le contenu représentatif se dissout dans leur contenu affectif.” TI, 204.

we would always find ourselves among things: color is always extended and objective, the color of a dress, a lawn, a wall; sound is a noise of a passing car, or a voice of someone speaking [...] Sensation as a simple quality floating in the air or in our soul represents an abstraction because, without the object to which it refers, quality can have the signification of being a quality only in a relative sense: by turning over a painting we can see the colors of the objects painted as colors in themselves (but in fact already as colors of the canvas that bears them). Unless their purely aesthetic effect would not consist in this detachment from the object, but then sensation would result from a long thought process. [Nous nous trouverions toujours auprès des choses, la couleur est toujours étendue et objective, couleur d'une robe, d'un gazon, d'un mur – le son, bruit de la voiture qui passe, ou voix de l'homme qui parle [...] La sensation comme simple qualité flottant en l'air ou dans notre âme, représente une abstraction parce que, sans l'objet auquel elle se rapporte, la qualité ne saurait avoir la signification de qualité sinon dans un sens relatif: nous pouvons en retournant un tableau voir les couleurs des objets peints comme couleurs en elles-mêmes (mais en réalité déjà comme couleurs de la toile qui les porte). A moins que leur effet purement esthétique ne consiste dans ce détachement de l'objet, mais alors la sensation résulterait d'un long cheminement de la pensée.]³⁴⁶

The objectifying character of intentionality constitutes, as we know, one, if not *the*, major objection of Levinas to Husserlian phenomenology,³⁴⁷ while the relation of intentionality to sensation (and temporalization) is not only a recurrent and evolving problematic in Levinas's studies on Husserl,³⁴⁸ but one that would have a particularly profound influence on his own

346. TI, 203-204.

347. According to Stephan Strasser, after having objected, in *La théorie de l'intuition dans la Phénoménologie de Husserl*, to the "ideal of a supra-temporal, eternally valid theory," as well as "the intellectualist character of the transcendental phenomenological reduction," Levinas, notwithstanding his defense of Husserl ten years later, in "L'œuvre d'Edmond Husserl," weaves there three new critiques, one of which being, precisely, the aforementioned objectifying character of intentionality, together with, claims Strasser, the "immanence of consciousness" and the "the pretension that the conscious subject is absolute origin," the ontological consequences of which will, according to the author, constitute the focus of the 1940 study. Cf. Strasser, "Antiphénoménologie et phénoménologie dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 75(25), 1997, 102-104.

348. For instance, in 1940, Levinas claimed to perceive a wavering "in the L.U. concerning the role of sensations – inert elements bereft of meaning, whose function in conscious life is very poorly defined (is it enough to say that intentions animate them, or that they are the 'building-stones of acts) – may induce us to take literally a language that needs to be interpreted. But what cannot mislead us as to the genuine meaning of Husserl's thought is the subordination of the world of sensation to the phenomenology of intentions, and the appearance of the play of intentions and identification at the core of sensation itself. [Le flottement que l'on perçoit dans les L. U. sur le rôle des sensations – éléments inertes et dépourvus de sens dont la fonction dans la vie consciente est fort mal définie (suffit-il de dire que les intentions les animent ou qu'ils sont les 'pierres de construction des actes?'), tout cela peut nous pousser à prendre à la lettre un langage qu'il convient d'interpréter. Ce qui ne peut tromper cependant sur le véritable sens de la pensée husserlienne, c'est la subordination du monde de la sensation à la phénoménologie des intentions et l'apparition du jeu des intentions et des identifications au sein de la sensation elle-même.]" EDE, 31.

While in 1965 he claims: "Husserl holds on to a notion from which the message of intentionality should, it would seem, have freed him: the notion of sensation. Hyletic data are found at the basis of intentionality.

inquiries, ultimately leading to the *deformalization of time* that, in *Autrement qu'être*, will come to interrupt phenomenology itself. Through his analysis of enjoyment, Levinas seeks to show that the things we enjoy, sensations themselves, are not simply, nor originally, intentional poles nor objects of knowledge, insofar as they are not the result of our acts of consciousness nor are they contents that would come to fulfill forms a priori of objectivity, rather these are contents, direct objects, that complement the “living from...” — neither representations nor means to act upon, but the very contents of life; and it is thus that “living from...” sensibility as enjoyment, marks a break with the idealism of the “consciousness of...” of thematization, of conferring meaning to each thing, bringing to light not only the immediacy of the sensation, but its “suis generis transcendental function.”³⁴⁹

But being the object of a remarkable development in *Totalité et Infini*, what Levinas himself refers to as the “rehabilitation of sensation” does not, however, as the reader is no doubt aware, have its origin here, it does not “begin” with enjoyment, for we saw it emerge in our philosopher’s various aesthetic analyses³⁵⁰ starting from the 1944 note “Problèmes d’esthétique” that was the subject of discussion in our previous chapter.³⁵¹ There we were told that sensation as aesthetic object consisted precisely in this detachment from its objective meaning, from its objective reference and was considered, and analyzed, thus in its pure state, sensation as such, independent from the objectivity of the object and irreducible to objectifying intentionality; an analysis that was later prolonged in *De*

Sensation, far from playing within the system the role of a residue that would progressively be removed, occupies a more and more important role in Husserlian meditation. [Husserl conserve une notion dont le message de l’intentionnalité devait, semble-t-il, libérer: celle de la sensation. Les données hylétiques se trouvent à la base de l’intentionnalité. Loin de jouer dans le système le rôle d’un résidu dont l’évacuation progressive devait intervenir, la sensation occupe dans la méditation husserlienne une place de plus en plus grande.] EDE, 148.

349. “Au lieu de prendre les sensations pour des contenus devant remplir des formes a priori de l’objectivité, il faut leur reconnaître une fonction transcendantale sui generis.” TI, 204.

350. We should remember, on the other hand, the conference “Parole et Silence,” where sound was differentiated from all other sensations and said to rupture the phenomenal word by its transcendence. As mentioned earlier the phenomenology of sound, elaborated there, was not pursued by Levinas whom, in *Totalité et Infini*, not only does not distinguish sound from all other sensations belonging to the sphere of enjoyment and thus of immanence, but suggests it to be the “medium” of thought of the I of representation — “The subject that thinks by representation is a subject that hearkens to its own thought: *one has to think of thought as in an element analogous to sound and not to light*. [Le sujet qui pense par la représentation est un sujet qui écoute sa pensée: *la pensée se pense dans un élément analogue au son et non pas à la lumière*.]” TI, 132 (my emphasis). It would appear, thus, that between 1948 and 1961, sound has “lost” its privilege, that is, its transcendence.

351. See *supra* section 1.5.

l'existence à l'existant, with the introduction of the term “exoticism” through which it was claimed that that art tears things from the perspective of the world and from our possession, conferring upon them an *alterity*, that through it, sensation returned to the impersonality of the elements that led to the “discovery” of the materiality of being, in its raw state, as the very fact of the *il y a*;³⁵² but no less in “La réalité et son ombre” where sensibility was posited as a “distinct ontological event” — as the doubling of reality and being, resemblance —, where sensation, freed of all conception, was said to appear with the *image*, of which it constituted its hold over us, in which *intention got lost*, and whose function of rhythm, as the ambiguous commerce with reality, outside of being-in-the-world, exposed reality and the subject to their non-coincidence with themselves, exposed their own internal antagonism, engendering the desubstantialization of the subject with the turning of the oneself into *anonymity*.

There is then, as noted, between the 1944 and the 1947 (and the 1948) analyses of art, the notable difference that the horizon of aesthetics from which Levinas theorized sensibility became that of *being*, and more precisely, of being understood as the *il y a* — a dimension, thus, not only of absence of objects and meaning, but also of the depersonalization of the subject — something that, considering that in *Totalité et Infini*, sensibility constitutes, as the mode of enjoyment, a core element of the articulation of subjectivity, its *elemental* foundation — would appear to contradict its initial theorization which it no less takes up in essence; but there are two reasons why it does not: first, because the constitutive connection between sensation and sensible subjectivization was already somehow, I believe, tacit in the 1948 text at least, in which a duality emerged within the subject, a diastasis, an ambiguity in being itself, an essential non-coincidence of the I with itself — this other than I in me, a stranger, a shadow, “*une solitude à deux*”³⁵³ — which faced with the work became exterior to itself, essentially *anonymous*, and thus no longer a being-in-the-world which, one could say, precludes the essential ambiguity of oneself [*soi-même*] and anonymity at the heart of the sensible subjectivization articulated in *Totalité et Infini*, as we will see in a moment; and secondly, because artistic enjoyment was said, in “La réalité et son ombre” (harshly, it is true, but nonetheless) to constitute an egoism of sorts, it was said that art was a source of

352. “Behind the luminosity of forms, by which beings already relate to our ‘inside’ – matter is the very fact of the *there is*. [Derrière la luminosité des formes par lesquelles les êtres se réfèrent déjà à notre ‘dedans’ – la matière est le fait même de *l’il y a*].” EE, 92.

353. EE, 151.

pleasure and contentment having its place (even if only a place) in man's happiness (and artistic and aesthetic enjoyment are more than implicit in Levinas's 1961 discussion of enjoyment, as we will see shortly); and notwithstanding the question of irresponsibility, the "event" of artistic enjoyment is particularly revealing of the surpassing of satisfaction in satisfaction that characterizes enjoyment which need does not account for, insofar as, albeit achieved, satisfaction is not the end of enjoyment (which is an end in itself); need traverses enjoyment inasmuch as the enjoying subject, even if satisfied, is always hungry, i.e., always "needy," not that he is never satisfied, but he is never satisfied of being satisfied, for one is never tired of enjoying, because one lives of, feeds of enjoying, whereby if one were to stop enjoying one would die (isn't that precisely suicide?), much like one would sometimes rather die than to do without enjoying.³⁵⁴ Thus enjoyment is in constant renewal: it does not cease to renew itself, whereby need is always-already beyond satisfaction, whereby also enjoyment can be said to be a continual accomplishment insofar as it is an infinite renewal. Can we not say the same about art? And about artistic enjoyment?

Art is, as we know (but are often afraid to say) essentially *useless*: it is not a tool, it is not a means of communication, nor a means of any kind, it is an end in itself, one that requires interpretation, surely, but in and of itself art does not have a purpose: it is what it is and nothing more, nor nothing less; so why do artists continue to produce works of art? Why do people keep enjoying them? Why after listening to a song, one listens to another one, a different one, or the same one over and over? Why does one listen to music in the first place? Have we not seen enough movies? Read enough books? The incessant renewal of art, and of the interpretation it calls for infinitely which only renews, I believe, its very enjoyment, strikes me as particularly suitable to better understand what is at stake in enjoyment and of its renewable character; it is, if I may put it so, the epitome of enjoyment.

So, this transcendental analysis of sensation is, indeed, in line with Levinas's earlier phenomenology of the sensible in the context of art — there is a clear continuity in his characterization of sensibility which is "born" in the aesthetic dimension; something that is indeed confirmed when in the last part of the above cited passage Levinas refers to the

354. "The contents from which life lives are not always indispensable for the maintenance of that life, as means or as the fuel necessary for the 'functioning' of existence. Or at least they are not lived as such. With them we die, and sometimes prefer to die rather than be without them. [Les contenus dont vit la vie ne lui sont pas toujours indispensables au maintien de cette vie, comme des moyens ou comme le carburant nécessaire au 'fonctionnement' de l'existence. Ou, du moins, ils ne sont pas vécus comme tels. Avec eux, nous mourons et, parfois, préférons-nous mourir que d'en manquer.]" TI, 113.

essential detachment from the object as the aesthetic effect that is “compromised” by the idea of intentionality according to which the colors of a painting are always (or already) the colors of the canvas that bears them, but precisely, sensibility “does not aim at an object, however rudimentary. It concerns even the elaborated forms of consciousness, but its proper work consists in enjoyment, through which every object is dissolved into the element in which enjoyment is steeped.”³⁵⁵ Because to be sure, the objects of the everyday experience, the object that the concrete I encounters in the world are not “elements” but things qua things, convertible, realizable, have a name and identity, “are fixed by the word which gives them, which communicates them and thematizes them;”³⁵⁶ these are productions, the result of a labor, things in which “the sensible qualities already cling to a substance,” and are thus represented, grasped by perception; but the world of perception, the world of language, of instruments, of possession, that is, the ordinary course of life, is not primordial, but rooted in this elemental inconspicuous background that precedes and conditions it, the very same element that, as noted and discussed previously, we find in Levinas’s aesthetic theorizations.

Thus, the concept of sensibility is, in 1961, much as it were in 1947, conceived and understood from this “substantially ‘blind’ and passive reality,”³⁵⁷ this elemental where the access to reality is made through enjoyment, where the commerce with it is affective and spontaneous, sincere and naïve, and thus essentially sufficient, one that contents the I and marks its sufficiency and sovereignty as an independent ego without my being aware of it; but also without my being aware of it, the identity of things in perception remains unstable, and does not “close off the return of things to the element;”³⁵⁸ speaking of which:

The aesthetic orientation man gives to the whole of his world represents, on a higher plane, a return to enjoyment and to the elemental. The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image. All art is plastic. Tools and implements which themselves presuppose enjoyment, offer themselves to enjoyment in their turn. They are playthings: the fine cigarette lighter, the fine car. They are adorned by the

355. “La sensibilité ne vise pas un objet et fût-il rudimentaire. Elle concerne jusqu’aux formes élaborées de la conscience, mais son œuvre propre consiste en la jouissance, à travers laquelle tout objet se dissout en élément où la jouissance baigne.” TI, 145.

356. “Les choses se fixent grâce au mot qui les donne, qui les communique et les thématise.” TI, 148.

357. F. P. Ciglia, *Un Passo fuori dall’uomo. La genesi del pensiero di Levinas* (Padova: Cedam, 1988), 83.

358. “Mais cette identité des choses reste instable et ne ferme pas le retour des choses à l’élément. La chose existe au milieu de ses déchets.” TI, 148.

decorative arts; are immersed in the beautiful, where every going beyond enjoyment reverts to enjoyment. [L'orientation esthétique que l'homme donne à l'ensemble de son monde, représente sur un plan supérieur un retour à la jouissance et à l'élémental. Le monde des choses appelle l'art où l'accession intellectuelle à l'être se mue en jouissance, où l'Infini de l'idée est idolâtré dans l'image finie, mais suffisante. Tout art est plastique. Les outils et les ustensiles, qui supposent eux-mêmes la jouissance, s'offrent, à leur tour, à la jouissance. Ce sont des jouets : le beau briquet, la belle voiture. Ils se parent d'arts décoratifs, plongent dans le beau où tout dépassement de la jouissance, retourne à la jouissance.]³⁵⁹

That Levinas distrusts beauty, we already knew, but more than distrustful, he reveals himself as a staunch aestheticist here where art is unabashedly assimilated to beauty and reduced to an apparatus of aesthetics, if I may say so, in the aesthetization or beautification of the world; beauty, “form *par excellence*” that nature borrows, and things call for; because a thing is never completely absorbed by its form, its nakedness exceeds its finality to which it is therefore not entirely subordinated, and so it appears to perception, in itself; but this “in itself” is not a “from itself,” its nakedness is not an absence of forms, but a lack that beauty can mend, insofar as it “introduces a new finality, an internal finality into this naked world”³⁶⁰ — a *signification* — through which the thing finds a place in the whole. And it is precisely in opposition to the thing thus understood that Levinas distinguishes the *Face*, hence the incisive remark that precedes the passage quoted above, that the distinction between matter and form, essential to the experience of a thing, does not apply to the face which, unlike a thing, is not endowed with a signification — it has a sense, not from me, or in the relational field, but “from itself,” in its nudity which is not the formless [*l'informe*], that is, “matter that lacks and calls for form”³⁶¹ (and thus for art, for beauty), but original absence of forms.³⁶²

359. TI, 149.

360. “La beauté introduit dès lors une finalité nouvelle une finalité interne dans ce monde nu.” TI, 72.

361. “The face has no form added to it; but does not present itself as the formless, as matter that lacks and calls for form. [Le visage n'a pas de forme qui s'y ajoute; mais il ne s'offre pas comme l'informe, comme matière à qui la forme manque et qui l'appelle.]” TI, 148-149.

362. This depiction of the nudity of the face cannot but bring to mind Levinas's own description of the “exotic nudity” of modern art in *De l'Existence à l'Existant*, as “that true nakedness, he wrote, which is not absence of clothes but, as it were, absence of forms, that is, the non-transmutation of our exteriority into inwardness which forms realize.” It was, if you recall, this positive determination of the aesthetic effect of exoticism, “extracting and setting aside a piece of the universe,” from which he then characterized modern art as a struggle against vision and a renunciation to representation and to a classical ideal of beauty that the

Things, Levinas claims, have no face, which is why they appeal to art which seeks to give them one. This hypothesis that, by now, Levinas had formulated in at least two different occasions³⁶³ is not, as he will argue elsewhere,³⁶⁴ meant as some sort of denunciation of idolatry, but as a recognition of this “animation of matter” that art accomplishes — the obscure and cold matter that awaits the artist’s hand, the interior of the lady’s sleeves that Proust admired “like those dark corners of cathedrals, nonetheless worked with the same art as the façade”³⁶⁵ — by which it never ceases to renew the world, to find novelty in it, to fight against the weight of the monotony of being. But at what cost? Art marks the return to enjoyment, where the “infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but *sufficient*, image.” Fixed in beauty — beginning of terror, to which we stand in awe while it coolly disdains to destroy us³⁶⁶ — the infinite, the absolute, which exceeds our measure, is given a plastic form, both marvelous and deceitful, whose seductiveness lies, precisely, in the fact that *it is sufficient*, as if the image “stood for” infinity, as if it symbolized it, as if it allowed me to cross the distance that separates me from the infinite, indeed to “touch” it; thus the movement of transcendence, beyond the egoist and thus innocently solitary world of enjoyment, is interrupted, and reverts to the immanence of the “here below” — the infinity of the idea, the sense that comes to us from the other is reduced to the spectacle of enjoyment, to the elemental which, by essence satisfied, cuts us off from infinity. Because if things qua

modernists subvert by bringing to light things in the nakedness of their beings, thus disturbing to the gaze. There is an undeniable proximity between the nudity of the face and the exotic nudity of modern art as described by the philosopher; in both cases there is a defection of form that precludes conceptualization and generalization — nudity is the very inaccessibility to the grasp, and therefore a certain withdrawal from the world; yet, the nudity of the face precedes the exotic nudity of art, the “chaste nudity” of the face, as Levinas will name it in section IV.B, “Phénoménologie de l’eros,” is a condition of the nudity of art, just as feminine beauty is a condition of artistic beauty. Furthermore, it may be, as Catherine Chalier claims, that the exotic nudity of art is simply not radical enough, insofar as “it is satisfied to disconcert the glance,” while leaving it “under the influence of beauty;” and indeed as Levinas himself will claim in the 1987 text “Jean Atlan et la tension de l’art”: “the pure exotism of the ‘elsewhere’ where some artists take refuge, frees things only of our habits. It does not denude them to offer them in beauty to an aesthetic tenderness that we can call chaste eroticism. [Le pur exotisme de ‘l’ailleurs’ où se réfugient certains artistes, ne libère les choses que de nos habitudes. Il ne les dénude pas pour les offrir dans la beauté à une tendresse esthétique que l’on peut dénommer érotisme chaste.]” JA, 510.

363. In “L’ontologie est-elle fondamentale?,” 97-98, and “Éthique et Esprit,” in DL, 23.

364. DO, 8.

365. “Proust admirait l’envers des manches d’une robe de grande dame comme ces coins sombres des cathédrales, cependant travaillés avec le même art que la façade.” TI, 210.

366. Rainer Maria Rilke, “Die Erste Elegie.” In *Elegias de Duino*. Dual-Language Book. Translated by José Miranda Justo (Lisboa: Relógio D’Água, 2016), 10-11. First published 1923 as *Duineser Elegien* by Insel.

elements suit me, nourish me, satisfy me, serve me as tools, art further *fascinates* me and thus represents a return to the elemental “on a higher plane” because art “endows things with something like a *façade*, that by which objects are not only seen but are as objects of exhibition,” that by which a thing is exposed but does not deliver itself, *keeps is secret*, for imprisoned in its myth, it “gleams like a splendor,” and “captures by its grace as by magic,” yet does not reveal itself.³⁶⁷ And it is precisely such an existence, one that is outside of being in the world, that does not reveal itself, that gives itself while escaping, that simultaneously seduces and threatens, fascinates and deceives, that characterizes the element, the “object” of my enjoyment, of my need; thus “the overflowing of sensation by the element, which appears in the indetermination with which it offers itself to my enjoyment, takes on a temporal meaning”³⁶⁸ — a concern for the morrow mars the happiness of enjoyment.

The future of sensibility as lived in the instant of enjoyment is one of disquiet, of insecurity; the joy of the present instant is marred by the uncertainty of the morrow implicated in the unfathomable depth, the *apeiron*, the “bad infinite” of the elemental: “The indetermination of the future alone brings insecurity to need, indigence: the perfidious elemental gives itself while escaping.”³⁶⁹ Insubstantial and elusive, the element is pure quality that lacks the category of *something*, anonymous quality that is refractory to identification and which in enjoyment is lost in “nowhere” while coming forth from nothing which, precisely, constitutes “its fragility, the disintegration of becoming, that time prior to representation – which is menace and destruction.”³⁷⁰ Thus the depth of the elemental remains essentially undetermined, and it is this indetermination that makes it menacing, that brings an essential restlessness to the subjectivity blissfully immersed in enjoyment, whose continuation is thus imperiled; and this future, essentially without security, of the element “is experienced concretely as the mythical divinity of the element”:

367. “C’est l’art qui prête aux choses comme une *façade* – ce par quoi les objets ne sont pas seulement vus, mais sont comme des objets qui s’exhibent... Par la façade, la chose qui garde son secret – s’expose enfermée dans son essence monumentale et dans son mythe où elle luit comme une splendeur, mais ne se livre pas. Elle subjugué par sa grâce comme une magie, mais ne se révèle pas.” TI, 210.

368. “ce débordement de la sensation par l’élément et qui se montre dans l’indétermination avec laquelle il s’offre à ma jouissance, prend un sens temporel.” TI, 150.

369. “L’indétermination de l’avenir seule apporte l’insécurité au besoin, l’indigence: l’élémental perfide se donne en échappant.” TI, 150.

370. “La qualité ne résiste pas à l’identification parce qu’elle représenterait un écoulement et une durée; son caractère élémental, sa venue à partir de rien, constitue, au contraire, sa fragilité, son effrètement de devenir, ce temps antérieur à la représentation qui est menace et destruction.” TI, 150.

Faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, mark the nothingness that bounds the egoism of enjoyment in the midst of its familiarity with the element... What the side of the element that is turned toward me conceals is not a “something” susceptible of being revealed, but an ever-new depth of absence, an existence without existent, the impersonal par excellence. [Dieux sans visage, dieux impersonnels auxquels on ne parle pas, marquent le néant qui borde l’egoïsme de la jouissance, au sein de sa familiarité avec l’élément... Ce que cache la face de l’élément qui est tournée vers moi, n’est pas un “quelque chose” susceptible de se révéler, mais une profondeur toujours nouvelle de l’absence, existence sans existant, l’impersonnel par excellence.]³⁷¹

The element I enjoy issues in the nothingness that separates, the nothingness of the primitive and mythical gods, and their eternal seduction, the faceless pagan gods that lurk in the insecurity of the elemental of which they seem to personify the fluctuations, “the ambiguous solidification of its absolute inconsistency.”³⁷² Like the forces of nature that exceed my powers and become mythical characters, the “numerous and numinous” gods of paganism, myths, seem to lend a consistency, despite the nothingness they in fact are to the elemental that surrounds me, to the very exteriority of the world which is the “nowhere,” the abyss unto which the element I inhabit flows and loses itself: the element, Levinas writes, is “at the frontier of a night” and its nocturnal prolongation, precisely “the reign of mythical gods,” issues in the *il y a* — the anonymous and horrifying rustling that lurks unbidden behind all finality as the negation of all qualifiable beings, that murmurs from the depths of the nothingness of the element, haunting our enjoyment: “the element extends to the *il y a*. Enjoyment as interiorization runs up against the very strangeness of the earth.”³⁷³

The strangeness of the earth, meaning the exteriority of the world that feeds enjoyment and upon which enjoyment depends to articulate the ipseity of the I whose very independence is, therefore, dependent upon an exteriority — an “other” than oneself, the non-I — in which the I is immersed, and which nourishes its enjoyment all the while threatening its continuation, so that the sovereignty of the enjoyment thus nourished in and by the other “runs the risk of a betrayal: the alterity from which it lives already expels it from

371. TI, 151.

372. Ciglia, “Mito e diaconia etica...,” 72.

373 “L’élément se prolonge dans l’*il y a*. La jouissance, comme intériorisation, se heurte à l’étrangeté même de la terre.” TI, 151

paradise”³⁷⁴ — hence the ambiguity of the sensible subjectivization, that is, the ambiguity of the self and the anonymous, of the jubilant and sovereign enclosed self, and the anonymous otherness that nourishes it but threatens its ipseity, the self and the loss of itself, its depersonalization: the dissolution of itself in its own shadow. And that is the ever-precarious position of human subjectivity, vertiginously suspended over the yawning abyss of non-sense, of the *il y a*. But it is thus that enjoyment accomplishes separation, inasmuch as separation “would be but a word if the ego, the separated and self-sufficient being, did not hear the muffled rustling of nothingness back unto which the elements flow and are lost.”³⁷⁵

Well, if in its irreducible exoticism, art echoes the *il y a*, if it signals its return, exposing us to it, to this other face of reality, if the oneself loses itself in the artistic contemplation, if, facing the image, the I is bereft of its power to assume [*pouvoir de pouvoir*], of its mastering over existence, perhaps it is not unreasonable to surmise that it carries out a meaningful function; with its derisory, absurd life, petrified and “impotent to force the future,” suspended in the *entretemps*, where suffering remains, as forever Niobe’s tears run down the marble of her unredeemable sin, which is also that of her *unredeemable* punishment — which needs not, however, be ours, for *time we are*, and it may be that art reminds us of that; that by its own feebleness, by its own precariousness, it reminds us of our own. Yet the thread is thin, and its alluring rhythms strong; we must tread carefully. But that is the “*beau risque à courir*” leading to the true transcendence, to borrow a Platonic expression that will become dear to our philosopher, because it is this disturbance, this heteronomy “*within the very interiority hollowed out by enjoyment ... that incites to another destiny than this animal complacency in oneself;*”³⁷⁶ thus a dimension opens in interiority “through which it will be able to await and welcome the revelation of transcendence. In the concern for the morrow

374. “La souveraineté de la jouissance nourrit son indépendance d’une dépendance à l’égard de l’autre. La souveraineté de la jouissance court le risque d’une trahison: l’altérité dont elle vit, déjà l’expulse du paradis.” TI, 177.

375. “La séparation qui s’accomplit par l’égoïsme ne serait qu’un mot, si l’être séparé et suffisant, si l’ego n’entendait pas le sourd bruissement du néant où refluent et se perdent les éléments.” TI, 156.

376. “il faut ... que *dans l’intériorité même que creuse la jouissance*, se produise une hétéronomie qui incite à un autre destin qu’à cette complaisance animale en soi.” TI, 159.

there dawns the primordial phenomenon of the essentially uncertain future of sensibility.”³⁷⁷
And that is the face.

The face that, as said earlier, manifests itself in the sensible, albeit in its own *peculiar* way; still, manifesting itself in the sensible, the face is “a thing among things” — it has a form that delimits it, a sensitive appearance, and thus, a necessary plasticity to its manifestation which is not added, but co-originary, it belongs to its very structure, and that is, as we have seen, its caricature. As in the 1948 article, caricature does not designate here the accentuation or exaggeration of any physiognomic feature of the face, but the arrest of the life of face in its *epiphany*, the seizure of the essential mobility of the features in which the face consists of as *expression*; in other words, it is the immobilization of the face in a plastic and mute image that resembles it in death, in which expression is no more, whereby “the dead face becomes a form, a mortuary mask, it is shown instead of letting see, but precisely thus no longer appears as a face.”³⁷⁸ Hence the face, in the liveliness of its epiphany, overflows the sensible dimension in which it necessarily manifests itself — pierces the form, the sensible appearance which nevertheless delimits it — where it precisely opens up this dimension of expression, whose essential bareness and indigence, that is, whose *extreme exposure*, defies the powers of assimilation:

The permanent opening of the contours of its form in the expression imprisons in a caricature this opening which makes burst the form. The face at the limit of holiness and caricature is thus still in a sense exposed to powers. In a sense only: the depth that opens in this sensibility modifies the very nature of power, which henceforth can no longer take, but can kill. [L’ouverture permanente des contours de sa forme dans l’expression emprisonne dans une caricature cette ouverture qui fait éclater la forme. Le visage à la limite de la sainteté et de la caricature s’offre donc encore dans un sens à des pouvoirs. Dans un sens seulement : la profondeur qui s’ouvre dans cette sensibilité modifie la nature même du pouvoir qui ne peut dès lors plus prendre, mais peut tuer.]³⁷⁹

It is thus that the face undergoes a mutation into resistance to the grasp or comprehension, so that being as a non-neutralizable datum cannot be suspended or dominated by

377. “Mais ainsi s’ouvre, dans l’intériorité, une dimension à travers laquelle elle pourra attendre et accueillir la révélation de la transcendance. Dans le souci du lendemain luit le phénomène originel de l’avenir essentiellement incertain de la sensibilité.” TI, 160.

378. “Le visage mort devient forme, masque mortuaire, il se montre au lieu de laisser voir, mais précisément ainsi n’apparaît plus comme visage.” TI, 293.

379. TI, 172.

appropriation or usage — “I can no longer [*je ne puis plus pouvoir*]” — but “only” unlimitedly negated, that is, *annihilated*, whereby before the face, as Blanchot puts it, “there is no choice but to speak or kill.”³⁸⁰ Such is the exceptional possibility of murder, or violence at the limit of murder that “can only aim at a face,”³⁸¹ that is, at a (sensible) presence which is itself infinite, a presence that gives itself to power and, simultaneously, escapes that power.³⁸² The face is then the locus of a “living contradiction,” as Levinas calls it (or “of a fight – of a *polemos*?” as Jacques Rolland suggests),³⁸³ for it is what tempts and guides violence and at once forbids it, inasmuch as the apparition of the face and its expression are rigorously contemporaneous: manifesting itself in the sensible, and thus captive of a plastic and mute form, the face is the instigator and the object of the murderous intent, but insofar as it immediately withdraws from its form, *de-forms itself*, the face eludes such an intent with an intransigent (however silent) “no,” since “in it, the infinite resistance of being to our power, asserts itself against the murderous will that it defies” — “Thou shalt not kill” the very meaning of the face which thus gives itself simultaneously as gaze [*regard*] and speech [*parole*], as “the original and unthinkable unity of a speech that can assist itself and of a gaze that calls for help”³⁸⁴: “the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised.”³⁸⁵

Already language before words, the face is neither a sign nor does it signify as one (for the sign belongs to the world and the face *does not* since it opens and exceeds totality) insofar

380. Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 86.

381. “La violence ne peut viser qu’un visage” TI, 249.

382. “Violence bears upon only a being both graspable and escaping every hold. Without this living contradiction in the being that undergoes violence the deployment of violent force would reduce itself to a labor. [La violence ne porte que sur un être à la fois saisissable et échappant à toute prise. Sans cette contradiction vivante, dans l’être qui subit la violence, le déploiement de la force violente se réduirait à un travail.]” TI, 246. Only murder is total negation of being; labor and representation are only partial negations.

383. Commenting on Levinas’s description of the nudity of the face as exposure to death, Jacques Rolland claims that this “new description” of the face that the philosopher presents in his later writings, can only be understood from what he terms the “contra-phenomenology” of the face presented in *Totalité et Infini* where the face is, he writes, “the place of a fight – of a *polemos*? – between the *form* in which the face is caught (which it de(con)structs but where it remains a prisoner) and *the expression* by which it distinguishes itself from a figure or a portrait and escapes the form, de-forms itself – and thus denudes itself.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique comme philosophie première* (Paris: Rivages Poche, 1998), 119 (note 18).

384. Derrida, “Violence et Métaphysique,” 352.

385. “le visage me parle et par là m’invite à une relation sans commune mesure avec un pouvoir qui s’exerce.” TI, 216.

as, refusing any and all referrals, the face presents itself before every sign and thus signifies independently (i.e., in its nudity) of any worldly significations or reference to a system: it *expresses itself*; expression whose (first) content is this very expression, for the one who expresses attends this expression and by, and in, that attendance its being is effected: “the *absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation*: a coinciding of the expressed with whom expresses.”³⁸⁶ The presence of the face as *expression* designates therefore its surplus of manifestation with respect to the phenomenon, this fundamental concept of traditional phenomenology that is here the target of Levinas’s criticism owing to its irreducible equivocity; the phenomenon which, contrary to the face, is absent from its own manifestation: the phenomenon, Levinas writes, “is the being that appears, but remains absent. It is not appearance, but reality that lacks reality still infinitely removed from its being;”³⁸⁷ and it is precisely this manifestation in the absence of being through which the philosopher distinguishes the signification of the face in its transcendence of expression, from the signification of the work (*œuvre*), of which the work of art is (but) a particular case. By contrast to the face that, as said, does not signify (something) but expresses itself, *in person*, whereby it assists its own manifestation and, consequently, remains “forever master of the sense it delivers,”³⁸⁸ the work does not — the work is *not* an expression³⁸⁹ for the term “expression” in *Totalité et Infini* means precisely a presentation *in person* to another, a precondition that only the particular manifestation of the face fulfills, face to which, therefore, the term “expression” is reserved (an understanding that would, *in theory*, be clear from the very title of section II.E.2 where this discussion first takes place, “*Œuvre et*

386. “présent avant la manifestation qui seulement le manifeste. *L’expérience absolue n’est pas dévoilement mais révélation* : coïncidence de l’exprimé et de celui qui exprime.” TI, 61.

387. “Le phénomène c’est l’être qui apparaît, mais demeure absent. Pas apparence, mais réalité qui manque de réalité encore infiniment éloignée de son être.” TI, 197-198

388. “Dans le visage l’exprimé *assiste* à l’expression, exprime son expression même – reste toujours maître du sens qu’il livre.” EDE, 173 (“L’idée de l’Infini”).

389. At least not in the sense of the face. In the conference “L’Écrit et l’Oral” (1952) Levinas was less “heavy-handed” in the use of the term “expression” compared to *Totalité et Infini* even though the term did not have then the same depth or gravity of meaning, the same “loftiness,” so to speak: “the work of art which presents itself certainly nowadays ... (– in a dimension of exteriority opened by the writings – *the work of art is also expression*) in the sense that is expression a product or a behavior. It is in a way or another the prolongation of a spontaneity, of a song of bird, of a game played for itself. [l’œuvre d’art qui se présente certes de nos jours ... (– dans une dimension d’extériorité ouverte par les écrits – *l’œuvre d’art est aussi expression*) au sens où est expression un produit ou un comportement. Elle est d’une façon ou d’une autre le prolongement d’une spontanéité, d’un chant d’oiseau, d’un jeu joué pour soi.]” OC2, 209. My emphasis.

expression,” if only the coordinating conjunction “and” [*et*] were not so ambiguous in the Levinasian lexicon and particularly in *Totalité et Infini*). Instead, the work is a *sign* that is delivered by its author, and as such signifies (something) and not itself; and here the verb “deliver” is quite accurate for these signs are indeed delivered, that is, set free, released from their author, these are “orphans” of their signifier [*signifiant*], who absents himself from his work. This does not mean that the work does not signify its author, it does, but *in his absence*; he is, Levinas claims, “surprised more than understood . . . as if by burglary;”³⁹⁰ dispossessed, the author no longer wills over his own creation which, incapable of defending itself against the Other’s *Sinngebung*, “exposes the will that produced it to contestation and unrecognition;”³⁹¹ the author is exposed in the work but does not express himself whereby “from the work I am only deduced and am already ill-understood, betrayed rather than expressed.”³⁹² The author is only indirectly signified by his work, “*in the third person*,”³⁹³ as if having lost its voice:³⁹⁴ he has delivered a sign and left it to itself. But where does it go?

— “*Where does the music go when you stop playing?*”³⁹⁵

Well, in *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas speaks of a *destiny* for the work, independent from its author, by which the work is integrated into an ensemble of works and into economic life, where it is maintained in the anonymity of money, and comes to be inscribed into a foreign will that lays hold of it and to whose designs it lends itself: sold, bought, applauded, judged, interpreted, alienated, stolen, forgotten, reawakened, etc. . . ., the work remains a part of the

390. “Aborder quelqu’un à partir des œuvres, c’est entrer dans son intériorité, comme par effraction; l’autre est surpris dans son intimité, où il s’expose certes, mais ne s’exprime pas, comme les personnages de l’histoire. Les œuvres signifient leur auteur, mais indirectement, à la troisième personne.” TI, 62

391. “L’œuvre ne se défend pas contre la *Sinngebung* d’autrui et expose la volonté qui l’a produite à la contestation et à la méconnaissance, elle se prête aux desseins d’une volonté étrangère et se laisse approprier.” TI, 251-252.

392. “À partir de l’œuvre je suis seulement déduit et déjà mal entendu, trahi plutôt qu’exprimé.” TI, 192.

393. My emphasis. TI, 62 and 271.

394. “To write is to break the bond uniting the word to myself – to invert the relationship that makes me speak to a *thou* – ‘to echo that which cannot cease speaking.’ [Écrire c’est briser le lieu qui unit la parole à moi-même, invertir le rapport qui me fait parler à un toi – ‘se faire écho de ce qui ne peut cesser de parler.’]” SMB, 16.

395. “Una volta un bambino mi chiese: ‘ma dove va la musica quando non suoni più?’ Solo i bambini fanno domande così.” *Prova d’orchestra*, directed by Federico Fellini (Rai; Daimo; Albatros, 1978). [Video file]: 00:58:24 – 00:58:31.

economic life as a modality of labor integrated into a cultural and an historical orders; anonymous merchandise, it signifies neither by itself, nor by the dead will of its author; instead, meaning is conferred upon it by the system, by the totality in which it is integrated, and in which it loses itself, in which it *dies* in a way.³⁹⁶

In *Totalité et Infini*, the work of art is, as any other work, a sign, and as such belongs to the world of phenomena, a world, Levinas writes, that “reveals by concealing” which is “a *mode of being* where nothing is ultimate, where everything is a sign, present absenting itself from its presence and in that sense dream;”³⁹⁷ a universe of false semblants where “threat and seduction act by creeping into the interstice that separates the work from the will,”³⁹⁸ whereby, ultimately, “to express oneself through one’s works is precisely to decline expression.”³⁹⁹ Still, we are allowed to ask: is not this refusal of expression of itself expression, language — “a mode of speaking”? Inverted expression no doubt, for obscure, equivocal and thus possibly deceitful; it is not, to be sure, speech which “implies a possibility of breaking off and beginning,”⁴⁰⁰ but somehow its reverse, an antilanguage, a laughter that seeks to destroy language, and by which the silent world of facts becomes that of a bewitched world.⁴⁰¹ And it is this silent bewitched world that Levinas describes in section I.C.3 (“La vérité suppose la justice”) where the philosopher conducts a reading of the *Metaphysical*

396. But is there no life to the sign before its death? Well, if there is, Levinas does not tell us; not in this work, he doesn’t; but he does elsewhere — in a manuscript contemporaneous with *Totalité et Infini*, “La signification,” where with a single turn of phrase the philosopher describes this “life” of the sign before its death, its *mode of being*, still on the hither side of history, of the economic and cultural orders, and thus before being enclosed in a plastic form, and petrified in a story and in fate: “The sign is left to its own life, it resounds of its own sonority, it is poetry {hesitation according to Valéry between sound and sense.} [Le signe est laissé a sa vie propre, il résonne de sa sonorité propre, il est poésie {hésitation selon Valéry entre le son et le sens.}]” OC2, 368. See *supra* 90.

Published as an appendix in OC2, the manuscript “La signification” comprises no less than 6 pages from the manuscript of *Totalité et Infini*. Although the editors are unsure as to the exact date and purpose of this manuscript, they suggest it to date prior to 1963, and to be a preparatory text for a conference. Cf. OC2 (Notice sur <La Signification>), 351-352.

397. “La phénoménalité dont il s’agit n’indique pas simplement une relativité de la connaissance; mais une *façon d’être* où rien n’est ultime, où tout est signe, présent s’absentant de sa présence et, dans ce sens, rêve.” TI, 194.

398. “La menace et la séduction agissent en se glissant dans l’interstice qui sépare l’œuvre de la volonté.” TI, 254.

399. “S’exprimer par sa vie, par ses œuvres, c’est précisément se refuser à l’expression.” TI, 192.

400. “Parler suppose une possibilité de rompre et de commencer.” TI, 87.

401. See *infra* 211.

Meditations, in which he posits the world of spectacle, the world of phenomena, as an absolutely silent and anarchical world that is so inasmuch as it resists a unifying principle, the univocity of a beginning, whereby it harbors an infinitely amplified ambiguity, a labyrinthine enchantment of uncertainty, a “mystification that passes for mystery.” Thus, the deceit produced in this silent world, the lie that the Evil Genius, lurking in all appearing, “does not manifest himself to state,” but rather *insinuates* in a mockery,⁴⁰² is already, as it were, “the modality of an utterance” [*la modalité d’une parole*]⁴⁰³ — its *reverse*, a (non-) word, a laughter, an antilanguage in which the word is not absent, but rather “lies in the depths of silence like a laughter perfidiously held back” which is

the situation created by those derisive beings communicating across a labyrinth of innuendos which Shakespeare and Goethe have appear in their scenes of sorcerers where speech is antilanguage and where to respond would be to cover oneself with ridicule. [Situation que créent des êtres ricanants, communiquant à travers un labyrinthe de sous-entendus que Shakespeare et Goethe font apparaître dans les scènes de sorcières où se parle l’antilangage et où répondre serait se couvrir de ridicule.]⁴⁰⁴

Much as he had claimed in “La réalité et son ombre” and in “L’autre dans Proust,” the universe of fiction, of literature, is for Levinas absolutely indetermined, and thus essentially and infinitely ambiguous, amoral, and equivocal. Literary references, mostly implicit but some explicit, abound in *Totalité et Infini* which begins as we saw with an unreferenced quote from Rimbaud and ends with an equally unreferenced quote from Baudelaire (TI, 343). From Proust (TI, 210, 314), Puskhin (TI, 140, 243), Mallarmé (TI, 254), Poe (TI, 261), Shakespeare, Goethe, to Dostoevsky, the great works of literature do not serve, even now, even here, as illustrations of philosophical propositions, nor are they mere allusions that philosophical exposition could do without; instead, these provide the philosopher with

402. The evidence of the cogito does not extinguish the doubt that the equivocation of the evil genius insinuates in a mockery, which arises again on the cogito itself, and from affirmation to negation, enters a movement of descent, “of infinite negation ... toward an ever more profound abyss ... the *il y a* ... sweeping along the subject incapable of stopping itself,” for neither the Cartesian cogito, nor knowledge can “provide a commencement to this iteration in dreaming.” Beyond affirmation and negation, the *il y a* is absolutely indeterminate, it is “an incessant negation, to an infinite degree, consequently an infinite limitation”: the “anarchy of the *il y a*” precludes all absolute evidence; but anarchy, Levinas claims, “is essential to multiplicity,” it is a part of it; multiplicity without which language would be but a universally coherent speech; without the anarchy inherent to multiplicity no principle could be instituted.

403. TI, 91.

404. TI, 92.

situations, predicaments — *images*, that are untranslatable (and unreachable) to conceptual thinking and description, that do not follow or illustrate the philosophical context or proposition but somehow raise it, indeed nurture its intrigue. Levinas does not comment on these works, nor does he refer to literature itself, as if literature were not next to philosophy but, as it were, “imbued” in the philosophical discourse, already a part of it. Nothing new, really, was it not Levinas himself who, in 1947, suggested that “all philosophy is only a meditation on Shakespeare”⁴⁰⁵? And have we not seen, in the first chapter, how the literary was implicated in Levinas’s philosophical speech to the point of their indistinction, to the point that we dared hypothesize that literature could have been, at the time, another name for philosophy? Literature *comes to his mind*, detached from any solemnization, and more often than not without any reference to the title or its author, absolutely decontextualized, *desacralized*. And yet, the literary work, the poetic work, writing [*l’écriture*] does not appear to enjoy any privilege in the (philosophical) discourse of *Totalité et Infini* compared to works in general, for the writer is no less absent from his work, and the literary work is no less complete [*achevé*] than other works, it is no less a petrification of the living word to which it is tributary, a frozen presence inscribed in history — mythology or philology — that does not, thus, just like any other work, “give itself out for the beginning of a dialogue,” and must be interpreted to “deliver” its meaning. But can we not see, in this same absence of the author, an “act” of generosity? Is not this distance the author takes from his work, from his creation to which he gives birth, life, only to absent himself, leaving it to “live” its “life” independently of his, an essentially unselfish act? And that, as Derrida suggests, “in depriving himself of the *enjoyments* and effects of his signs, the writer more effectively renounces violence”⁴⁰⁶? If Levinas’s stance in *Totalité et Infini* according to the notion of “work” therein formulated seems irreducible to such appeals, the fact is that, in just two years’ time, the philosopher will promote a remarkable rehabilitation of the notion of “work,” whose first letter is even capitalized, insofar as the Work, *conceived radically*, is no

405. “Il me semble parfois que toute la philosophie n’est qu’une méditation de Shakespeare.” TA, 60

406. “That the writer absents himself better, that is, expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech? And that, in depriving himself of the enjoyments and effects of his signs, the writer more effectively renounces violence? It is true that he perhaps intends only to multiply his signs to infinity, thus forgetting – at very least – the other, the infinitely other as death, and thus practicing writing as deferral and as an economy of death” Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 347.

more a sign but, rather, “*a movement of the Same unto the Other that never returns to the Same.*”⁴⁰⁷

Published in 1963, “La trace de l’autre,” alongside the 1964 essay “La signification et le sens,”⁴⁰⁸ precede the publication of Derrida’s essay — but not its writing (or at least its proofreading) as claimed by the author⁴⁰⁹ who regrets not being able to make but “brief allusions” to these texts in his essay. Still, he retains (and holds to, *dearly*) their guiding concept — the *trace* — which he supposes “should lead to a certain rehabilitation of writing. Is not the ‘He’ whom transcendence and generous absence uniquely announce in the Trace more readily the author of writing than of speech?”⁴¹⁰ Levinas’s 1963 and 1964 essays and, a year later, “Énigme et Phénomène”⁴¹¹ will, together, do the unthinkable for *Totalité et Infini*, that is, undermine the idea, the prerogative, the “authority” of presence “in the first person” and thus also of time, namely, of the *present* that such presence produces; a present that, as expected, is not a sort of assemblage “of instants mysteriously immobilized in duration,”⁴¹² but is, Levinas argues, won in the heat of a battle by the “incessant recapture of the instants that elapse by a presence that comes to their assistance, that answers for them.” It is this incessance, this actualization of the actual that is *expression* — the spoken word, the living word — that, in its very “struggle against the past” — against the inevitable moment of its becoming past, a written word — produces the present, its presentation: its

407. And he continues: “To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure. [*L’Œuvre pensée radicalement est en effet un mouvement du Même vers l’Autre qui ne retourne jamais au Même. Au mythe d’Ulysse retournant à Ithaque, nous voudrions opposer l’histoire d’Abraham quittant à jamais sa patrie pour une terre encore inconnue et interdisant à son serviteur de ramener même son fils à ce point de départ.*]” EDE, 191. “La trace de l’autre” was originally published in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 25(3), 1963: 605-623.

408. “La signification et le sens” was originally published in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 69(2), 1964: 125-156, and republished in *Humanisme de l’autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), 15-70.

409. Cf. Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 322 (note 1).

410. Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 347.

411. “Énigme et Phénomène” was first published in *Esprit*, 6, 1965: 1128-1142, and republished in EDE, 203-216.

412. Which is that, as we know, of the work of art (but also that of the insomnia as described in *De l’existence à l’existant*) which pertains to a freedom irredeemably captive of itself, a present that is forever thrown back to itself, that does not therefore leave the *entretemps*, between an impotent present and a frustrated future.

life.⁴¹³ A present whose privilege is that of preparing a future, the future of fecundity that constitutes the very possibility, and accomplishment, for the subject to go beyond himself.

In 1961, Levinas's gaze is in the present but "fixed" on the future. From a solid present, an absolutely constituted present, another present arises, a totally other present, which comes to save the "first" present insofar as it makes possible "an absolute youth and recommencement." But does not the work provide a similar possibility of recommencement? Is not the work, essentially, an offering the world to the other, that is, a generosity? A generosity that, as such, renounces not only one's interests, joys, and effects of one's works, but one's own contemporaneity with them, as when Léon Blum writes that "we work *in* the present, not *for* the present,"⁴¹⁴ and thus, for a future in spite of oneself, for a time beyond one's time, beyond one's death? Well, the 1963 and 1964 works, will confirm such a possibility.

Neither play nor death, but "*élan généraux*," disinterested action, the Work will no longer be a sign, and thus an economic concept, but a "trans-economy"⁴¹⁵ — the passage from my time, from my present to the time of the Other: *liturgy*, which detached from any religious meaning, is "an absolutely patient action, [that] does not rank as a cult next to works and ethics. It is ethics itself."⁴¹⁶ From which follows that an apparent reversal in Levinas's approach to time takes place after *Totalité et Infini*. It will no longer be in the future where the philosopher will look for the salvation of the present and, thus, of the subject, but rather in the *past*; not any past, but a past more distant than any rememberable past, an absolute, immemorial, irretrievable, *an-archival* past, a "deep once, never deep enough" of which the trace is neither a sign nor a memory, but disorder, the irreparable derangement of order: "*To be as leaving a trace is to pass, to leave, to be absolved.*"⁴¹⁷ But such a derangement is, for

413. "Ce présent n'est pas fait d'instant mystérieusement immobilisés dans la durée, mais d'une reprise incessante des instants qui s'écoulent par une présence qui leur porte secours, qui en répond. Cette *incessance* produit le présent, est la présentation – la vie – du présent." TI, 65.

414. "Nous travaillons *dans* le présent, non *pour* le présent." Levinas quotes this saying from Léon Blum's *À l'Échelle Humaine*, written in captivity in 1941 (published by Gallimard in 1945), in "La signification et le sens," HAH, 46.

415. Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique", 347.

416. "action absolument patiente, la liturgie ne se range pas comme culte à côté des œuvres et de l'éthique. Elle est l'éthique même." EDE, 192.

417. "*Être en tant que laisser une trace, c'est passer, partir, s'absoudre.*" EDE, 200. I shall resume the thematic of the trace in the next chapter.

the time being, the appanage of the face, as unique and uniquely significative in its non-belongingness to the world, as non-sign par excellence — the only “that shatters the panorama of the world, and of the world as the panorama of referral.”⁴¹⁸ It is not just that the concept of work deployed in *Totalité et Infini*, as Derrida claims, cannot be encompassed in the trans-economy of the Work, it is also that there is a need, a demand, to isolate the face from any sign and therefore from all referral. Ultimately, it is a matter of Levinas’s Platonism which is, in 1961, incorruptible.

As such, the written word is, unavoidably, secondary regarding speech, the spoken word which is the “plenitude of discourse,” for the simple enough reason that it does not meet the requirement by which a discourse is a relation with exteriority that, in *Totalité et Infini*, is the very essence of language, and that is the presence of the interlocutors, the bearing witness to one’s expression, to one’s word that can, thus, unlike the writing, start again:

It is as though the presence of him who speaks inverted the inevitable movement that bears the spoken word to the past state of the written word... The unique actuality of speech tears it from the situation in which it appears and which it seems to prolong. [Comme si la présence de celui qui parle inversait le mouvement inévitable qui conduit le mot proféré vers le passé du mot écrit... L’actualité unique de la parole l’arrache à la situation où elle paraît et qu’elle semble prolonger.]⁴¹⁹

Such is the difference between the phenomenon and the face, between the work, the writing [*l’écrit*], and oral discourse whose “privilege” is this ability to interrupt the prolongation into the past, to interrupt the becoming history, last word of the work, of the writing, whose author, in absenting himself, leaves his work to a purely phenomenal existence in a world where actuality is impossible because lacking a principle and, thus, an orientation: a *sense*. A primordial signification is needed from which all signs, works, and tools, from which every symbolism and signification derive — *expression*, the presentation of the Other to me, in person, which alone can surmount the ambivalence of apparition: “it is not I, it is the other than can say ‘yes,’” it is the Other who “gleams with its own light,” the Other whose word

418. We can perhaps also perceive here an attempt to move away from *Sein und Zeit* which “identifies in the work of art the ‘intramundane being’ that escapes the characterization of sign.” Now if Levinas shares the Heideggerian thesis of the co-belongingness between the world and the sign, he refuses precisely this singularization of the work of art since, for the philosopher, “the non-sign par excellence is always and only the face of others, and it is only the face that shatters the panorama of the world, and of the world as the panorama of referral.” Silvano Petrosini, “La fenomenologia dell’unico. Le tesi de Levinas” (introduction), *Totalità e Infinito* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1977), LV-LVI (note 119).

419. TI, 65.

comes from on high that can break the silence and thus introduce a principle — an *archè* — into this anarchy: speech is that commencement, “speech disenchants” [*la parole désensorcelle*].⁴²⁰

To poetic activity where influences arise unbeknown to us out of this nonetheless conscious activity, to envelop it and beguile it as a rhythm, and where action is borne along by the very work it has given rise to, where in a dionysiac mode the artist (according to Nietzsche’s expression) becomes a work of art — is opposed the language that at each instant dispels the charm of rhythm and prevents the initiative from becoming a role. Discourse is rupture and commencement, breaking of rhythm which enraptures and transports the interlocutors — prose. [À l’activité poétique où des influences surgissent, à notre insu, de cette activité pourtant consciente, pour l’envelopper et la bercer comme un rythme et où l’action se trouve portée par l’œuvre même qu’elle a suscitée, où d’une façon dionysiaque l’artiste devient, selon l’expression de Nietzsche, œuvre d’art, s’oppose le langage, qui rompt à tout instant le charme du rythme et empêche que l’initiative devienne un rôle. Le discours est rupture et commencement, rupture du rythme qui ravit et enlève les interlocuteurs — prose.]⁴²¹

If the relationship with the Other as an ethical relation is, in this work, essentially language⁴²² — in its desacralized essence of *prose*, in its immediacy of interpellation and in its straightforwardness [*droiture*], as “the incessant surpassing of the *Sinngebung* by the signification,”⁴²³ as the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed, and as “the very power to break the continuity of being or of history”⁴²⁴ whereby the interlocutors absolve themselves from the relation and remain absolute within it —, then this contrasting of “discourse” to what Levinas terms “poetic activity” (no doubt to distinguish poetry from language which is not, or not originally, an action, a species of activity⁴²⁵), and in whose depiction we readily recognize that situation of *participation* analyzed earlier⁴²⁶ to which

420. TI, 100.

421. TI, 222.

422. “Nous tâcherons de montrer que le *rappor*t du Même et de l’Autre — auquel nous semblons imposer des conditions si extraordinaires — est le langage.” TI, 28.

423. “Le langage est le dépassement incessant de la *Sinngebung* par la signification.” TI, 330.

424. “Le langage se définit peut-être comme le pouvoir même de rompre la continuité de l’être ou de l’histoire.” TI, 212.

425. “language is possible only when speaking precisely renounces this function of being action and returns to its essence of being expression. [le langage n’est possible que lorsque la parole renonce précisément à cette fonction d’acte et lorsqu’elle retourne à son essence d’expression.]” TI, 221. Cf. also 199; 202; 224-225.

426. See *supra* 112 and ss.

Levinas's open distrust of poetry⁴²⁷ (which Blanchot made sure to note in his commentary of *Totalité et Infini*)⁴²⁸ really comes down to, in which enthralled by the sublime rhythms of the work, and in spite of himself, the subject loses itself — is not just clear, but perfectly logical within the logic of this work where it is claimed, and repeated, that the idea of infinity requires the rupture with participation and the violence it wields. To the (impersonal) violence of rhetoric and poetic enthusiasms, Levinas opposes, therefore, this absolutely positive, rhetoric-free, peaceful prose of discourse that, nowise innocently Blanchot points out “resembles the tranquil humanist and Socratic speech that brings us close to the speaker.”⁴²⁹ But is such a language possible? Can there be such a language as that which Levinas strives to put forward, purified of all rhetoric, of all ambiguity, of all negativity, of all violence, of all linguistic thickness, and relying exclusively on its ethical righteousness, as pure invocation without thematization, and thus, without predication? What would it say? What would it offer? Would such “language still deserve its name?” — asks Derrida.⁴³⁰

The problematic of language is indeed one of the main points of discussion of “Violence et Métaphysique,” where Derrida puts in question Levinas's attempt to break with philosophical discourse from within that very discourse, from within the philosophical conceptuality he seeks to overturn, and thus with the language he seeks to destroy,⁴³¹ to conjugate, as he wishes, infinity as a positive plenitude and the face as speech, the saying of the Other as an irreducible alterity. But in his fight against the philosophical discourse, Derrida argues, Levinas “has already deprived himself of his best weapon: the disdain of discourse,” for unlike the negative theologians whom, he claims, gave themselves the right to speak in a language they knew to be finite, because inferior to the *logos*, and thus “resigned

427. “We distrust the poetry that scans and bewitches our gestures; we distrust everything that, in our lucid lives, is played in spite of us. [Nous nous méfions de la poésie qui déjà scande et ensorcelle nos gestes, de tout ce qui, dans notre vie lucide, se joue malgré nous.]” Levinas, “Personnes ou figures (À propos d’ ‘Emmaüs’ de Paul Claudel),” in DL, 188.

428. “Levinas mistrusts poems and poetic activity.” Blanchot, *L’Entretien Infini*, 76.

429. Blanchot, *L’Entretien Infini*,” 81.

430. Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 466, n. 2.

431. “We are not denouncing, here, an incoherence of language or a contradiction in the system. We are wondering about the meaning of a necessity: the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it.” Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 427.

Derrida recounts that one time, referring to his essay, Levinas told him, with a smile: “Basically, you reproach me for having taken the Greek *logos*, as one takes the bus, to get off.” Malka, *La vie et la trace*, 185.

to its own failure,” language, discourse occupies a central and originary place for Levinas, as the condition of thought, and as reason itself, so not only does he not disdain discourse, that is, does not proclaim its finitude, but deems it, the ethical word, the only that can provide access to infinity, and thus speak of the infinitely other. Yet, because, contrary to Husserl, Levinas refuses to consider the other as an intentional modification of consciousness, he makes the other inaccessible to speech, and deprives him of all foundation, and in so doing, argues Derrida “deprives himself of the very foundation and possibility of his own language,” which is why ultimately he claims of Levinas’s project that it is, at heart, a sort of *empiricism*⁴³² — “the dream of a purely heterological thought at its source,” that is, a thought without reference to itself founded on what would be a “non-philosophical” condition, in this case, the epiphany of the face. But that would mean that ethics would have its commencement in a non-philosophical (empirical) condition... it would, if only the experience of the face were an experience in the common sense of the word, which it is not. The face of the Other is not a purely empirical given which would be that which receives (instead of giving) a signification but is instead of, and by itself significant, which is why it is an experience in the *fullest* sense of the term — “absolute experience” or “experience par excellence” — the situation of the I in the face of the Other is the “*metempirical*”⁴³³ condition of ethics, the necessary and concrete situation in which the event of the Other is assumed; the face is the “primal imprudence” of ethics, beyond ontology, its “guiding star,” so to speak, that guarantees that ethics, knowing not where it is going, does not lose itself in the wanderlust of its “absolute adventure,”⁴³⁴ *whose road is that of philosophy*.

And indeed, though it may tend to the oneiric, empiricism is a philosophical gesture, a philosophical position, “*enfant de bonne race philosophique*” as Jan de Greef calls it, that Levinas radicalizes, inverts, “by revealing it to itself as metaphysics” — nonviolent (because unverballed) metaphysics whose very elocution is thus its first disavowal. The

432. “The true name of this inclination of thought to the Other, of this resigned acceptance of incoherent incoherence inspired by a truth more profound than the ‘logic’ of philosophical discourse, of this *renunciation* of the concept, of the *a priori*s and transcendental horizons of language, is *empiricism*. For the latter, at bottom, has ever committed but one fault: the fault of presenting itself as a philosophy. And the profundity of the empiricist intention must be recognized beneath the naïveté of certain of its historical expressions.” Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 470.

433. My emphasis. E. Levinas, “Transcendance et hauteur,” in *Cahier de l’Herne*, 105. Orig. publ. in *Bulletin de la société française de Philosophie* in 1962.

434. “Aventure absolue, dans une imprudence primordiale.” TI, 341.

phrase imposes itself, language must be *said*, so that it can offer the world to the Other, the Other whose tradition is *philosophy*,⁴³⁵ which is why Levinas cannot “escape” philosophy — nor does he want to. The nonviolent metaphysics, ethics, must therefore “endure” the violence of its elocution, of its *articulation* with which violence first appears: the contemporary violence of the concept and the verb *to be* — *predication* — absent from no discourse, it orders the reintegration of all otherness into the sphere of the Same, it is the “first violence.” There is no discourse, no *logos* without “the interlacing of nouns and verbs,” and there is no philosophical discourse without the conceptual (ontological) moment that guarantees its synchronism and coherence.

And so, ultimately, in *Totalité et Infini*, as much as Levinas tries to break with the tradition of Western philosophy and with ontology, the philosopher cannot help but to “yield” to ontology — a concession that does not mean however, not necessarily at least, a “defeat,” as it were, of ethics to ontology, of the nonviolent ethical word to the violence of the *logos*, for let us recall that when resolutely assumed, the inability of the empirical condition to justify itself “contests the resolution and the coherence of the Logos (philosophy) at its root, instead of allowing itself to be questioned by it”⁴³⁶ —, beginning with the way he *inverts* the Heideggerian formulation of ontological difference in this work (privileging being [*étant*] in detriment of Being [*Être*]), an inversion that he knows to be insufficient⁴³⁷ to move beyond ontology as he seeks to, beyond the horizon where this difference is drawn, a movement that, no doubt, already animates this work which lacks however a better word for it; not one, in fact, but two: the Saying [*Dire*] and the Said [*Dit*], the terms that articulate this “breach” at the very heart of language that Levinas will put forward four years from now, in the aforementioned article “Énigme et phénomène,” and through which language will no longer be only a means of questioning, but will be *itself* the object of questioning, and thus the target of a certain mistrust, as “the possibility of an enigmatic equivocation for the better and for

.435 “il faut dire que la tradition de l’Autre n’est pas nécessairement religieuse, qu’elle est philosophique.” Levinas, EDE, 171.

436. Derrida, “Violence et Métaphysique (2),” 471.

437. Notably in the preface to the second edition of *De l’existence à l’existant*, where (probably in reply to Jean-Luc Marion’s critique in *L’Idole et la distance*), Levinas claims that this reversal was but a “first step” of the procedure that, in his words, marks the philosophical itinerary going from *Totalité et Infini* to *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, namely, the need to place the “ethical difference” beyond the ontological difference. Cf. EE, 12.

the worse, which men abuse.”⁴³⁸ Now, these words seem to respond affirmatively to Derrida’s suggestion, in “Violence et métaphysique,” that “the limit of violence and nonviolence is perhaps not between speech and writing, but within each one,” so that the distinction between the spoken word and the written word, between speech “in person” and the “impersonal” discourse that cannot assist itself, that constituted the essential of language in *Totalité et Infini* (thus understood exclusively as the metaphysical relation with the other) is *lost* to this more essential distinction within language itself — an *hiatus*, a *decalage*, an *ambiguity* — between the Saying and the Said, whose distance signifies a disparity, but not an antinomy, a disjunction, but not a contradiction, nor a complementarity; it signifies rather an encroachment, an *intrigue*, in which it is less a matter of affirming the primacy and ascendancy of the first over the latter, than of hearing behind the Said the Saying that carries it and bears a meaning before its thematization in a Said, before even its correlation with a Said (in which the absolute dia-chrony that precludes the gathering into present and representation is already erased), that is, the “silent origin [of language] before being;”⁴³⁹ not to suppress or discard the Said, but to invest it somehow, to rescue it from the objective order, thus rupturing its prevalence in being that is its natural place which is also the place where the Saying, as the non-verbalized restlessness for the other, can be proffered, said, shared with the other.

This problematization of language put forward remarkably by Derrida was quite possibly the linchpin of the so-called “surgery” that (the second part of) his essay is said to have performed on Levinas;⁴⁴⁰ for indeed the problematic of language, that even though playing

438. “Le langage est la possibilité d’une énigmatique équivoque pour le meilleur et pour le pire et dont les hommes abusent.” EDE, 208.

439. “... only in its silent origin, before Being, would language be nonviolent. But why history? Why does the phrase impose itself? Because if one does not uproot the silent origin from itself violently, if one decides not to speak, then the worst violence will silently cohabit the *idea* of peace? Peace is made only in a *certain silence*, which is determined and protected by the violence of speech.” Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 467. Levinas will pose this same question or rather, this same “conundrum,” in *Autrement qu’être* where we read: “Why would proximity, the pure signification of the Saying, the an-archival one-for-the-other of beyond being, revert to being or fall into being, into a conjunction of be-ings, into *essence* showing itself in the Said? Why have we gone to seek *essence* on its empyrean? Why knowing? Why problem? Why philosophy? [Pourquoi la proximité, pure signification du Dire, l’un-pour-autre an-archique d’au-delà de l’être, retournerait-elle à l’être ou tomberait en être, en conjonction d’étants, en *essence* se montrant dans le Dit? Pourquoi sommes-nous allés chercher l’*essence* sur son Empyrée? Pourquoi savoir? Pourquoi problème? Pourquoi philosophie?]” AE, 99.

440. “Derrida went to see Levinas: ‘He said to me,’ he recounts, ‘You anesthetized me in the first paper, then you operated me in the second. That’s all. We never spoke again.’” Malka, *La Vie et la Trace*, 184.

a central part in *Totalité et Infini*, insofar as it is understood as the metaphysical relationship with the Other, is not explicitly thematized, and namely in terms of temporalization, or rather, it is only thematized because it is understood in terms of *expression*, as the Face of the Other, by which it remains, therefore, and like *almost* everything else in this work, overshadowed will, instead, come to constitute the very intrigue at the heart of *Autrement qu'être*, itself heavily implicated in it. Having said that, there is one particular instance in *Totalité et Infini* where language seems to part from the expression of the face, from the understanding that dominates this work of its coincidence with the face, and to somehow compromise the separation between language and sensibility that is all too clear in this work, which brings us to the last “stop” of the present analysis: section IV.B. “*Phénoménologie de l'Éros*.”

Reviving the thematic of eros analyzed, notably, in *Le Temps et l'Autre*, and even earlier, in his captivity notebooks, Levinas (who, moreover, it is worth recalling, was by now still working on his novel “*Éros ou Triste Opulence*”⁴⁴¹) elaborates a brief phenomenological analysis of the erotic that he places alongside other themes such as fecundity, fraternity, filiality, time, and the “Ambiguity of Love” [*L'ambiguïté de l'amour*] which immediately precedes (and introduces) it, in a section significantly titled “Beyond the face” [*Au-delà du visage*]. These events that the author places beyond the face constitute situations or as he suggests in the preface, “dramas” (a term the philosopher, nonetheless, forgoes considering its equivocality)⁴⁴² that signify otherwise than the face, that is, these do not *express* in the manner of the face and yet, cannot, like the face, “be described as noesis aiming at noemata, nor as active interventions realizing projects.”⁴⁴³ What is particular about the erotic, and the caress which is its proper movement, is that in it appears a dimension of language that does not coincide with the expression of the face, for even though it is described “against” it, in

441. Though, as you surely recall from our earlier analysis of Levinas’s novel manuscripts, the theme of eros is, albeit present, far less central in this novel sketch (in spite of what its title may suggest) than in “*La Dame de chez Wepler*” whose plot revolves around the impossibility of a satisfying erotic relationship and the search for a sexual encounter.

442. “These are conjunctures in being for which the term drama would perhaps be most suitable, in the sense that Nietzsche would have liked to use it when, at the end of *The Case of Wagner*, he regrets that it has always been wrongly translated as action. But it is due to the resulting equivocation that we forego this term. [Il s’agit de conjonctures dans l’être auxquelles conviendrait peut-être le mieux, le terme de drame au sens où Nietzsche voudrait l’employer lorsque à la fin du *Cas Wagner* il déplore qu’on l’ait toujours à tort traduit par action. Mais c’est à cause de l’équivoque qui en résulte que nous renonçons à ce terme.]” TI, 13-14.

443. TI, 13.

regard to it, it goes beyond it, meaning also that the erotic relation represents the exceptional situation in *Totalité et Infini* in which language and sensibility are not wholly detached, and insofar as Levinas elaborates on the temporalization of sensibility through the caress, this analysis announces a crucial discussion that will be further developed in the 1967 essay “Langage et proximité” that together with the aforementioned articles of 1963, 1964 and 1965, prepares the “passage” from *Totalité et Infini* to *Autrement qu’être*.

Simultaneity of need and desire,⁴⁴⁴ concurrence of concupiscence and transcendence, duality of absolute proximity and absolute distance, ambivalence of extreme fragility and “exorbitant ultramateriality,” *eros*, the erotic relationship that extends alongside the night of the *il y a*, is, Levinas claims, “*the equivocal par excellence*;” yet it is this very heterogeneity that constitutes its originality and its radical transcendence (which precisely leads Levinas to conceive the social relationship as such), being “the possibility of the other appearing as an object of a need while retaining his alterity.” In the erotic relation, the proximity of the other, of the loved one is not, much as Levinas had claimed in *De l’existence à l’existant*, “a degradation of, or a stage on the way to, fusion” but “the positive character of the relationship,” insofar as in it the distance is wholly maintained and, thus, in its transcendent movement the subject does not return to itself. And though it is only truly accomplished in fecundity (to which it already leads), *eros* is without reciprocity, despite the self-satisfaction that also constitutes it. And accounting still for the equivocality of the *eros*, Levinas writes that it is “the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time *beneath and beyond discourse*,”⁴⁴⁵ two prepositions that account for the temporality of the erotic relation which describes in turn, I believe, the very temporalization of sensibility.

Starting from enjoyment, from sensibility understood as enjoyment which already “includes” or presupposes, however, the other, the erotic relation is both “absorbed in the

444. “[Enjoyment] brings into relief the ambiguity of an event situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence. This desire – a movement ceaselessly cast forth, an interminable movement toward a future never future enough – is broken and satisfied as the most egoist and cruelest of needs. [[La jouissance] fait ressortir l’ambiguïté qui se situe à la limite de l’immanence et de la transcendence. Ce désir – mouvement sans cesse relancé, mouvement sans terme vers un futur, jamais assez futur – se brise et se satisfait comme le plus égoïste et le plus cruel des besoins.]” TI, 285.

445. The first emphasis is mine. “La possibilité pour Autrui d’apparaître comme objet d’un besoin tout en conservant son altérité, ou encore, la possibilité de jouir d’Autrui, de se placer, à la fois, *en deçà et au-delà du discours*, cette position à l’égard de l’interlocuteur qui, à la fois, l’atteint et le dépasse, cette simultanéité du besoin et du désir, de la concupiscence et de la transcendence, tangence de l’avouable et de l’inavouable, constitue l’originalité de l’érotique qui, dans ce sens, est *l’équivoque par excellence*.” TI, 285-286.

complacency of the caress,”⁴⁴⁶ that is, need and satisfaction, and searches beyond that need, because moved by desire it solicits “what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough;”⁴⁴⁷ thus, the eros, where the sensible appears in its immediacy, is *in-between times*: between the past of consummation, and the future of desire, that is again, between what being extinguished *is no longer* [*n’est plus*], and what being a vertiginous depth *is not yet* [*n’est pas encore*] — which accounts for the particular intentionality of the caress which is not an intentionality of unveiling (which would lead to characterize the erotic as “seizing” “possessing” or “knowing) but one of search, whose movement however does not have an end, but goes beyond its own telos.⁴⁴⁸ Now, in terms of language, or expression, this ambiguity of the erotic affectivity translates equally into an ambiguity in its saying [*Dire*]: on the one hand, “the signifyingness of language” and, on the other, “the non-signifyingness of the lascivious that silence yet dissimulates,” meaning that the equivocality of the eros does not arise from what is said, between two meanings of the word, but from the “very mode of ‘saying,’ or of ‘manifesting’” which, in itself, “hides while uncovering, says and silences the inexpressible, harasses and provokes. The ‘saying’ – and not only the said – is equivocal.”⁴⁴⁹

Thus, the erotic relation is beyond discourse (i.e., beyond the face) insofar as being beyond the possible, in the caress, infinitely future, it is irreducible to the social, an irreducibility that “is positively, the community of sentient and sensed ... identity of the feeling ... love of love,” desire beyond being, from which nothing is further than possession, which would quite simply extinguish it — eros designates, here, through the caress, the

446. “Le mouvement de l’amant ... se complaît dans la compassion, s’absorbe dans la complaisance de la caresse.” TI, 288.

447. “La caresse consiste à ne se saisir de rien, à solliciter ce qui s’échappe sans cesse de sa forme vers un avenir – jamais assez avenir.” TI, 288.

448. As Levinas had claimed in *Le Temps et l’autre*: “it is like a play with something slipping away, a play absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come. [elle est comme un jeu avec quelque chose qui se dérobe, et un jeu absolument sans projet ni plan, non pas avec ce qui peut devenir nôtre et nous, mais avec quelque chose d’autre, toujours autre, toujours inaccessible, toujours à venir.]” TA, 82.

449. “La façon de ‘dire’ ou de ‘manifeste’ elle-même, cache en découvrant, dit et tait l’indicible, harcèle et provoque. Le ‘dire’ – et non seulement le dit – est équivoque. L’équivoque ne se joue pas entre deux sens de la parole, mais entre la parole et le renoncement à la parole, entre la signifiante du langage et la non-signifiante du lascif que dissimule encore le silence.” TI, 291.

It is important to note that the terms “saying” and “said” referred to above, are not yet considered and employed here as conceptual categories, as they will be from 1965 onwards; the term “saying” denotes, for the time being, the unsaying of the said, that is the very equivocality of the erotic expression.

immediacy of the sensible beyond consciousness and enunciating speech, in the confines of reason and, in that sense, expresses the end of discourse which cannot account for it; the erotic relationship is beyond the face, insofar as it goes toward the *concealed*, toward what cannot be revealed — mystery⁴⁵⁰ —, toward a secret that is exposed as such, but not disclosed, which is its very profanation; but by this same movement, that is, by this profanation which characterizes the erotic, it is also beneath discourse, *en-deçà* of speech, because it dissimulates the signifyingness and the straightforwardness of the ethical word into allusions and innuendos, and thus inverts the purity of the expression of the face-to-face “into indecency, bordering on the equivocal that says less than nothing, already laughter and raillery,”⁴⁵¹ not unlike

the laughter that deflagrates in Shakespearean witches’ sessions full of innuendos, beyond the decency of words, as the absence of all seriousness, of all possibility for speech, the laughter of “ambiguous tales” where the mechanism of laughter is not only ascribable to the formal conditions of the comic ... there is in addition a content that brings us to an order where seriousness is totally lacking. [le rire qui fuse dans les réunions shakespeariennes de sorcières, plein de sous-entendus, par-delà la décence des paroles, comme l’absence de tout sérieux, de toute possibilité de parole, le rire des “histoires équivoques” où le mécanisme du rire ne relève pas seulement des conditions formelles du comique ... Il s’y ajoute un contenu qui nous ramène à un ordre où le sérieux manque totalement.]⁴⁵²

In its renouncement to expression and to the word that constitutes its particular mode of expression, i.e., its non-signifyingness, the erotic would appear to resemble that reverse of language that we found in the anarchical and silent word of spectacle, the world of phenomenality, to which the literary work, but not only literary, indeed any work such as it is understood in *Totalité et Infini*, that is, as sign, would appear to belong. Surely, this modality of the word, being behind signification must take its meaning from presence, from the primary expression that is the face, through which its obscurity and equivocality can be

450. “In all its ontological purity, eros does not require participation in a third term (tastes, common interests, a connaturality of souls) – but direct relationship with what gives itself in withholding itself, with the other qua other, with mystery. [Éros dans sa pureté ontologique qui ne tient pas à une participation à un troisième terme – goûts, intérêts communs, connaturalité des âmes –, mais relation directe avec ce qui se donne en se refusant, avec autrui en tant qu’autrui, avec le mystère.]” AP, 122.

451. “L’expression s’invertit en indécence, déjà toute proche de l’équivoque qui dit moins que rien, déjà rire et raillerie.” TI, 291.

452. TI, 295.

surmounted (something that is already true of the Eros) — but does not this analysis of eros, of the caress, of the enjoyment that grounds it and the intentionality that describes it, open another path? That, perhaps, of an understanding of language that finds in this (anti-) language *en-deçà* of signification and speech (and thus of the face), *en-deçà* of the language that enunciates propositions and messages, *en-deçà* of the *logos*, “language more ancient than the *truth of being*,”⁴⁵³ and thus, somewhat, in the confines of reason — language in its affective, material and, essentially, sensible dimension, as proximity,⁴⁵⁴ caress, contact, and thus, necessarily, a certain movement of enunciation, a way of saying, a way of speaking, an inclination, an inflexion of voice, a *temporalization* — the very immediacy sought after, in *Totalité et Infini*, in the Face of the Other, and the interpellation it calls forth which seemed however to entail a certain conditioning of transcendence to presence, and a “subservience” to reason, insofar as language, the ethical speech, was said to found reason and to coincide with it.⁴⁵⁵

Well, *if*, as argued throughout this chapter, art is essentially bound for silence, if art, for Levinas, including literature, is not language, and if the *en-deçà* in which it is exiled, in which it revels and to which it leads us, is that of non-truth, of an equivocal silence, of enigmas, allusions and enchanting rhythms, that preclude the beginning of a dialogue, then, does not this blooming recognition of a sensible dimension in language pierce through that

453. “Langage de la proximité pour la proximité, plus ancien que celui de la *vérité de l'être*.” PC, 18.

454. As noted by Étienne Feron in his insightful study *De l'idée de la transcendance à la question du langage*: “It was only natural that after having addressed a proximity without language in *Le Temps et l'Autre* and after having described a language without proximity at the time of *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas would make of the conjunction of language and proximity the title of one of his texts.” Feron, *De l'idée de la transcendance à la question du langage. L'itinéraire philosophique d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Grenoble Jérôme Millon, 1992), 126.

455. “If the face to face founds language, if the face brings the first signification, establishes signification itself in being, then *language does not only serve reason, but is reason*. [Si le face à face fonde le langage, si le visage apporte la première signification, instaure la signification même dans l'être, *le langage ne sert pas seulement la raison, mais est la raison*.]” My emphasis, TI, 228; “The face opens the primordial discourse ... that obliges entering into discourse, the commencement of discourse rationalism prays for, a ‘force’ that convinces even ‘the people who do not wish to listen’ and thus founds the true universality of reason. [Le visage ouvre le discours original ... qui oblige à entrer dans le discours, commencement du discours que le rationalisme appelle de ses vœux, ‘force’ qui convainc même ‘les gens qui ne veulent pas entendre’ et fonde ainsi la vraie universalité de la raison.]” TI, 220; “In *the welcoming of the face the will opens to reason*. Language ... teaches and introduces the new into a thought ... the very work of reason. [Dans *l'accueil du visage la volonté s'ouvre à la raison*. Le langage ... enseigne et introduit du nouveau dans une pensée; l'introduction du nouveau dans une pensée ... voilà l'œuvre même de la raison.]” TI, 241-242.

And as claimed by De Greef: “the word as ethical expression of others establishes reason and breaks totality, but on the other hand this same reason is set up as a discourse establishing totality.” Jan De Greef, “Éthique, réflexion et histoire chez Levinas,” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 67, no. 95 (1969), 437.

screen of silence that stretches between the author and the audience, and thus restore art's ability to speak, or may be, *our ability to hear it [l'entendre]*?

CHAPTER 3

The Sense of the *Essential*

« *All is less than
it is,
all is more.* »

— Paul Celan, “Cello-Einsatz”*

As we come to the closing chapter of this study, let us focus on that which is certainly not illegitimate to hold as Levinas’s masterwork: *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*.

A tremendously complicated work, not so much for the novelty of its philosophical propositions, as for the intricacy of its per-formative elocution, for the breathlessness of its *saying* at the confines of language, at the limits of reason and ever verging on *non-sense*, *Autrement qu’être* is the perhaps paradoxical expression of an extreme radicality and a supreme delicacy. If the term “radicality” warrants no notice considering how it recurs in one form or another in the various readings of this work, the same cannot perhaps be said of the latter, likely to ring hollow without a word to follow which is this: the “delicacy” I wish to denote does not mean after all the forsaking of accuracy for feebleness of any kind, nor the renunciation of reasoning for the flowery of expression; it is meant, rather, to account for the arresting weightlessness that seems to carry Levinas’s pen forward, when we know that writing was for him like having a hammer pounding on his nail.¹

* “*alles ist weniger, als / es ist, / alles ist mehr.*” Paul Celan, “Cello-Einsatz,” In *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden Zweiter Band Gedichte II* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 76.

1. Cf. Michaël Levinas, “Mon père m’a transmis.”

But could this delicacy be a mere cover? The wooing armor of a radical core? Neither guise nor disguise, this delicacy is not entered to ease a prior radicality but, drawing from a sensibility more profound than knowledge, and more ancient than the abstraction of nature, is of itself radical: *it was born radical*.

There is this strange new “air” about *Autrement qu’être*; *as if* the long-suspected but never truly claimed dereliction of all-things-structural and systematic, of formality and formalization could, at last, give way to the pure rhythm of thought (at the height of its poetic puissance), of writing, of speaking, of *breathing*: with its inflections, iterations, hyperboles and expirations that make it resemble a melody of sorts, a chant that is as much sirenic as it is solemn — as it is brutal; *as if* there were nothing more to withstand, nothing more to find nor to found, to oppose nor to lose; nothing more to say really, but to say better — not more easily, but more intensely, without restraint, without fear of anything, and particularly of *violence*, of the “violence par excellence”² which is that of Ethics — to say himself better; and *as if*, at last, echoing Husserl’s saying that “the philosophical problems finally appeared to him in all their clarity now that age had given him time to solve them,”³ everything seems to finally make sense, even if that sense, written on crooked lines,⁴ puts sense itself in question.

Quite unlike, I daresay, its “predecessor,” *Totalité et Infini*.⁵

2. As opposed to the violence without violence, “non-violence par excellence,” that dominates *Totalité et Infini*; in *Autrement qu’être*, it is rather the primordial violence of the persecuting hold of the Other that prevails.

3. “Husserl disait que les problèmes philosophiques lui apparaissaient enfin dans toute leur clarté, maintenant que le temps lui était ménagé par l’âge, pour les résoudre.” EDE, 125, n. 2.

A coincidence no doubt, but no less marvelous for it, is the fact that at the time *Autrement qu’être* was published Levinas was exactly the same age as Husserl when he gave the final session of the last seminar of his career.

4. As in the Portuguese proverb “God writes straight on crooked lines” [Deus escreve direito por linhas tortas]” quoted in AE, 230.

5. The banality of my saying this does not diminish its relevance and maybe its truthfulness: if in the historical time, *Totalité et Infini* precedes *Autrement qu’être* by 13 years, the latter precedes the former by much more in a time other than or pre-historical; indeed, one could say that AE is the pre(hi)story of TI, the anachronic and anarchical “latent birth” of its subject: from the accusative me [*moi*] to the I [*Je*] that will champion TI already *with others*, producing thus the necessary (and intricate) design, the conditions of possibility for the *otherwise than being*, of this ‘way of thinking’ that grounds TI whose central question is then no longer subjectivity, but *alterity*; which is why one ought to read *Totalité et Infini*, and indeed as suggested by Jacques Rolland, “retrospectively and prospectively, his entire body of work” — *from Autrement qu’être*. Jacques Rolland, “Une logique de l’ambiguïté,” in *Autrement que savoir: Emmanuel Levinas. Avec les études de Guy Petitdemange et Jacques Rolland* (Paris: Éditions Osiris, 1988), 37.

The debate around the relationship between Levinas's two major works is immense, immensely interesting, and interestingly divergent. For some, these two works appear to have been written by two different authors, with some going as far as to question the "successfulness" of the later work,⁶ while for others these are clearly authored by the same person who furthermore says fundamentally the same thing(s) in both, albeit in two very different ways — which is the one thing everyone seems to agree on: that the language (and with it, the *Stimmung*) of *Autrement qu'être* is quite unlike that of *Totalité et Infini*, something the author himself gladly admits to.⁷

But the relinquishing of the "callous language" [*langage durci*]⁸ of 1961 is only, I believe, the most visible "face" of another *modification*, in maybe the very sense (though in a certainly different context) that Levinas gives to this word in 1974, and that is the fact that

6. Namely Michel Vanni who disputes the idea that *Autrement qu'être* represents "a gain and a culmination on all levels for Levinas's thought," speaking of it rather as a step backwards and an "impasse" in the philosopher's work, one that, he suggests is "linked to a form of 'Heideggerianization' of this thought" by which the more "concrete" themes advanced in *Totalité et Infini* are abandoned for an "idle" subject that resolving itself "into radical *patience* or unreserved *atonement* under the persecution of others" has perhaps, he claims, nothing more to answer for. Vanni, "Transcendance et ambiguïté. Quelques problèmes d'interprétation de la pensée de Levinas," *Les Études philosophiques* 1, no. 60 (2002), 113-114. Vanni's critique echoes that of Étienne Feron who, in regards to the question of language in Levinas's work, tackles the shift between TI and AE, from speech understood as face-to-face to the Saying as 'saying itself' [*se dire*]: "It is as if, starting from the discourse between interlocutors in order to identify the Saying in which ipseity and the uniqueness of subjectivity are knotted together, Levinas goes back to the anarchic call of the Infinite, from which, however, it becomes almost impossible to return to the initial situation of the *relationship* with others or proximity, precisely because the Saying as a call from the Other shatters the very structure of the relationship," from which he wonders whether this displacement of speech to the Saying "does not end up, to a certain extent, short-circuiting the very relationship with others, and whether Saying interpreted as 'saying itself' is not already an obliteration of proximity." (Feron, *De l'idée de transcendance*, 330) He thus speaks of an impasse (that is perhaps, he suggests, the "logical consequence of Levinas's phenomenological premises") by which the concrete relationship with the other, the dialogical situation, would end up neutralized in an abstract or neutral monologue. Faced with such criticism, the reasonableness of which I do not dispute, I will simply refer to my previous note.

7. At least twice; in the 1978 essay "Signature" where the philosopher claims: "The ontological language which *Totalité et Infini* still uses ... is henceforth avoided. And the analyses themselves refer not to the experience in which a subject always thematizes what he equals, but to the transcendence in which he answers for that which his intentions have not encompassed. [Le langage ontologique dont use encore *Totalité et Infini* ... est désormais évité. Et les analyses, elles-mêmes, renvoient non pas à l'*expérience* où toujours un sujet thématise ce qu'il égale, mais à la *transcendance* où il répond de ce que ses intentions n'ont pas mesuré.]" Levinas, "Signature" in DL, 440. And in the preface to the 1987 German edition of *Totalité et Infini*: "*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* already avoids the ontological – or more exactly, eidetic – language to which *Totalité et Infini* incessantly resorts to. [*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* évite déjà le langage ontologique – ou, plus exactement, eidétique – auquel *Totalité et Infini* ne cesse de recourir.]" TI, I-II.

8. The expression is by Jacques Rolland in *Parcours de l'Autrement*, 21.

although bearing a somewhat similar structure to *Totalité et Infini* (that, is non-linear),⁹ *Autrement qu'être* does not follow the oppositional and hierarchical logic that steers the former. It is no longer a matter of dividing and keeping apart metaphysics and ontology, the phenomenon and the face (a term that without disappearing, loses its prerogative in 1974, that is, its presence in person, that is again, its *present* which it (sur)passes,¹⁰ being already and only trace of itself), transcendence and immanence, Dasein and/or Jewish, without losing the ultimate, that is to say, primordial, aim: the Good beyond being already informed *Totalité et Infini*, the beyond being already guided the research proposed therein, whose terminology and “composure” nevertheless seemed to thwart. It is true, and I suggested as much in the last chapter, that this opposition was ultimately artificial, for the supposedly opposed “orders” were already and necessarily implicated in one another: what was lacking, however, was a *trace* of this interference — a trace that is “not just another word”¹¹ that recurs in *Autrement qu'être*, but the para-doxically an-archical principle that guides this work, that again para-doxically, signals the excess or abuse of language that alone allows for the exception deranging or putting out of order of all *essence*, the ex-ception of the *otherwise than being* or being's *other*.¹² To the choice “Dasein or J.” the Levinas of 1974, better than

9. Much like *Totalité et Infini*, *Autrement qu'être* does not follow a linear structure which would allow for a systematic exposition, but proceeds rather on the basis of repetition of the same idea — “the attempt to say transcendence” — through different concepts, each echoing and illuminating the others: “The necessities of thematization in which they are said ordain a division into chapters, although the themes in which these concepts present themselves do not lend themselves to linear exposition, and cannot be really isolated from one another without projecting their shadows and their reflections on one another. Perhaps the clarity of the exposition does not suffer here only from the clumsiness of the expounder. [Les nécessités de la thématization où ils sont dits ordonnent une division en chapitres, sans que les thèmes où ces concepts se présentent, se prêtent à un déroulement linéaire, sans qu'ils puissent véritablement s'isoler et ne pas projeter, les uns sur les autres, leurs ombres et leurs reflets. La clarté de l'exposition ne souffre donc peut-être pas ici uniquement des maladroitures de l'exposant.]” AE, 37.

10. As in Levinas's “precious expression” “*se passer*” that is meant to name the derangement operated by the trace and which, thus, one could say to be the most meaningful *verb* of *Autrement qu'être*. “‘To come to pass’ – a precious expression in which the self figures itself in a past that bypasses itself, as in ageing without ‘active synthesis.’ The response which is responsibility – incumbent responsibility for the neighbor – resounds in this passivity, this disinterestedness of subjectivity, in this sensibility. [‘Se passer’, expression précieuse où le soi se dessine comme dans le passé qui se passe comme la sénescence sans ‘synthèse active.’ La réponse qui est responsabilité – responsabilité incombant pour le prochain – résonne dans cette passivité, dans ce désintéressement de la subjectivité, dans cette sensibilité.]” AE, 30-31.

11. “... la trace n'est pas un mot de plus: elle est la proximité de Dieu dans le visage de mon prochain.” Levinas, “Un Dieu Homme?,” In EN, [61].

12. And not just any other, that is, the other in general as the negativity of being; this distinction between being's *other* (the *otherwise than being*) from all other figures of being (the *being otherwise*) which, as intervals of nothingness, maintain the *conatus* that is, the inter-esse-ment that marks the triumph of being, is the crucial

that of 1961, fathoms, indeed *knows*, that to go beyond being, which is to say, to find the *exception* to it, neither avoiding, belittling nor antagonizing being suffices (not least because being does not allow itself to be antagonized in whatever fashion one wishes or dares to) — but that being must, instead, be dethroned *not from without, but from within*,¹³ for one cannot escape the “absorbing and resorbing power of essence,”¹⁴ nor indeed oppose it but only be uprooted, extracted, or better, *wrenched away from it*; for the ontological difference can neither be passed over nor demeaned,¹⁵ but must instead be *seen* and *educated* by a new (yet more ancient) and *gravest* difference that irrupts within it: a difference — that of Ethics — through which, transcending itself, being takes on, at last, its proper, that is, its just sense.¹⁶ And so, to opposition and hierarchy are not opposed either harmony or, much less, identity,

and most difficult question of *Autrement qu'être*: “Passing to being’s *other*, otherwise than being. Not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*. Neither not-to-be... the negativity that attempts to repel being is immediately submerged by being... The *esse* of being dominates the not-being-itself... To be or not to be — the question of transcendence is therefore not there. The statement of the being’s *other* — of the otherwise than being — claims to enunciate a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness: precisely the difference of the *beyond*, the difference of transcendence. [Passer à l’*autre* de l’être, autrement qu’être. Non pas être autrement, mais autrement qu’être. Ni non plus ne-pas-être... la négativité qui tente de repousser l’être est aussitôt submergée par l’être... L’*esse* de l’être domine le ne-pas-être-lui-même... Être ou ne pas être — la question de la transcendence n’est donc pas là. L’énoncé de l’*autre* de l’être — de l’autrement qu’être — prétend énoncer une différence au-delà de celle qui sépare l’être du néant : précisément la différence de l’*au-delà*, la différence de la transcendance]” AE, 13-14.

13. “If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being* — the *esse* —, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being. [Si la transcendance a un sens, elle ne peut signifier que le fait, pour l’événement d’être — pour l’*esse* —, pour l’*essence*, de passer à l’*autre* de l’être.]” AE, 13.

14. The expression is by Guy Petitdemange in “Emmanuel Levinas: Au-dehors, sans retour,” in Arno Munster (ed.), *La différence comme non-indifférence. Éthique et altérité chez Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Kimé, 1995), 26.

15. Precisely Derrida’s ontological objection to Levinas’s procedure in *Totalité et Infini*: “By refusing, in *Totalité et Infini*, to lend any dignity to the ontico-ontological difference, by seeing it only as a ruse of war, and by naming *metaphysics*, the intra-ontic movement of ethical transcendence (the movement respectful of one existent toward another), Levinas confirms Heidegger’s point: for does not the latter see in metaphysics (in metaphysical ontology) the forgetting of Being and the dissimulation of the ontico-ontological difference?” Derrida, “Violence et métaphysique,” 459.

And Levinas’s subsequent response in *Autrement qu'être*: “The way of thinking proposed here consists neither in disregarding being nor in treating it with ridiculous pretension in a disdainful manner, as the failing of a higher order or Disorder. It is, on the contrary, from proximity that being takes on its just sense ... being must be understood from *being’s other*. [La façon de penser proposée ici ne consiste pas à méconnaître l’être ni à le traiter avec une prétention ridicule d’une façon dédaigneuse, comme la défaillance d’un ordre ou d’un Désordre supérieur. Mais c’est à partir de la proximité qu’il prend, au contraire, son juste sens... il faut comprendre l’être à partir de l’*autre de l’être*” AE, 33.

16. And thus, a sense other than the Heideggerian sense of being: “Question of the sense of being: not the ontology of the comprehension of this extraordinary verb, but the ethics of the justice of being. [Question du sens de l’être: non pas l’ontologie de la compréhension de ce verbe extraordinaire, mais l’éthique de la justice de l’être]” DQVI, 257.

but tension, equivocation, enigma, or again, *ambiguity*. And precisely on ambiguity lies what I trust to be the cardinal gesture of *Autrement qu'être* and (thus) also the point of its departure from *Totalité et Infini*: the *embracing of ambiguity*.¹⁷ Neither indifference, resignation, nor still leniency, but the welcoming of ambiguity into the bosom of transcendence: “Transcendence – the beyond essence which is also *being-in-the-world* – requires ambiguity: a blinking of sense which is not only a chance certainty, but a frontier both ineffaceable and finer than the tracing of an ideal line.”¹⁸

But *surely* this is not the *same* ambiguity on which we have been harping on so insistently, that ambiguity which, for Levinas, essentially and irremediably characterizes art? Not directly, not primarily, no. Ambiguity here defines the very *way* of the otherwise than being, between sense and non-sense; it is, as Rolland finely puts it, a mode of signifying in which “the terms come to signify only by bringing with them ... their own *contestation*,”¹⁹ an ambiguity that, as we will see, is necessarily “played out” between ethics and ontology, which is why, as I will seek to show, art is also “encompassed,” implicated, in Levinas’s welcoming gesture toward ambiguity; ambiguity that is rendered, concretely, *through, in* (and somehow also, *beyond* or *on the hither side* of) *language* — the crux of *Autrement qu'être* whose own language is, moreover, the source of its greatest difficulty: that, in Paul Ricœur’s words, of “finding ... the *said* of its *Saying*,” that is, of “thematizing itself”²⁰: for how does one think, how does one *enounce* the otherwise than being without betraying it, without making it signify but a *being otherwise*?²¹ how does one say this extreme goodness

17. “Is ambiguity always a lack of rigor in thinking or an intention to deceive? ... Is it not also a modality of the possible? [L’ambiguïté est-elle toujours un manque de rigueur dans la pensée ou une intention de tromper? ... N’est-elle pas aussi *une modalité du possible*?]” My emphasis. Levinas, *Autrement que savoir*, 70.

18. “À la transcendance – à l’au-delà de l’essence qui est aussi *être-au-monde* – il faut l’ambiguïté: clignotement de sens qui n’est pas seulement une certitude aléatoire, mas une frontière à la fois ineffaçable et plus fine que le trace d’une ligne idéale.” AE, 238.

19. Rolland, *Parcours de l’Autrement*, 9.

20. Paul Ricœur, *Autrement. Lecture d’Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence d’Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: PUF, 2006), 2, 9. Or as argued by Silvano Petrosino, “it is a matter of *devising a ‘grammar’* that is capable of *saying* the speech [*parole*] of the face, that is capable, in a certain ‘way of thinking,’ of thinking this speech.” Petrosino, “D’un livre à l’autre. *Totalité et Infini – Autrement qu’être*,” in *Les Cahiers de la nuit surveillée 3: Emmanuel Levinas*. Edited by Jacques Rolland. 195-210. (Paris: Editions Verdier, 1984), 204.

21. “*Otherwise than being* that is sought here from the outset, and which as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the Saying that states it... in which the *otherwise than being* already

without contradicting it in its very *proclamation*?²² — that comes to be thought of here *as a question*,²³ through the fairly troublesome couple that is the *Saying* [*le Dire*] and the *Said* [*le Dit*].

As remarked in the last few pages of our previous chapter, language becomes a question in *Autrement qu'être* — is made a question of — inasmuch as it no longer coincides *exclusively* with metaphysics as it did in *Totalité et Infini*, that is, language is no longer understood solely as the metaphysical relation with the other, but comes to be acknowledged here, first and foremost, as “the birthplace of ontology.”²⁴ Language, like time, like truth, belongs to ontology whose difference is enounced in the Said: “assembling the dispersion of duration into nouns and propositions,” language “lets being and be-ing be heard.”²⁵ To speak

comes to signify but a *being otherwise*. [*Autrement qu'être* qui, dès le début, est recherché ici et qui, dès sa traduction devant nous se trouve trahi dans le dit dominant le Dire qui l'énonce... où *l'autrement qu'être* se met déjà à ne signifier qu'un *être autrement*.]” AE, 19.

22. “Passer au delà de l'être – suprême bonté qui se démentirait en se proclamant!” EDE, 213.

23. Question not as a minus of affirmation in view of an answer, but as the distance that opens “between the meaningful and the expressed that appears in the as-it-were, in the unsaying [L'écart entre le sensé et l'exprimé qui apparaît dans le pour-ainsi-dire, dans le dédire.]” Levinas, DMT (“Être et Sens”), [119]. The full significance of the term “écart” is, I believe, obscured by its rendition to English as “gap” which means, negatively, a gulf that separates, whereas “écart” signifies, *positively*, a distance that opens, i.e., that puts into tension what has been separated, being in this sense a (sur)plus, an excess, an *excessing*; this distinction or clarification is, in its subtlety, I feel, particularly relevant to shed some light on a singularly intricate *question* such as that of language in Levinas.

Even so, despite the closer attention paid to language after *Totalité et Infini*, and notably in *Autrement qu'être*, I do not share either the view that the Levinas of 1974 is less a phenomenologist than a philosopher of language (Levinas never developed a proper analysis of language, much less a theory of language), or that one can perceive a sort of linguistic *Kehre* between the two works, insofar as the (remarkable) developments on the question of language between the philosopher's two major works are not, as I see it, the result of a profound modification in his thinking on the subject, nor do these reflect a sort of exaltation of language in the sense of an acknowledgment of a superior wisdom to it; as the philosopher himself claims: “I do not proceed at all like Heidegger, who attributes a special wisdom to language... That there is a wisdom in language is possible. I would be very happy to find it, but it is not at all something definitive for me.” (Wyschogrod, “Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” 283). And so, argues the philosopher, “there is not at all an analysis of language in *Autrement qu'être*, it is instead, a matter of finding in language what was always signified phenomenologically.” (Wyschogrod, 283). Which is why, if it is true that the couple Saying-Said is the crux in the sense of *intrigue*, of *Autrement qu'être*, it means nothing by itself: neither the “distinction” Saying-Said, nor the relationship derived from that distinction, are (ultimately) the point of Levinas's “interest” so to speak in language, here as elsewhere.

24. “Dans le Dit se trouve le lieu de naissance de l'ontologie. Elle s'énonce dans l'amphibologie de l'être et de l'étant.” AE, 74.

25. “À l'ontologie – à l'exposition de l'être dans son amphibologie d'être et d'étant – appartiennent temps et langage, en tant que le langage, rassemblant en noms et en propositions la dispersion de la durée, laisse entendre être et étant.” AE, 48.

[trans. note]: As you may have noted, I have altered my rendering to English of “l'être” [*das Sein*] and “l'étant” [*das Seiende*] from, respectively “Being” and “being,” to “being” and “be-ing.” This is not an idle

is to say being *always* and, in this sense, the universality of language is nothing less (or nothing more) than the universality of being: apriority of the Said that “is not added on to a preexisting knowledge, but is the most profound activity of knowing, its very symbolism,”²⁶ indiscretion of the Said in which “everything shows itself,” ideality of the Said in which “everything is conveyed before us – be it at the price of a betrayal. Ancillary and thus indispensable language.”²⁷ first and last word, the Said “is the *origin* and the *ultimate* of philosophy.”²⁸ But in this Said, in this said that says it all and where *everything shows itself*, one hears an *echo* of something else, a subtle and ever-fading voice on the brink of its absorption in the hypostasized eon that always triumphs in it; an echo that surpasses what is said, that precedes the “‘what is it that shows itself in truth ...?’ that questions the being which exhibits itself in terms of this being”²⁹ —, the voice of infinity that answers before all questions, the trace of the Saying whose signification cannot be assembled, the echo of the *otherwise* whose (pre-originary) sense the Said does not succeed in exhausting, “because *the ground of the Saying is never really said.*”³⁰

Much as Levinas had suggested at the end of *Totalité et Infini*, “the ‘saying’ – and not only the said – is equivocal.”³¹ Ambiguity or insubordination of the Saying which is not *completely* absorbed in its inevitable Said, which is not exhausted in the internal play of

inconsistency but an (perhaps presumptuous) attempt to reflect Levinas’s own understanding of “being” and of the ontological difference throughout his work which reaches, in *Autrement qu’être*, as it will hopefully become clear in the pages that follow, its “ultimate” expression. In contrast to the previous chapter where I opted for the capitalization of “Being” to translate “*être*” and rendered “*étant*” as “being” with the lower case “b,” my translational choice for this chapter aims to avoid the (previously unavoidable) overemphasis of being resulting from the use of the capital letter which, as Thomas Sheehan argues, “hypostasizes and inflates it into ‘Big Being,’ a metaphysical ‘Something’ (however ethereal) that lies somewhere beyond entities and that we can allegedly ‘pursue’ and ‘relate to.’” (Sheehan, “A paradigm shift in Heidegger research,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, 34 (2001), 189); this “contraction” of Being to being also adds to the “ambiguity” (or “amphibology”) between being and what I will from now on call “be-ing,” whose hyphenation finds justification in the temporal and continuous (as opposed to static and determined) character of *das Seiende*, of its manifestation in the light of being which translates into not one, but a plurality of ways of manifestation.

26. “Quoi qu’il en soit, le *Dit* ne vient pas s’ajouter à un savoir préalable, mais est l’activité la plus profonde du savoir, son symbolisme même.” AE, 102.

27. “Dans le langage comme dit, tout se traduit devant nous – fût-ce au prix d’une trahison. Langage ancillaire et ainsi indispensable.” AE, 17.

28. “Le Dit où tout se montre est l’*origine* et l’*ultime* de la philosophie.” AE, 136.

29. AE, 48.

30. My emphasis. “... le fond du *Dire* n’est jamais proprement dit.” AE, 96.

31. See *supra* 210.

apophansis that always inclined to nominalization, congeals “all of language’s resources of signification into nouns,”³² “forgetful of the proposition and exposure to the other in which they signify.”³³ Saying that beyond its correlation with the Said (“the price that manifestation demands,”)³⁴ before its inevitable mediating “adventure” as nominalized apophansis, and on the hither side of its function as usher [*appariteur*] of being and be-ing and thus as bestower of meaning (to essence and be-ings)³⁵ — signifies *otherwise*, before essence, as the “for the other” of responsibility. Hence the para-dox of a “Saying without Said” [*le Dire sans Dit*] — Saying whose Said consists in *responding* without saying anything but “here I am!” [*me voici!*]: extra-ordinary word that “formulates the accusative of the subject without supposing any nominative,”³⁶ pure expression of exposure, sign of the very significance of this exposure that is not effaced even in its Said — Saying that says nothing, that *is* nothing, but its own iteration — “Saying saying saying itself”³⁷ — the *sincerity* of language that is accomplished by (as opposed to being an attribute or quality of) the Saying,³⁸ which is also

32. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 8.

33. AE, 125.

34. “The correlation of the Saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands. [La corrélation du dire et du dit, c’est-à-dire la subordination du dire au dit, au système linguistique et à l’ontologie est le prix que demande la manifestation.]” AE, 17.

35. “Le Dire signifie autrement qu’en appariteur présentant essence et étants – c’est là l’une des thèses du présent écrit.” AE, 78.

Far from its traditional meaning, the term *essence* (or *essance*), in *Autrement qu’être*, designates rather (and precisely) being as different from be-ing, the very articulation of being and be-ing, as Levinas stresses throughout the work: “The term *essence* designates *being* different from *be-ing*, the German *Sein* distinct from *Seiendes*, the Latin *esse* distinguished from the scholastic *ens*. [Le terme *essence* y exprime l’être différent de l’étant, le *Sein* allemand distinct du *Seiendes*, l’*esse* latin distinct de l’*ens* scholastique.]” AE, 9; “The term *essence* – which we do not dare spell *essance* – designates the *esse* distinguished from the *ens* – the process or event of being – the *Sein* differentiated from the *Seiendes*. [Le terme *essence* – que nous n’osons pas écrire *essance* – désigne l’*esse* distinct de l’*ens* – le processus ou l’événement d’être – le *Sein* différent du *Seiendes*.” (13); “In this work the term *essence* designates *being* as differentiated from *be-ing*. [Dans ce travail le terme *essence* désigne l’être différent de l’étant.]” AE, 43; “We continue to use the term *essence*, underscored, as an abstract noun of action for being as distinguished from be-ing in the amphibology of being and be-ing. [Nous continuons d’employer en le soulignant le terme d’*essence*, comme un nom abstrait d’action pour l’être distingué de l’étant dans l’amphibologie de l’être et de l’étant]” AE, 163, n. 2.

36. “[L]e Dire se formule comme *me voici*, formulant l’accusatif du sujet ne présumant aucun nominatif.” Levinas, DMT (“La sincérité du Dire”), [176].

37. “Dire disant le dire même, sans le thématiser, mais en l’exposant encore.” AE, 223.

38. “Sincerity is not an attribute of the Saying; it is the Saying that accomplishes sincerity, inseparable from giving, for it opens reserves from which the hand that gives draws without being able to dissimulate anything:

its *veracity*, which is also its *sense* “before language scatters into words”³⁹ — extra-ordinary significance that is without signifier, that contains more than it can contain, that, as the very condition of communication, as that “without which no language, as transmission of messages, would be possible,”⁴⁰ is what first makes the Said possible, what alone opens its space, what, as one might say, makes *being*, before being, and thus (ultimately) justifies it, which is not possible, however, but “from the Said and the question ‘What is it about ...? [Qu’en est-il de ...?],’ already interior to the Said where everything shows itself,”⁴¹ and where showing itself, the otherwise than being (already) betrays itself, of a betrayal that philosophy is called upon to reduce.

Here the confusion is not only reasonable, but certain; it is also necessary. Because though pertaining to two different (but not independent) orders — the Saying of responsibility and proximity to Ethics, and the Said of truth and essence to Ontology —, the Saying and the Said are not therefore opposed or contradict each other, nor still can they do without one another, but constitute rather two distinct (but of a distinction that does not, precisely, correspond to a dividing, an opposition, which would entail the suppression of one term to the benefit of the other), yet equally necessary, inter-dependent aspects of the enigma of transcendence, of the significance of the Saying irreducible to appearing, that emerges, however, *and only*, within language itself, that is to say, of the ethical signification that

sincerity undoes the alienation that the Saying undergoes in the Said, where, under the cover of words, in the verbal indifference, information is exchanged, pious wishes are uttered, and responsibilities shunned... A fission of the ultimate substantiality of the self, sincerity is not reducible to anything ontic, or anything ontological, and leads as it were beyond or on the hither side of everything positive, every position. It is not an act or a movement, or any sort of cultural gesture which presuppose already the absolute breakthrough of oneself. [La sincérité n’est pas un attribut du Dire; c’est le Dire qui accomplit la sincérité, inséparable du donner car ouvrant les réserves où la main qui donne, puise sans pouvoir rien dissimuler: sincérité défaisant l’aliénation que le Dire subit dans le Dit, où, sous le couvert des mots, dans l’indifférence verbale, s’échangent des informations, s’émettent des vœux pieux et se fuient les responsabilités... Fission de l’ultime substantialité du Moi, la sincérité ne se réduit à rien d’ontique, à rien d’ontologique et mène comme au-delà ou en deçà de tout positif, de de toute position. Elle n’est ni acte, ni mouvement, ni geste culturel quelconque lequel suppose d’ailleurs déjà la percée absolue de soi.]” AE, 224-225

39. “... le sens du langage avant que le langage ne s’éparpille en mots, en thèmes s’égalant aux mots ...” AE, 236.

40. “... dire d’avant le langage, mais sans lequel aucun langage, comme transmission de messages, ne serait possible.” AE, 32.

41. “Mais on ne peut remonter à cette signification du Dire ... qu’à partir du Dit et de la question: ‘Qu’en est-il de...?’ déjà intérieure au Dit où tout se montre.” AE, 76.

cannot be understood from ethics⁴² but only, precisely, signal itself in the order of language and knowledge, in the trace *retained*, that is, in this case, *saved* in the Said;⁴³ they are, consequently, two players of a same movement, a same transcendence which is that of language itself — the very *drama* at the heart of this work which is that, at last, in which art itself is implicated.

Which is why, however long you may have found these “introductory” pages in which the word *art* was only echoed without being heard, these have neither avoided the subject nor strayed from the essential there is to be said about it in *Autrement qu’être* where it is, from the outset, conceived as *said* — as modality of essence that exposes the temporality of the *essence* of being,⁴⁴ but where it is also claimed to be *born from proximity* as, perhaps, the very event of the transcendence of language, whose inspired essence it lays bare.⁴⁵

A number of questions arise at this point of which I limit myself to naming but two: first, had not Levinas previously claimed, indeed *proclaimed* that art was not language? That it was closed-off to dialogue — *essentially bound for silence*? On the other hand, are not the two clauses enounced above contradictory? That is, admitting that art is *after all*, and of itself language, *said*, and is as such, on the “side” of ontology, of being, as “modality of essence,” is it not inconsistent to claim that it is (also) born from proximity — proximity which the philosopher sets out in this work to “think outside of the ontological categories ...

42. Otherwise, ethics would constitute an “independent moral experience” which is precisely not the case in Levinas. While remaining irreducible to consciousness, ethics does not belong to a circumscribed domain inaccessible to knowledge as an independent experience or relationship foreign to, or taking place outside of consciousness; as claimed by the philosopher in the forward of *Humanisme de l’autre homme*: “It is not a matter, in proximity, of a new ‘experience’ opposed to the experience of objective presence... of an ‘ethical experience’ in addition to perception. *It is a matter, rather, of casting doubt on Experience as a source of sense.* [Il ne s’agit pas dans la proximité d’une nouvelle ‘expérience’ opposée à l’expérience de la présence objective..., d’une ‘expérience éthique’, en plus de la perception. *Il s’agit plutôt de la mise en question de l’Expérience comme source de sens.*]” HAH, 11. Consequently, the Saying of proximity is not another saying in addition to the Saying correlative of the Said, the apophantic or intentional saying; the Saying of responsibility and the intentional or noematic saying are one and the same Saying, that both signifies on the hither side of language, and shows itself in language.

43. Ambiguous “retention” that if, on the one hand, is necessary to the “appearing” of the present, as the very assembling of being in a synchronized and synthesized time that precludes the irreducible diachrony of the immemorial past (that, Levinas claims, is retained by theology and art, AE, 235, n.1), is equally necessary, on the other hand, for the reduction of the Said to the Saying which starts from the trace or echo of the Saying retained by and in the Said.

44. Cf. AE, 70-72.

45. Cf. AE, 227, n. 1 and AE, 263.

not in function of being”⁴⁶ but precisely beyond being, as Saying, signifyingness, *disinterestedness*, that is, suspension or interruption of essence — ?

Two different but not alien questions that I ask you to bear in mind while I seek to unravel Levinas’s account of art in *Autrement qu’être*, which takes place all *but* entirely in chapter II — “De l’intentionnalité au sentir” — where the philosopher takes the required “first” step in his adventure beyond phenomenology, while remaining (of course) faithful to its method. A first step that moves back and forth between Husserl and Heidegger (re-tracing, in a way, his own distant adventure *into* phenomenology)⁴⁷ to call into question first the Husserlian subordination of sensibility to intentionality (and thus also its recoverable temporal structure) and subsequently, or *consequently* (because the discussion leads there) to question the Heideggerian notion of the ontological difference because, according to him, “the appearing of being is not the ultimate legitimation of subjectivity.”⁴⁸ Thus, Levinas describes, and re-transcribes, the movement of intentionality to those terms that structure this work as a whole, namely, the Said and the Saying which lead him to Heidegger’s ontological difference that is shown here as an “amphibology” of the Said — the “bed of being,” where dormant lies an inebriated Saying that Levinas strives to wake-up and to sober-up, that is to say, to “*reduce*” to its proper signification: as the one-for-the-other of *giving*, as the irrefusable and irrevocable responsibility despite oneself — extreme passivity of the Saying that is the profound sense of *sensibility* before its articulation as knowledge, as logos — as *proximity*. But one can put it in still another way (in several ways in fact): it

46. “The proximity of one to the other is here conceived outside of ontological categories... Everywhere proximity is conceived ontologically, that is, as a limit or complement to the accomplishment of the adventure of essence, which consists in persisting in essence and unfolding immanence, in remaining in an ego, in identity. Proximity remains a distance diminished an exteriority conjured. The present study sets out to not conceive proximity in function of being. [La proximité de l’un à l’autre est pensée ici en dehors des catégories ontologiques... Partout, la proximité est pensée ontologiquement, c’est-à-dire comme limite ou complément à l’accomplissement de l’aventure de l’essence, qui consiste à persister dans l’essence et à dérouler l’immanence, à rester en Moi, dans l’identité. La proximité demeure distance diminuée, extériorité conjurée. La présente étude essaie de ne pas penser la proximité en fonction de l’être.]” AE, 32.

47. “La grande chose que j’ai trouvée fut la manière dont la voie de Husserl était prolongée et transfigurée par Heidegger. Pour parler un langage de touriste, j’ai eu l’impression que je suis allé chez Husserl et que j’ai trouvé Heidegger.” Poirié, *Essai et Entretiens*, 78. But if it was Husserl who led Levinas to Heidegger, it was, in some way (in a different way), Heidegger who made him return to Husserl — and isn’t that the case, precisely, in *Autrement qu’être*, and particularly in this second chapter, where moving from Husserl to Heidegger, Levinas returns to Husserl through the ultimate “reduction” of the Saying to the Said?

48. “Mais l’apparaître de l’être n’est pas l’ultime légitimation de la subjectivité – c’est en cela que le présent travail s’aventure au-delà de la phénoménologie.” AE 281.

a matter of moving from the (ontological) Question “what?” to the (ethical) question “who?” — and somewhere in the midst, as *how*, pure *how*, there is art.⁴⁹

Truth. Here is the question that opens not only the first, but each of the five *waves* of the exposition of *Autrement qu'être* (but how could it be otherwise in philosophy?) Truth that the philosopher seeks and expresses; truth that consists, before anything else, before all enunciation or judgement, of the exhibition of being to itself in self-consciousness, that is, appearing, phenomenality — “simultaneity of consciousness accessing being and being open to consciousness” — which is inseparable from time: “The discovery of all things depends on their insertion in this light ... of the time of essence. Things are discovered in their qualities, but the qualities are in lived experience, which is temporal.”⁵⁰ Time is not the simple coincidence between the sensing [*sentir*] and the sensed [*sentir*] but a lapse, a distance [*écart*] in the sensible impression that differs from itself without differing, “other in identity”⁵¹ — that constitutes the necessary (and sufficient) interval for a light to enter and to disperse opacity and thus to awaken consciousness, to produce the appearing to oneself:

Manifestation cannot occur as a fulguration in which the totality of being shows itself to the totality of being, for this “showing itself to” indicates a getting out of phase which is precisely time, that astonishing distance of the identical from itself! [La manifestation ne se peut pas comme fulguration où la totalité de l'être se montre à la totalité de l'être, car ce “se montre à” indique un déphasage qui est précisément le temps, étonnant écart de l'identique par rapport à lui-même!]⁵²

The mode of exhibition or manifestation of being is thus characterized by this diastasis which is the very temporality of time in which being must depart from itself, from its identity (its totality) and temporalize itself in order to dis-cover itself: that is *mostration* — the interval between what shows itself (the aimed at) [*le visé*] and the aiming [*la visée*]. But if truth consists of the manifestation of being to itself, *in self-consciousness*, that is, in co-presence and simultaneity between the being that shows itself (manifestation) and the subject of

49. AE, 70.

50. “La découverte de toutes choses dépend de leur insertion dans cette lumière – ou cette résonance – du temps de l'essence. Les choses se découvrent dans leurs qualités, mais les qualités dans le vécu qui est temporel.” AE, 55.

51. “Il y a conscience dans la mesure où l'impression sensible diffère d'elle-même sans différer; elle diffère sans différer, autre dans l'identité.” AE, 57.

52. AE, 51.

knowledge (consciousness), then this lag, this distance must be recoverable, synchronizable; indeed: “The getting out of phase of the instant, the ‘all’ pulling off from the ‘all’ – the temporality of time – makes possible, however, a recovery in which nothing is lost.”⁵³ This recovery of the diastasis by the synthesis of retentions and protentions (from which, Levinas argues, not even the originary impression, the *Ur-impression*, is free)⁵⁴ is at the origin of intentionality and of consciousness itself. In the temporality of time, sensibility and consciousness come together, unfolding as lapse and reunion, diachrony synchronizable in representation — truth.

Thus, truth is re-presentation: it can only arise from a “retentional” dephasing in which the “transcendence of totality thematized in truth” implies a partition of totality, a division into parts, or more precisely, into *images*. Being shows itself not at once, but in several times, propagating itself through a multiplicity, or an infinity of images; each image is only one part of the whole, whereby it must stand at “the confines of itself or beyond itself, so that truth not be incomplete or one-sided,” whereby rather than showing being directly, it must reflect and symbolize it, *the totality of being* — which is the only one that suffices to truth — the part for the whole, the less restituting the whole, the more in the less. “Truth consists in a being whose images are its reflection, but also its symbol, identified through new images,”⁵⁵ in a cognitive process, or “subjective” movement that is articulated according to the intentional “as...” structure [*en tant que*]. As that which shows itself immediately, the image — sensible image, immediate, given before being searched — is the “term of ostension,” but insofar as it does not show being but merely reflects it (and is thus “idea, symbol of another image,” where the sensible is already “intentionality turned in a search for a more complete presence,” “towards *that which*, in the image, is announced beyond the

53. “Le déphasage du instant, le ‘tout’ décollant du ‘tout’ – la temporalité du temps – rend cependant possible une récupération où rien est perdu.” AE, 51.

54. Cf. AE, 57-59.

55. “...the transcendence of the totality thematized in truth is produced as a division of the totality into parts. How can these parts still be equivalent to the whole, as is implied when exposition is truth? By reflecting the whole. The whole reflected in a part is an image. Truth then would be produced in the images of being. [...la transcendance de la totalité thématifiée dans la vérité, se produit comme une division de la totalité en parties. Comment les parties peuvent-elles cependant équivaloir au tout, ce que l’ostension comme vérité implique? En reflétant le tout. Le tout se reflétant dans une partie est image. La vérité se produirait donc dans les images de l’être.]” AE, 52; “La vérité consiste pour l’être dont les images sont le reflet, mais aussi le symbole, à s’identifier à travers de nouvelles images.” AE, 100.

image”)⁵⁶ — the image is also the term “where truth is not at its term,”⁵⁷ incompleteness of truth that forgets its own departure, a truth which can only therefore be *promised*: “Always promised, always future, always loved, truth lies in the promise and the love of wisdom.”⁵⁸ Truth then, as noted earlier, is *re-presentation*: “recommencement of the present which in its “first time” is for the second time – retention and protention, between forgetting and expecting, between memory and project”⁵⁹ — “*just passed, about to come*”⁶⁰ — retention of retention, “down to memory, which recovers in images what retention failed to preserve, down to historiography, which reconstructs that whose image was lost. To speak of consciousness is to speak of time. It is in any case to speak of a recoverable time,”⁶¹ to which Levinas adds soon after: “The time of sensibility in Husserl is the time of the recoverable” — the lost time that lets itself be recovered, the time of sensing [*sentir*] of sensation, the “lived flux” — it coincides with the consciousness of time which is thus the very time of consciousness. But consciousness in Husserl is mute; obstinately mute; and this leads Levinas to Heidegger who in §7 of *Sein und Zeit* claims: “*Λόγος* lets something be seen (*φαίνεσθαι*), namely that which the discourse is about [...] Discourse ‘lets something be seen’ *ἀπὸ* ..., from the very something which is being discussed”⁶² — which Levinas is likely echoing when he writes that: “every phenomenon is said,” and that “the phenomenon itself is phenomeno-*logy*.”⁶³ Neither accidental nor extrinsic, language is *originary* to

56. Respectively: AE, 101; AE, 100; AE, 52.

57. AE, 52.

58. “Mais si l’ostension implique une partition de la totalité de l’être, l’ostension ne peut s’achever sans s’éteindre. La vérité se promet. Toujours promise, toujours future, toujours aimée, la vérité est dans la promesse et l’amour de la sagesse.” AE, 52-53.

59. “La vérité est retrouvailles, rappel, réminiscence, réunion sous l’unité de l’aperception... précisément re-présentation, c’est-à-dire éloignement où le présent de la vérité *est* déjà ou *est encore*; re-présentation c’est-à-dire recommencement du présent qui dans sa “première fois” est pour la deuxième fois – rétention et protention, entre l’oubli et l’attente, entre le souvenir et le projet. Temps qui est réminiscence et réminiscence qui est temps – unité de la conscience et de l’essence.” AE, 51.

60. “*tout juste* passée, sur le *point de venir*.” AE, 57.

61. “Jusqu’à la mémoire qui récupère en images ce que la rétention n’a pas su garder, jusqu’à l’historiographie qui reconstruit ce dont l’image est perdue. Parler conscience, c’est parler temps. C’est en tout cas parler temps récupérable.” AE, 41

62. “Der *λόγος* läßt etwas sehen (*φαίνεσθαι*), nämlich das, worüber die Rede ist [...] Die Rede »läßt sehen« *ἀπὸ* ... von dem selbst her, wovon die Rede ist.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 43.

63. My emphasis. AE, 64, 65.

manifestation (and the recovery it allows for) which is produced in the very event of language: “The very exposition of being – its manifestation – essence qua essence and being qua be-ing, are spoken,”⁶⁴ “to enter into being and truth is to enter into the said; being is inseparable from its sense! It is spoken. It is in the logos.”⁶⁵ Meaning that the manifestation of being, the process or *esse* of being where truth itself is born — is produced in (and not only reflected on) language, in the word as *Logos*, the *Said* in whose amphibology, ontology takes its point of departure to state its *difference*.⁶⁶

In what is possibly one of the most interesting (and perhaps also, controversial) “twists” of *Autrement qu’être*, Levinas “amphibologizes” the famous ontological difference [*ontologischen Unterschied*]: the distinction between being and be-ing, the “difference par excellence. The Difference”⁶⁷ that grounds thinking (both the destruction of the history of ontology and the construction of the *Seinsfrage*), that *is* and *belongs to* Dasein and its existence, that is founded in Dasein’s transcendence whose final term is the very emergence of this difference, and in whose forgetfulness (or unthoughtfulness) Heidegger saw the very forgetfulness of being, out of which metaphysics was born⁶⁸ — the ontological difference is

64. “L’exposition même de l’être – sa manifestation – l’essence comme essence, l’étant comme étant, se parlent.” AE, 65.

65. “Entrer dans l’être et la vérité, c’est entrer dans le Dit; l’être est inséparable de son sens! Il est parlé. Il est dans le logos.” AE, 77.

66. “... the distinction between being and be-ing is borne by the amphibology of the said. [... la distinction entre être et étant est portée par l’amphibologie du dit.]” AE, 17

67. DMT (“Commencer avec Heidegger”), [113].

68. “*The forgottenness of being is the forgottenness of the difference between being and be-ing. [Die Seinsvergessenheit ist die Vergessenheit des Unterschiedes des Seins zum Seienden.]*” Heidegger, “Der Spruch des Anaximander,” in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1977), 364. According to J. Kockelmans, the forgottenness of the difference was due to the intrinsic ambiguity of the expression “*to on hēi on*” commonly used in metaphysics to refer to beings as its subject matter, insofar as the participle “*on*” can be used “either as a noun or as an adjective with a verbal meaning. Thus, it either means that which is, a being, or designates that by which a being ‘is’, namely, its Being.” An ambiguity that Heidegger wishes to transcend “by thinking Being as a process” which requires “thinking Being neither as Being in general nor as supreme Being, but as the process of unveiling.” Thus, when speaking about “ontological difference,” Heidegger does not intend to refer to this ambivalence, but rather to a more fundamental difference between Being taken as the original process of unconcealment (though which the ontological difference comes about) and beings taken as things that have their proper modes of Being and, thus, their meaning.” Joseph Kockelmans, “Ontological difference, hermeneutics and language.” In *On Heidegger and Language* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 206.

here treated (deformed really, though at least, as Levinas, *amphibologically*, points out, not forgotten)⁶⁹ as an amphibology which is why he claims it is not the ultimate:

Does the mystery of *being* and *be-ing* – their difference – disturb us already? The distinction and the amphibology of being and be-ing will turn out from the start to be important and being – determinant for truth; but this distinction is also an amphibology and does not signify the ultimate. [Le mystère de l'*être* et de l'*étant* – leur différence – inquiète-t-elle déjà? Dès le départ, la distinction et l'amphibologie de l'*être* et de l'*étant* se montreront importantes et l'*être* – déterminant pour la vérité; mais cette distinction est aussi une amphibologie et ne signifie pas l'ultime.]⁷⁰

An amphibology, that is, a double meaning or an ambiguity that is already interior, as it were, to what Levinas terms *essence* which here, as noted earlier, designates precisely *being* as different from be-ing, that is, the very articulation of being and be-ing (and in that sense, perhaps “being” in its proper Heideggerian sense.)⁷¹ An amphibology, that is, an equivocation that the Difference *is in fact*, or supposes, or tolerates: is not be-ing always in its being? And is not being always the being of a be-ing? Because, though the ontological difference was, Levinas claims, maintained “with unwavering clarity” by Heidegger,⁷² fundamental ontology itself lets being be said as an identified be-ing, much as it folds the *Dasein* into being.⁷³

Thus, Levinas’s “amphibologization” of the difference — meant not as its reduction to a “frivolous play of syntax” but, quite on the contrary, as a testament to the pre-ontological weight and seriousness of language⁷⁴ — denotes the insurmountable equivocality that

69. “Deformed and ill-understood? At least this deformation will not have been a way to deny the debt. Nor this debt a reason to forget. [Déforme et mal compris? Du moins cette déformation n’aura-t-elle pas été une façon de renier la dette, ni cette dette une raison d’oublier.]” AE, 67.

70. AE, 43.

71. See *supra* 230, n. 68.

72. “Heidegger initially distinguishes between what is, ‘*the be-ing*’ (das Seiende) and ‘*the being* of the being’ (das Sein des Seienden)... Heidegger’s originality lies precisely in maintaining this distinction with unwavering clarity. [Heidegger distingue initialement entre ce qui est, ‘*l’étant*’ (das Seiende) et ‘*l’être* de l’étant’ (das Sein des Seienden)... L’originalité de Heidegger consiste précisément à maintenir avec une netteté jamais en défaut, cette distinction.]” EDE, 56.

73. “Fundamental ontology itself, which denounces the confusion between being and be-ing, speaks of being as an identified be-ing. And the mutation is ambivalent. Every nameable identity can turn into a verb. [L’ontologie fondamentale elle-même, qui dénonce la confusion de l’être et de l’étant, parle de l’être comme d’un étant identifié. Et la mutation est ambivalente. Toute identité nommable peut se muer en verbe.]” AE, 74.

74. AE, 74, 77.

inhabits it and which is none other than the full reversibility of its terms, insofar as it coincides with the dual-structure of the Said which is both *noun* and *verb*, identifying designation — proclaiming this *as* this or this *as* that [ceci *en tant que* ceci ou ceci *en tant que* cela] — and temporalizing resonance — bearing sensible life as the breaking down of substances into modes of being, modes of temporalization — language not only confirms be-ing but verbalizes its active essence. Said is therefore, as remarked earlier, the birthplace of ontology, the ontological foundation of language, i.e., the very site of the assembling of the essence of being, behind which there is neither *essence* nor be-ing;⁷⁵ and onto-logy is precisely enounced in this “amphibology” which *unfolds* within the Said, by which “the identical entities – things and qualities of things – begin to resound in their *essence*” and, simultaneous, “*essence* is nominalized, becomes a word designating and consecrating identities.”⁷⁶ Which is why the ontological difference (or amphibology) cannot, according to Levinas, be first or last: because it is *already* within the Said,⁷⁷ within the Logos (“the equivocal of being and be-ing — primordial amphibology,”)⁷⁸ in which the identical be-ings show themselves, in whose kerygma alone the identical has meaning which is, of itself, manifestation of being. The Said “*always says being*,”⁷⁹ but then again, always says be-ing too, meaning that language is both nominal and verbal, synchronic and diachronic, that the Said, as noted earlier, is both *noun* and *verb*, both *identifying designation* and *temporalizing resonance*: two functions that are not, mutually exclusive, but rather reciprocally implicated.

Language qua Said can be conceived as a system of nouns identifying entities, and thus as a system of signs doubling up the be-ings, designating substances, events and relations by substantives or other parts of speech derived from substantives, designating identities – in sum, *designating*. [Le langage comme Dit peut donc se concevoir comme un système de noms identifiant des entités et, dès lors, comme un système de signes doublant les étants désignant des substances, des événements et des relations par des substantifs ou

75. “There is no *essence* nor be-ing behind the Said, behind the Logos. [Il n’y a pas d’*essence* ni d’étant derrière le Dit, derrière le Logos.]” AE, 69.

76. AE, 73.

77. “The distinction between being and be-ing is borne by the amphibology of the said without this distinction and this amphibology being therefore reducible to verbal artifices. [La distinction entre être et étant est portée par l’amphibologie du dit, sans que cette distinction ni cette amphibologie se réduisent pour autant à des artifices verbaux.]” AE, 17.

78. “Le logos est l’équivoque de l’être et de l’étant – amphibologie primordiale.” AE, 73.

79. My emphasis. AE, 185, n. 1.

par d'autres parties du discours dérivées des substantifs, désignant des identités – bref, *désignant*.]⁸⁰

Qua noun, the Said functions by designating and identifying be-ings in the temporal flow of sensation, that is, idealizing them.⁸¹ As identification, the noun coincides with the very work of consciousness which, as we saw earlier, is not an immediate coincidence but precisely, re-presentation, i.e., identification in the temporal flow of sensation. The intention that animates the identification accomplished by language qua nomination understands (or pretends) “this” (in the sensible) *as* “that” (its sense) thus enouncing the ideality of the same in the diverse — proclamation of sense which is a priori:⁸²

The “identical unities” are not given or thematized first, and then receive a meaning; they are given through this meaning. “This as that” – is not lived but said. The identification is *understood* on the basis of a mysterious schematism, of something already said, of a preliminary *doxa* ... without which the identifying, naming language would not be able to approach the sensible; doxa, *already said*, fable, epos, in which the *given* is held in its theme. [Les “unités identiques” ne sont pas données ou thématisées d’abord pour recevoir un sens ensuite: elles sont données par ce sens. “Ceci en tant que cela” – cela n’est pas vécu, cela est dit. L’identification s’entend sur la base d’un schématisation mystérieux, d’un déjà dit, d’une *doxa* préalable ... sans lesquels le langage identifiant, nommant n’aurait pu atteindre le sensible; doxa, *déjà-dit*, fable, epos où se tient le *donné* dans son thème.]⁸³

As nomination, language is not just a close system of nouns (which it also is) but, precisely, proclamation and consecration of “this *as* that” — “saying which is also *understanding* and *listening*, absorbed in the said... kerygma at the bottom of a *fiat*.”⁸⁴ Nomination is thus an intentionality, a saying tended toward the proclamation of a thematizing Said that identifies

80. AE, 69-70.

81. “The identity of the term consists in its very ideality. [L’identité du terme consiste dans son idéalité même].” EDE, 219. Insofar as the identity of the entity proclaimed by the kerygma is not given, it can only be *ideal*; whereby one could say that “this as *this*” is only possible as “this as *that*.”

82. “*This as that* – signification is not a modification brought to a content existing outside language... In the *this as that*, neither the *this*, nor the *that* is given forthwith outside of speech. [*Ceci en tant que cela* – la signification n’est pas une modification apportée à un contenu existant en dehors de tout langage... Dans le *ceci en tant que cela*, ni le *ceci*, ni le *cela* ne se donnent d’emblée, en dehors du discours.]” Levinas, HAH (“La signification et le sens”), 22.

83. AE, 62-63.

84. “Le mot est nomination, autant que dénomination, consécration de ‘ceci en tant que ceci’ ou de ‘ceci en tant que cela’ – dire qui est aussi *entendement* et *écoute* absorbés dans le dit ... kérygme au fond d’un *fiat*.” AE, 63.

be-ings in temporal duration, in a correlation that makes of “the Saying a simple internal doubling and finally a subordination of the Saying to the Said,”⁸⁵ which is precisely “the price that manifestation demands.” Indeed, be-ing shows itself identical only inasmuch as it is *said*, precisely given a meaning by being named by the Said that precedes it and gives it form — “coagulating in a ‘something’ the flowing of time,” synchronizing the diachrony of time in a recallable temporality, in the memorable time of *essence*, thematizing it — fixing this “something” in the *already said* where it appears *identical* in the light of temporality, where be-ing *is* its essence,⁸⁶ where being “lets itself” be “said as an identified be-ing.” But

and with as much right – language can be conceived as verb in a predicative proposition in which the substances break down into modes of being, modes of temporalization. Here language does not double up the being of entities but exposes the silent resonance of the essence. [Mais – et avec autant de droit – le langage se conçoit comme verbe dans la proposition prédicative où les substances se défont en modes d’être, en modes de temporalisation, mais où le langage ne double pas l’être des étants, où il expose la résonance silencieuse de l’essence.]⁸⁷

Beneath and in spite of its function of nomination and designation that words accomplish in the Said, already implying the anachronism of the *already said*, by which be-ing is identified, language issued from the verbliness of the verb — the verb *to be* which designates the temporal modification, that is, the very flowing of time — makes the essence of being vibrate.⁸⁸ The verb can, to be sure, function as a sign, that is, as a *noun*, and thus designate and express an event or an alteration in a be-ing; but that function is only, in fact, secondary insofar as it already derives from the verbliness of verb: it is only “by reason of its privileged exposure in time, that the dynamism of entities is designated and expressed by verbs.”⁸⁹ Because

85. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 6.

86. “L’étant qui apparaît *identique* dans la lumière des temps *est* son essence dans le *déjà dit*.” AE, 65.

87. AE, 69-70.

88. “Le langage issu de la verbalité du verbe ne consisterait pas seulement à faire entendre, mais aussi à faire vibrer l’essence de l’être.” AE, 61

89. “C’est la verbalité du verbe qui résonne dans la proposition prédicative et c’est à titre secondaire, en raison de son étalement privilégié dans le temps, que le dynamisme des étants se désigne et s’exprime par des verbes.” AE, 68.

The verb *to be* says the flowing of time as though language were not unequivocally equivalent to denomination. As though in *being* the verb came to function only as a verb. As though this function amounted to the teeming and mute itching of that modification without change that time operates. [Le verbe *être* dit la fluence du temps comme si le langage n'équivalait pas sans équivoque à la dénomination. Comme si dans *être* le verbe rejoignait seulement la fonction de verbe. Comme si cette fonction revenait au fourmillement et à la sourde démangeaison de cette modification sans changement qu'opéra le temps.]⁹⁰

It is thus that the verb comes into its very verbality: in ceasing to name and designate, the verb does not double up the real for it is not the name of being, but its very *resonance*, the *resonance* of being as such, the resonance of *essence* — temporalization — the verbality of the verb. Then the word as verb functions as *non-nominalized apophansis* by which be-ing is not named (and thus has no *a priori* sense), but makes itself “understood verbally, as a ‘mode’ of essence,” as the *fruitio essendi* itself, as a *how*, a modality of this essence or this temporalization.”⁹¹

Highlight the “pre-linguistic” level of the word — precisely in the word as verb — Levinas makes it clear that essence

is not only conveyed in the Said, is not only “expressed” in it, but originally – though amphibologically – resounds in it as *essence*... The Said as verb is the *essence* of *essence*. *Essence* is the very fact by which there is theme, ostension, doxa or logos and, therefore, truth. Essence is not only conveyed, it is temporalized in a predicative statement. [L'*essence* ne se traduit pas seulement dans le Dit, ne s'y “exprime” pas seulement, mais y résonne originellement – mais amphibologiquement – en tant qu'essence... Le Dit comme verbe est l'*essence* de l'*essence*. L'*essence*, c'est le fait même qu'il y a thème, ostension, doxa or logos et, par là vérité. L'*essence* ne se traduit pas seulement, elle se temporalise dans l'énoncé prédicatif.]⁹²

In the tautological preposition “*red is red*,” the verb means neither an event, a process, or a succession of states; the verb does not double up the *red*, it does not *designate* its essence, or signifies an alteration in the red, for instance, the “turning red, the passage from the non-

90. AE, 61.

91. “Dans la proposition prédicative – dans l'apophansis – l'étant peut, par contre, se faire entendre verbalement comme une ‘façon’ de l'essence, comme la *fruitio essendi* même, comme le *comment* – comme une modalité – de cette essence ou de cette temporalisation.” AE, 67

92. AE, 69.

red to red, or from the less red to more red,”⁹³ because in its properly verb-function, the verb does not designate, period; instead, it diachronizes the immediate coincidence of the nominalized adjective with itself (the identical entity), temporalizing it, making the “red” to resonate, vibrate as a “modality” of essence; what resounds in the proposition “*red is red*” is the verb, “redden,” in its verbality, that is, as the essence of the red, as “*red reddens*.” And “it is here that” Levinas argues, “the word ‘has its own ways,’ unique of their kind, irreducible to symbolization which names or evokes.”⁹⁴ The verb is thus the *essence* of *essence*, because indeed, the work of being, the essence of being designates “nothing that could be a nameable content – thing, event or action;” it names rather the very temporalization of time: “this mobility of the immobile, this multiplication of the identical, this diastasis of the punctual, this lapse.” Modification without “usury” or “creaking” — modification without (real) modification, and thus, ideal or phenomenological modification: “the *esse* of all being” — the constitutive temporal diastasis or stretching out of time that is ostension — “the *original dispersion* of opacity.”⁹⁵ By this distension in the temporal flow of the sensible by which the identical entity distances itself from itself, temporality is *essence* and original light — temporality is the verb of being. Still, the question arises: what is it that causes this resonance to be heard? How does be-ing begin to resonate, to vibrate in its essence, that is, in its *being*? How is be-ing awakened by being? Levinas answers ... *through art*:

The identical entities – things and qualities of things – begin to resound with their *essence* in a predicative proposition not as a result of psychological reflection about subjectivity and the temporality of sensation, but *through art*, ostension par excellence – Said, reduced to the pure theme, to exhibition – absolute even to shamelessness, capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined – Said reduced to the Beautiful, bearer of western ontology. *Essence* and temporality begin to resound with poetry or song. [Mais les entités identiques – choses et qualités de choses – se mettent à resonner de leur *essence* dans la proposition prédicative, non pas à la suite de la réflexion psychologique sur la subjectivité et la temporalité de la sensation, mais à *partir de l’art*, ostension par

93 “... le verbe ne signifie pas un événement, un dynamisme quelconque du rouge opposé à son repos de qualité, ni une activité quelconque du rouge, le passage par exemple du non-rouge au rouge – le rougir – ou le passage du moins rouge au plus rouge, une altération.” AE, 68.

94. “C’est là que le mot ‘a des façons’ uniques en son genre, irréductible à la symbolisation qui nomme ou évoque.” AE, 60-61.

95. “L’*essence* ne désigne rien qui soit contenu nommable – chose ou événement ou action – elle nome cette mobilité de l’immobile, cette multiplication de l’identique, cette diastase du ponctuel, ce laps. Cette modification sans altération ni déplacement ... est précisément la visibilité du Même au Même, qu’on appelle parfois ouverture.” AE, 53.

excellence – Dit, réduit au pur thème, à l'exposition – absolue jusqu'à l'impudeur, capable de soutenir tous les regards auxquels exclusivement elle se destine – Dit réduit au Beau, porteur de l'ontologie occidentale. L'essence et la temporalité s'y mettent à résonner de poésie ou de chant.]⁹⁶

Before even interpreting these lines (and those that follow), something seems different, for: where is the shadow, the idol, the caricature, the statue? What of the alluring rhythms, the plasticity of myths, the obscurity of fate or the immobility of images? Levinas's "aesthetic" vocabulary appears to have undergone a change, one that perhaps explains why a number of scholars have argued for an "evolution" in Levinas's appraisal of art in *Autrement qu'être* regarding his previous texts, notably "La réalité et son ombre" and *Totalité et Infini*, that having apparently "forgone" the image and its bewitching rhythms, and gone on, moreover, to interpret sensibility no longer in terms of enjoyment, but as proximity,⁹⁷ everything was different in 1974.

While there is no denying that Levinas's vocabulary is different in *Autrement qu'être* (despite the fact that it makes an explicit reference to the 1948 essay),⁹⁸ art is here, as it ever was, at the very heart of ontology, of the comprehension of being, of the access to being. Indeed, we are told that art that makes the essence of be-ing resonate or vibrate, that is art which awakens be-ings in their *being*, meaning, precisely, bringing the essence of being (and thus, necessarily, the ontological difference itself) to light. Art is, therefore, acknowledged a, no doubt decisive (ontological) part by Levinas, one that brings the French philosopher into an eerie proximity to Heidegger's own account of art, for let us recall that the German philosopher claims of the "work" of the work of art that it is the "bringing about" of the openness, in whose open be-ing shows itself, appears, *is*, meaning that the work of art is the disclosive event in which truth happens, truth that is precisely the *unconcealment* [*die Unverborgenheit*] of be-ing as be-ing — the truth of being. Levinas, therefore, comes closer

96. The second emphasis is mine. AE, 70.

97. Which is not (quite) true. Though sensibility, that in *Totalité et Infini* was indeed described as "the mode of enjoyment" is, from "Langage et proximité" onwards interpreted, primordially, as proximity, enjoyment remains an "ineluctable moment of sensibility" (AE, 116) which "in its possibility to indulge in itself, exempt from dialectical tensions, is the very condition of the for-the-other of sensibility and its vulnerability as exposition to the Other." AE, 119.

98. AE, 235, n. 1.

than ever to Heidegger's own account of art.⁹⁹ But if that is the case, then wouldn't he be *literally* contradicting himself? Because did he not claim in "La réalité et son ombre" that art did not, and could not, reveal being, but that it was, on the contrary, the very event of its obscuration? That art lead not to the truth of being, but precisely, to its non-truth? That art was inhumanely placed outside the triumphal work of being, and that only the word of criticism could integrate it in the "true homeland of the mind," the intelligible world? Well, yes, but still, I wouldn't call it a contradiction, and there are two reasons why: first, because "being," "truth of being," "revelation" and "beyond" do not mean quite the same here as they did in that essay written over 26 years ago, where the task of philosophy was to show the "work of being itself in its truth," where "to go beyond" was to "communicate with ideas, to understand," where the "beyond," the *transacendence* opposed to the *transdescendence* of art was not "beyond being," was not a way to leave being and the ontological categories but, on the contrary, the "way" to being itself in its truth, being as light and understanding, to which art was opposed as essential non-understanding; while in *Autrement qu'être*, it is not a question of simply getting out of being understood as being in general, as *il y a*, through the hypostasis, nor of privileging be-ing over being, nor of proposing a pluralism in being, nor still of thinking the beyond being as a surplus of being: it is a matter of breaking free from the duality inherent in being, whether it is the duality of being/be-ing or being/nothingness, it is a matter of asking whether being "is its own reason of being, alpha and omega of intelligibility," whether the happening of being, its "coming to pass" would carry on its "train" of being while "demanding a justification, posing a question preceding all questions"¹⁰⁰ — a question that asks not *what is?* but *to whom?* — "the Other to whom the petition of the question is addressed," that does not belong to the intelligible sphere to be explored," but "stands in proximity": ex-position of the Saying in the pro-position of the Said addressed to the other, sign for nothing, pure giving, opening *in* being which is also an opening *within* being, for it can only signal itself in the amphibology of being and be-ing,

99. But then, Levinas was never as close to Heidegger's own philosophy as he is (paradoxically) in *Autrement qu'être* — a closeness that is that is neither fortuitous nor preventable, but rather necessary for a radical separation, a separation whose effectiveness and endurance depends on its own instability, on its own fragility, a separation that is never guaranteed, and therein lies its strength, its truth, if you will; that is, maybe the very closeness/distance between holiness and sacredness, noted previously.

100. "L'être est-il sa propre raison d'être, alpha et oméga de l'intelligibilité, philosophie première et eschatologie? Le 'se passer' de l'être qui se passe, ne mènerait-il pas, au contraire, son train, tout en demandant une justification, posant une question précédant toute question?" DQVI, 232.

possibility that belongs to the non-nominalized *apophansis* which remains a modality of the *Saying*; an opening in which art, as *how*, is implicated.

What changes here, if anything, is not Levinas appraisal of art (however differently expressed) but something more “fundamental,” that I have been trying to bring to light, and that is a different “attitude” toward ontology itself which does not involve its overtaking by a supra-ontological order or principle, nor leaving the ontological categories (even if the “ontological” language is indeed avoided); it implies, rather, “discovering” that opening that takes place in the essence of being itself, in its manifestation, through which the reduction can be attempted, and in which art and poetry are, I believe, implicated. The second reason is that, while in “La réalité et son ombre,” the word of philosophical criticism was external to the work of art, as a language other, foreign to art (namely philosophical), that came to its “rescue” from the outside, 26 years on, the said of *exegesis* (whose disambiguation is itself significant) is internal to the work itself, it is inherent, intrinsic in it, as the “Said properly said” [*Dit proprement dit*], as the necessary meta-language that every work of art awakens and makes resonate.

But let us go back to the text *properly so-called*, specifically to section II.3.d (“L’amphibologie de l’être et de l’étant”) of *Autrement qu’être* where we find what I consider to be some of Levinas’s most beautiful lines on art, and where following on from what he said above, the philosopher writes that “the search for new forms, from which all art lives, keeps awake everywhere the verbs that are on the verge of lapsing into substantives.”¹⁰¹ Now this is a crucial passage, one that bring to light, as Rolland observes, “a certain precedence or pre-eminence of being over be-ing,”¹⁰² that is, of verbs over nous, over substantives, over nominalized terms — an exaltation of the verb that, precisely, art accomplishes, insofar as

in painting, red reddens and green greens, forms are produced as contours and vacate with their vacuity as forms. In music sounds resound, in poems the vocables – material of the Said – no longer yield before what they evoke but sing with their evocative powers and their diverse ways to evoke, their etymologies; in Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos* architecture makes buildings sing. Poetry is productive of song, of resonance and sonority, which are the verbliness of verbs or *essence*. [Dans la peinture le rouge rougeoit et le vert verdoie, les formes se produisent comme contours et vacuent de leur vacuité de formes. Dans la

101. “Et la recherche de formes nouvelles dont vit tout art tient en éveil partout les verbes, sur le point de retomber en substantifs.” AE, 70.

102. Rolland, *Parcours de l’Autrement*, 145.

musique, les sons résonnent, dans les poèmes les vocables – matériaux du Dit – ne s’effacent plus devant ce qu’ils évoquent, mais chantent de leurs pouvoirs évocateurs et de leurs façons d’évoquer, de leurs étymologies; dans *Eupalinos* de Paul Valéry, l’architecture fait chanter les édifices. La poésie est productrice de chant – de résonance et de sonorité qui sont la verbalité du verbe ou l’*essence*.]¹⁰³

Levinas’s lexicon may well have changed, but what we read here is fully in line with his previous analyses of art, and namely with the “playfulness” of the one from 1944, discussed in our first chapter and which, to spare the reader, I will limit myself to recalling how it described the aesthetic object as a dematerialization into pure sensations, into the infinite and ungraspable materiality of sensations, pure because detached, free from all objective meaning, and “guided,” or organized instead according to an order proper to it — the inner functioning of sensation which, in its detachment from objective signification, functioned “as the very fact of signifying” which designated the divorce with all objectivity and which I there called “*musicality*” — *the setting of things to music* in which what mattered was, as noted, less the song, *what* was sung about, than the *singing itself*, not the *what* then, but the mode, the *how*, pure *how* that in 1974 describes as “the touch of color and pencil, the secrecy of words, the sonority of sounds – all these modal notions, resonance of essence,” the sensations in art modulate essence, these are modalities that make essence resound in the work: “the palette of colors, and the gamut of sounds, and the system of vocables, and the meandering of forms are exercised as a pure *how*.”¹⁰⁴ But also, and consequently, with his characterization of art, in *De l’existence à l’existant*, as essentially *exotic*, a term that is here reprised: “all work of art,” Levinas writes, “is thus exotic, worldless, essence in dissemination.”¹⁰⁵

In its inexhaustible profusion and renewal, in its essential exoticism, art undoes the substances “into modes of being, modes of temporalization,” into adverbs functioning as such, as modes of time and vibrancy — “as though the differences of pitch, register and timber, color and forms, words and rhythms – were but temporalization, sonority and

103. AE, 70.

104. “La palette des couleurs, et la gamme des sons, et le système des vocables, et le méandre des formes s’exercent en guise de pur *comment* – c’est la touche de la couleur et du crayon, le secret des mots, la sonorité des sons – toutes ces notions modales, résonance de l’essence.” AE, 70-71.

105. “tout œuvre d’art est ainsi exotique, sans monde, essence en dissemination.” AE, 71.

key.”¹⁰⁶ And picking up from his notes on both the *Carnets de captivité* and *De l'existence à l'existant*, Levinas devotes several lines to *music*, namely to *Nomos Alpha* by Iannis Xenakis.[±]

Elusive creator, constructor of sounds, Xenakis (meaning “little foreigner”) is a household name of the twentieth century music, avant-garde composer, and pioneer of electronic music, namely granular music; through his application of procedures from mathematics, engineering, and architecture¹⁰⁷ to his musical composition, Xenakis built a new and distinctive musical language, foreign to the traditional one, and which often relied on complex graphical designs for the formation of his musical structures. Decrying those who, he argued, “deny music by taking it out of itself,”¹⁰⁸ Xenakis defined music instead as the sonic expression of intelligence, logic (both pure and that of emotions) and intuition, involving “action, reflection, and self-transformation by the sounds themselves,” and in spite of all the complexity and rigor that behooved his compositions, he also claimed music to be “the gratuitous play of a child.”¹⁰⁹ Moving away from both polyphony and from serialism Xenakis searched for a composition of disorder through the application of probability theory that he termed “stochastic music” which he described as “a world of sound-masses, vast groups of sound-events, clouds, and galaxies governed by new characteristics such as density, degree of order, and rate of change, which required definitions and realizations using probability theory;”¹¹⁰ and then in the 60s, inspired by the tonal structure in Demonic and Byzantine music, and intending to compositions in which all the five parameters of sound

106. “Comme si les différences de hauteur, de registre et de timbre, de couleur et de formes, de mots et de rythmes – n'étaient que temporalisation, sonorité et touche.” AE, 71.

± Iannis Xenakis (1922 –2001), Romanian-born Greek-French (naturalized in 1965) composer, architect and engineer.

107. Architecture, for Xenakis (who worked for a decade in Le Corbusier's firm) brought solutions to his music and vice-versa. And inverting Goethe's definition of architecture as petrified music, Xenakis claimed music to be architecture in movement.

108. Xenakis refers to both the “technocrats” that “treat music as a message which the composer (source) sends to a listener (receiver),” and the “intuitionists,” in which he encompasses “the ‘graphists,’ who exalt the graphic symbol above the sound of the music and make a kind of fetish of it,” and those who, influenced by the “happenings,” add “a spectacle in the form of extra-music scenic action to accompany the musical performance.” Xenakis, “Towards a Metamusic,” In *Formalized Music. Thought and Mathematics in Composition* (NY: Pendragon Press, 1992), 180-181. Orig. published 1967.

109. This is the 6th of the seven “principles” proposed by Xenakis in his “Toward a Metamusic” to cover the term “music,” (181) one that naturally brings to mind Levinas's own aesthetic analysis of 1944.

110. Xenakis, “Towards a metamusic,” 182.

(pitch, duration, intensity, density and tone) and not just some of them, would be formalized, Xenakis arrived at “symbolic music,” and the idea of musical composition *ex-nihilo*: using both the group theory, and the “sieves” theory (scale-types), Xenakis made a further important distinction between *in-time* (which contains a before and an after, namely, narrative music, traditional melody, serial music and rhythm) and *outside-time* (which can be thought of without considering a before or an after, and which is, thus, instantaneously delivered, struck):¹¹¹ *Nomos Alpha* (1965-66) is the result of that work.

In it, music, Levinas writes:

bends the quality of the notes emitted into adverbs, every quiddity becomes modality, the strings and woods turn into sonority. What is happening? Is a soul complaining or exulting in the depth of the sounds that break up or between the notes that no longer melt into a melodic line, but which hitherto succeeded one another in their identities, contributing to the harmony of the whole, silencing their squeaking? What misleading anthropomorphism or animism! The cello *is* a cello in the sonority that vibrates in its strings and its wood, even if it is already reverting into notes – into identities that settle into their natural place, in gamuts from the acute to the grave, according to the different pitches. The *essence* of the cello – a modality of *essence* – is, thus, temporalized in the work. [La musique dans *Nomos alpha pour violoncelle seul* de Xenakis, par exemple, infléchit la qualité des notes émises en adverbess, toute quiddité se faisant modalité, les cordes et les bois s’en allant en sonorité. Que se passe-t-il ? Une âme se plaint-elle ou exulte-t-elle du fond des sons qui se brisent ou d’entre les notes qui ne se fondent plus en ligne mélodique, elles qui jusqu’alors se succédaient dans leur identité contribuant à l’harmonie de l’ensemble, faisant taire leur crissement ? Anthropomorphisme ou animisme trompeurs ! Le violoncelle *est* violoncelle dans la sonorité qui vibre dans ses cordes et son bois, même si déjà elle retombe en notes – en identités qui se rangent en gammes à leur place naturelle, de l’aigu au grave, selon des hauteurs différentes. L’*essence* du violoncelle – modalité de l’*essence* – se temporalise ainsi dans l’œuvre.]¹¹²

Levinas’s words, his “rendition” of this piece which is, of course, from a listener’s perspective (a very “educated” one, mind you)¹¹³ would appear to be at odds, so to speak,

111. Cf. “Toward a Metamusic,” 183; and “Toward a Philosophy of Music,” in *Formalized Music*, 207-209.

112. AE, 71.

113. It is worth recalling that Levinas’s wife was a classically trained pianist, and their son, Michaël was, and is himself a pianist as he is also, as noted earlier, a composer and co-founder of the spectralist movement (see *supra* 62, n. 135); that being said, Levinas, according to his wife, Raïssa, as recounted by Salmon Malka: “has never had an ear [for music], he never understood music at all,” adding, “how can anyone be so insensitive to music?” To which he, guiltily confessed: “It is true ... except for my son’s!” (Malka, *La vie*, 18) This remark, as you will surely agree, is quite fitting for the present discussion, in the sense that Xenakis is considered a proto-spectralist and thus a precursor of the “genre” of music that his son would go on to create. Cf. also M.

with the austere (and unerring) logicalness and calculability of Xenakis's composition which leaves absolutely nothing to chance, or rather, nothing to *uncalculated chance*, as indeed, *Nomos Alpha*, that utopian piece is one of the, if not *the*, most "formalized" (i.e., composed with mathematical concepts) and axiomatic of all of Xenakis's compositions (the very term "Nomos" meaning rule or law). But is it? Because the acoustic shock it provokes, the sheer energy it brings, together with the inevitable subjectivity brought by the virtuosity of the cellist, is incommensurate with any rationalization one attempts to make of it; and yet we can *see* it, we can visualize it, we can see the masses and volumes, and textures, the points and lines and curves, the verticality and depth — an extreme *plasticity* in which we can *see the sounds*, their reality, their matter, *sounds becoming reality*. And it is this extreme materiality of the sounds insisting on their presence, that holds our aural (but also visual) attention while bursting forth in the form of an *appeal* which is, I feel, precisely what Levinas is trying to convey: a plaintive soul, a cry,¹¹⁴ a squeaking, an evanescence, a frailty, the palpable melancholy in the vibration and tension of the strings and woods that does not add to the "ontic personality" of the instrument, of the cello, but is, on the contrary, the result of its "ontological *dissolution*,"¹¹⁵ through a (hidden) diachronous energy that breaks up the sequences of notes, that forgoes the melodic line, a knowledge that "reverts" to a vibration that lapses into notes but lets them die, in a way, and continues to sound, to resound, to reverberate, and it is this sonorous effect that is somehow unpredictable as an infinite modulation of time, as reaching for the inaccessible,¹¹⁶ but an inaccessible which is neither the esoteric, the sacred nor the divine, but the discovery of the very "fact of matter," the materiality, the physicality of music, of the sensible, of sounds (as Xenakis once wrote: "to touch sound with your fingers. That is the heart of music, its essence!")¹¹⁷ — a sonority

Levinas, "La chanson du souffle, l'appel du visage," *Phásis. European Journal of Philosophy*, no.1 – "Appel/Élection" (2013): 145-154.

114. Come to think of it, Xenakis himself claims: "For me, perhaps the most fantastic music is that of the demonstrations I heard in Athens" — a chaos of screams and cries, explosions, intermittent shooting of the machine guns, wounded, dead: "an extraordinary music!" *Xenakis révolution: Le bâtisseur du son*, directed by Stéphane Ghez (Cinétévé; Arte France). [Video file], 00:05.09 – 00:05:45.

115. As argued by F.-P Ciglia in *Un passo fuori dall'uomo*, 80.

116. "My work is not governed by rationality alone... I only speak about what I can speak about... I reach [for] the inaccessible through music." Xenakis, "Entretien IV: rationalité et impérialisme [avec François-Bernard Mâche]," *l'Arc* 51 (1972), 58.

117. Entry from Xenakis's notebooks dated 1952, shown in *Xenakis révolution*, 00:14:06 – 00:14:10.

without sacrality: like the red reddens, or the green greens, or the sound sounds, the violoncello violoncellises — it “is the very paradigm of the time of the work expressed in the material.”¹¹⁸ And indeed *Nomos Alpha* is a piece about time, much as it is a piece about sound as sound, or music as music which is to say a *music of music*.

In this resounding of essence, always on the verge of freezing into names, the dialectical movement, the mediation by which things, substances, terms are conceptually determined is interrupted, the object synthesis that binds the sensible components of the existents bursts apart into a mass of colors, lines, sounds — the object, the entity is desubstantiated, uprooted from the mundane perspective, removed from the totality of involvements or referential structure of the world, for the coincidence with itself of the identical be-ing is severed, the coagulation of the temporal flow by which being emerges as an identifiable be-ing, a nameable entity, is disintegrated which is why the philosopher claims that art “keeps awake everywhere the verbs that are on the verge of lapsing into substantives.” But that being the case, we are once again, through art and its exoticism, exposed to the anonymous and impersonal menace of the *il y a*, enveloped in its incessant rumor that fills every silence, that translates the defection of substantiality, of the substantive, to which Levinas, in 1947, opposed the event of the *hypostasis*, “the upsurge of an existent into existence,” the taking position, in the anonymous and general being, that meant the affirmation of the subject, “the event by which the act expressed by a verb became a being designated by a substantive.” But later, as you recall, we saw how the *il y a*, into which the elemental extended, could be seen to fulfill an important task in the structuration of subjectivity: in *Totalité et Infini* separation was said to be meaningful and effective only *if* exposed to this lingering threat of the *il y a* “that murmurs at the depths of the nothingness of the element, haunting our enjoyment,” only *if* hearing this “muffled rustling of nothingness back unto which the elements flow and are lost.” Well, that task is now, in *Autrement qu’être*, explicitly acknowledged:

The *il y a* – is all the weight that alterity weights supported by a subjectivity that does not found it... In this overflowing of sense by nonsense, sensibility – the Self – is first brought out, in its bottomless passivity, as pure sensible point, a dis-interestedness, or subversion of essence. Behind the anonymous rustling of the *il y a*, subjectivity reaches passivity without any assumption... To *support* without compensation, the excessive or

118. Danielle Cohen-Levinas, “Ce qui ne peut être dit. Une lecture esthétique chez Emmanuel Levinas.” In *Emmanuel Levinas, Philosophie et Judaïsme*. Edited by Danielle Cohen-Levinas and Shmuel Trigano, (Paris: Press Editions, 2002), 371.

disheartening hubbub and encumberment of the *il y a* is needed. [L'*il y a* – c'est tout le poids que pèse l'altérité supportée par une subjectivité qui ne la fonde pas ... Dans ce débordement du sens par le non-sens, la sensibilité – le Soi – s'accuse seulement, dans sa passivité sans fond, comme pur point sensible, comme dés-intéressement, ou subversion d'essence... De derrière le bruissement anonyme de l'*il y a* la subjectivité atteint la passivité sans assomption... Pour *supporter* sans compensation, il lui faut l'excessif ou l'écœurant remue-ménage et encombrement de l'*il y a*.]¹¹⁹

Which is perhaps why in his dialogue with Philip Nemo, Levinas claims that despite speaking little of the *il y a* by itself in his latter texts, “the shadow of the *il y a* and of non-sense, is required as the very test of dis-inter-estedness.”¹²⁰ It is no longer in the hypostasis that lies the answer, for hypostasis is reversible, it reverses into essence — but precisely in its de-fection, in the de-position of the subject, of the sovereignty of the I faced with the other — an irreducible relationship: “to escape the *il y a* one must be, not posed, but *deposed*; to make an act of deposition ... [which] is the social relationship with the Other, the dis-inter-ested relation.”¹²¹

Much as I tried to suggest in the analysis of *Totalité et Infini*, I believe that here too we can recognize, perhaps even in a more undemanding manner, a positive significance to art, derived precisely from its exoticism; exoticism which is beyond that “of the “‘elsewhere’ where certain artists take refuge” which, as Levinas notes in his text about Jean Atlan,[±] “frees things only from our habits,”¹²² whereby the works remain “stuck” to the dogma of “art for art’s sake” (which, as a matter of fact, the painter himself refused: “nothing enraged Atlan more than the concept of painting as mere delectation”).¹²³ Atlan’s shapes are, as he wrote in his “Lettre à la revue *Geijutsu Shinto*” (cited by Levinas in his essay): “without passports, without identity papers. They are neither abstract nor figurative but simply exist with a

119. AE, 255.

120. “Mais l’ombre de l’ ‘il y a,’ et du non-sens, me parut encore nécessaire comme l’épreuve même du dés-intér-essement.” EI, 43.

121. “... pour sortir de l’*il y a*, il faut non pas se poser, mais se déposer; faire un acte de déposition, au sens où l’on parle de rois déposés. Cette déposition de la souveraineté par le *moi*, c’est la relation sociale avec autrui, la relation dés-intér-essée.” EI, 42.

± Jean-Michel Atlan (1913 –1960), Algerian-born French painter.

122. “Le pur exotisme de l’‘ailleurs’ où se réfugient certains artistes, ne libère les choses que de nos habitudes.” JA, 510.

123. Bernard Dorival, *Atlan. Essai de Biographie Artistique* (Paris: Éditions Pierre Tisné, 1962), 172.

violence”¹²⁴ — not, he adds, a futile violence, but an *essential* violence consecrated by the tearing away “from the simultaneity of continuous forms, from the primordial coexistence that takes place on the canvas, from the original spatiality of space”: “the diachrony of rhythm or the beat of temporality or duration or the life that denies this space of gathering and synthesis covering and concealing this life;”¹²⁵ rhythm that is the origin of breath and life, that is where perhaps, as Levinas suggests, the very intrigue of the human is played: “tension of art between human despair and hope – a struggle as dramatic as the unveiling of Truth and the imperative of the Good.”¹²⁶ And this exoticism, this living rhythm and essential tension that Levinas discerns in Atlan’s images which, he suggests, perhaps lends “a new, meta-biological and metaphysical mode of existence to this life, more alive than the life attentive to its own reflections in the painted,” makes him wonder whether

artistic engagement is not one of the privileged modes for man to break into the pretentious sufficiency of being that claims to be already accomplishment and to overthrow its heavy densities and impassive cruelties? [N’ouvre-t-on pas, de par l’engagement artistique, l’un des modes privilégiés pour l’homme de faire irruption dans la suffisance prétentieuse de l’être qui se veut déjà accomplissement et d’en bouleverser les lourdes épaisseurs et les impassibles cruautés?]¹²⁷

But was it not art that, in “La réalité et son ombre” and “La transcendance des mots,” Levinas denounced for its sufficiency? “Sufficiency,” says Françoise Armengaud, “has changed sides.”¹²⁸ Granted that is true, it still seems to me that this “transposition” of sufficiency says more about being than it does about art, in other words, that it is more a reflection of Levinas’s different conception of being (and ontology in general), than an essential change in his conception of art. Having said that, let us stay with this idea that art effects an irruption in the sufficiency of being which, as a matter of fact, is not an idle one, triggered by Atlan’s

124. Jean Atlan, “Lettre à la revue *Geijutsu Shinto*” (1959), in Dorival, *Atlan*, 177.

125. “N’entend-il pas arracher par le pinceau – à la simultanéité des formes continues, à la coexistence primordiale qui s’accomplit sur la toile, à la spatialité originelle de l’espace que le pinceau même affirme ou consacre – la diachronie du rythme ou le battement de la temporalité ou la durée ou la vie qui renie cet espace du rassemblement et de la synthèse recouvrant et dissimulant cette vie?” JA, 509.

126. “Tension de l’art, vécue entre désespoir et espérance de l’homme – lutte aussi dramatique que le dévoilement du Vrai et que l’exigence impérative du Bien. Mais ainsi se noue probablement l’intrigue même de l’humain.” JA, 509.

127. JA, 509.

128. Armengaud, “Faire ou ne pas faire images,” par. 41.

eroticized and dancing forms alone, but one to which Levinas returns just two years later, not once but twice, in the course of his dialogue, precisely with Armengaud, around the work of Sacha Sosno:[±]

Aesthetics, art, designates a domain, or a reign, that precedes the reign of God and which can cure me of my hold over things that comes from my perseverance in being. The image is a lesson in disinterestedness. A mature humanity should be able to think about something other than being, to emerge from the bewitchment of what is. [L'esthétique, l'art, désigne un domaine, ou un règne, qui précède le règne de Dieu et qui peut me guérir de mon emprise sur les choses qui me vient de ma persévérance dans l'être. L'image est leçon de désintéressement. Une humanité mûre doit pouvoir penser autre chose que l'être, sortir de l'ensorcellement par ce qui est.]¹²⁹

Note that Levinas is not referring here to Sosno's work in particular, but is speaking rather generally, as generally as he could possibly be: "art," "aesthetics," "image," "domain," "reign." And indeed, I find that Levinas's most interesting thoughts in this dialogue are not those that concern Sosno's work itself and his obliterated (or hidden) faces and torsos, whose interest, if you will, lies basically in making explicit, and making a practice (or as Levinas kindly puts it, an "art") of what other artists, writers, poets and musicians also do albeit in a less *literal* (and thus perhaps also, more meaningful and profound) way;¹³⁰ one of which being, precisely, the idea of the image as "a lesson in disinterestedness." But, in "La réalité et son ombre," the image was said, instead, to be "interesting," "interesting in the sense of

[±] Sacha Sosno, born Alexandre Joseph Sosnowsky (1937 – 2013), French sculptor and painter.

129. DO, 27-28.

130. As Levinas's himself suggests when, at one point in the dialogue, he wonders whether "Sosno's square obliterations of faces, with their brutal negativity have the same meaning, the same depth" as Vassili Grossmann's "*otherwise* – obliterated faces" in his description, in *Life and Destiny*, of the "napes of people's necks queuing up at the Lubyanka counter in Moscow to deliver letters or parcels to relatives or friends ... which still express, for those in the queue watching them, anguish, worry and tears." DO, 20.

What I mean is, while this idea of "obliteration" is no doubt an interesting one, an important one, one that exposes "the ease or lighthearted casualness of the beautiful, and recalls the wear and tear of being, the 'repairs' that cover it," (DO, 12) that "removes the false humanity from things," (22) that "shows the scandal; that recognizes it and makes it known," and which is, therefore, maybe, "full of compassion" (24), it is not, by itself, enough; the way, the *how* this idea is put to practice (and it being a "practice" in the first place) is, I feel, both redundant and reductive in Sosno, and indeed, reading through the text, Levinas himself implies as much: from the apparent confusion between obliterating and simply hiding — which is "where Sosno seems to really enjoy himself. He places a geometric figure on the face. He loves it!" (20) — to, consequently, the emotion that is missing in his works with their "brutal negativity," while Levinas reminds us that "even obliterated, it must still sing. The obliteration must sing ... It must be moving" (32), to the very possibility that obliteration makes or invites to speak, to which we can only wonder: but how much can one say?

‘entraining.’” How to reconcile these two apparently opposite conceptions of the image? But are they?

When only a couple of pages ago I spoke about the *il y a*, and the crucial part it plays in *Autrement qu’être*, I purposefully omitted the question of the “image,” mainly because in Levinas’s discussion of art in that work the term “image” (as I believe I had already remarked somewhere in the previous chapter) is not employed once, being “reserved,” as it were, to describe the process, discussed earlier, by which consciousness is produced as representation. Which does not mean that art has nothing more to do with images from now on (as evidenced by the above passages from *De l’oblitération*) but means perhaps that, having discussed the image so thoroughly in 1948, Levinas can simply refer back to that text (which he does), or maybe it means that the image, with everything we know it entails, could pose some kind of a problem for the mature Levinas — well, it *does*, but it is not a problem so much as an *ambiguity*.

Because, as you surely recall, the image as described in 1948 was characterized by a “fundamental passivity;” a passivity that had in the ear, and not in the eye, its “sensible organ,” insofar as the image was said to be *musical*. A passivity that lead, through that rhythm, that musicality, to the dispossession of the self, not as a mere absence of the self, but as a losing of oneself, a desubjectivization of the self: without consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, the subject was said to be caught up and carried away by it, and “not even *in spite of himself*, for in rhythm there is no longer a *oneself* [*soi*], but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity.” Now, you will say, and rightly so, that this passivity that Levinas acknowledged in the image, and which lead him to the concept of *participation*, is not that “passivity more passive than all passivity,” of “the subject in the Saying” that here, in *Autrement qu’être*, the philosopher poses at the basis of the structuration of subjectivity; *but*, I ask, does not that first passivity suppose the second? Does not the signification of the one-for-the-other entail, as suggested above, the possibility of the pure non-sense that threatens it, and finally (or firstly), that both passivities do engender a denucleation of the substantivity of the self which, despite their different “results” and “means,” could be said, furthermore, to be operated in both not through sight but through *hearing*: the Saying and the “*remue-ménage*,” the Saying and the “mute resonance, the murmur of silence” of essence, that without ever coinciding lend themselves to a possible (and necessary) confusion? If the image does engender, as Levinas claimed in 1948, a

desubstanciation of the subject, through its “useless” interest (that is, extraneous to functionality) then, according to the philosopher’s terms and “mindset” of 1974 onwards, it is not unreasonable, nor indeed, contradictory, to claim it now as “a lesson in disinterestedness,” because dis-inter-estedness entails here, precisely, a denucleation of the substantivity of the self as for-the-other: “To be des-inter-ested. ‘Not to kill-oneself-to-be’... is always positively relation to others, insofar as he can matter to me more than my own being.”¹³¹

To think the real in its image – in its memory – and thus perhaps in its past, is one of the commencements of art: it is being which is heavy, tangible, solid, good to hold, usable and useful, disengaged of its burdens or its ontological properties, in order to let himself be contemplated. Contemplation which is *dis-inter-estedness*. Furthermore, is not contemplation a generosity of the self, a gift to the other, a benevolence that interrupts the *inter-ested* effort of persevering in being? [Penser le réel dans son image – dans son souvenir – et peut être ainsi dans son passé, c’est un des commencement de l’art: c’est l’être lourd, tangible et solide et bon à prendre, utilisable et utile, qui se dégage de ses poids ou de ses vertus ontologiques pour se laisser contempler. Contemplation qui est *dés-inter-essement*. N’est-elle pas dès lors, dans le moi, générosité, don à l’autre, bienveillance qui interrompt l’effort *inter-essé* de persévérer dans l’être?]¹³²

Art takes a distance from the present, from reality, from the original which it ignores, and offers this distant view, which is both a re-tention and a pro-tention: retention by which art “presents things as coming from a deep past. Once upon a time...” which is nothing other than human finitude:

Expiry. The ticket we can no longer travel with. The semelfactive of existence that reminds us ... the fact that ‘this has already taken place.’ One always comes back to the human condition. This suffering, this secret, this withdrawal... Once, yes, but not twice! [La péremption. Le billet avec lequel on ne peut plus voyager. Le semelfactif de l’existence qui se rappelle à nous... ‘Cela à déjà eu lieu.’ On revient toujours à la condition humaine. Cette souffrance, ce secret, cette mise à la retraite... Une fois, oui, mais pas deux!]¹³³

Art presents things as reminiscence, memory, nostalgia and thus, also, *emotion*, suffering, what once took place and which our memory does not always retain by itself, either because

131. “Se *dés-inter-esser*. ‘Ne pas se tuer-à-être’... C’est toujours positivement relation à autrui. Dans la mesure où il peut m’importer plus que mon être.” DO, 10.

132. DO, 10.

133. DO, 32.

we have not lived it, or because it is simply *dulled in memory*; memory of regret, of suffering, of finitude, it provides, perhaps, an access to the immemorial in its trace, an access to, perhaps paradoxically, the irrepresentable, but also the imprescriptible, and thus also, perhaps, a *promise*; for the work is never finished, for reality itself is always off mark, obliterated. Art does not let us forget, and it maybe reminds us of this need *not to forget* — and there are indeed things one *should not forget*¹³⁴ — as it recollects the traces that often disappear from reality, from which it is also an appeal to the word, to interpretation, to a constant renewal of its sense, to other works, to new interpretations; thus also its protention regarding the future, creation *without me*, beyond my time — a flight from “being-toward-death” (which is not a purely aesthetic fact but is true of all human work [*œuvre*]). Thus understood, aesthetic contemplation becomes “generosity, a gift to others” and art as expression, as *celebration*, becomes free figuration, given to, expressed to, a struggle against the weight of being, its monotony, and the very banality of the world in which “reality appears as a general idea;” the effort of art, the struggle of the artist, is a struggle for renewal — renewal of the world which is also a renewal of the interest in others: it is *a way of speaking to others* that takes away the triviality of human reality: “The artist’s vision seeks to rediscover the novelty, the first contact with,” to find “something as unique, something that does not repeat itself,” and “to see it for the first time, that is, in its uniqueness, to grasp what is unique in what is not ... and beauty is probably this gift of uniqueness.”¹³⁵

I wonder, however, if this ethical condition of aesthetics is not immediately compromised by the joys of the beautiful monopolizing the generosity that have made them possible [Je me demande cependant si cette condition éthique de l’esthétique n’est pas aussitôt compromise par ces joies du beau accaparant la générosité qui les aurait rendues possibles.]¹³⁶

134. Thus begins *Autrement qu’être* with the poignant and arresting epigraph, or rather, *dedication*: “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism. [À la mémoire des êtres les plus proches parmi les six millions d’assassinés par les nationaux-socialistes, à côté des millions et des millions d’humains de toutes confessions et de toutes nations, victimes de la même haine de l’autre homme, du même antisémitisme.]” AE [5].

135. “Œuvre et altérité. Dialogue entre E. Levinas et A. Biancofiore” (June 6, 1990), in *Sujet et altérité sur Emmanuel Levinas* by Augusto Ponzio (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 149.

136. DO, 10.

As might be expected, aesthetic disinterestedness is not the ultimate; though “there is already relation to the other,” the perfection of beauty, Levinas argues, echoing his earlier remarks on the matter, particularly those made in “La réalité et son ombre,” “imposes silence without caring for the rest.”¹³⁷ The beautiful, “bearer of western ontology” to which the Said is reduced as pure theme, as exposition, that compromises the generosity, the goodness there is in it, the “benevolence that interrupts the *inter-ested* effort of persevering in being” which first made it possible; and in which, as we are told, in a footnote of *Autrement qu’être* that (again) echoes some of the author’s earlier pronouncements, both those of the 1948 essay and of *Totalité et Infini*,¹³⁸ “the movement beyond being is fixed,” and thus the absolute diachrony of the immemorial past is lost: “the incomparable, the dia-chronic, the non-contemporaneous, through the effect of a deceitful and marvelous schematism, is ‘imitated’ by art which is iconography... Theology and art ‘retain’ the immemorial past” — “The work of art substitutes itself for God.”¹³⁹

This is by far the most unfavorable of Levinas’s pronouncement on art in this work. It is also the only one, and, really, the same one we have been hearing all along. The stern and

137. “The perfection of the beautiful imposes silence without caring for anything else. It is the guardian of silence. It lets it be. This is where aesthetic civilization reaches its limits. [La perfection du beau impose silence sans s’occuper du reste. Il est gardien du silence. Il laisse faire. C’est là que la civilisation esthétique a ses limites.]” DO, 8.

138. See *supra* 187-190.

139. “Le passé immémoriale est intolérable à la pensée. D’où l’exigence d’arrêt: *ananké stenai*. Le mouvement au-delà de l’être devient ontologie et théologie. D’où aussi l’idolâtrie du beau. Dans son indiscrete exposition et dans son arrêt de statue, dans sa plasticité, l’œuvre d’art se substitue à Dieu... Par une subreption irrésistible, l’incomparable, le dia-chronique, le non-contemporain, par l’effet d’un schématisme trompeur et merveilleux, est ‘imité’ par l’art qui est iconographie. Le mouvement au-delà de l’être se fixe en beauté. La théologie et l’art “retiennent” le passé immémorial.” AE, 235, n. 1.

Hence a (if not *the*) crucial difference between *Autrement qu’être* and *Totalité et Infini*: “the need to stop (somewhere and not be infinite)” — the Aristotelian axiom, *ananké stenai* — which, as we know, took on a positive signification in *Totalité et Infini*, where Levinas insisted on the idea (and authority) of a “principle” (and therefore also of presence and present), of introducing a principle (*arché*) into anarchy, in order to overcome the ambivalence of the appearing is, on the contrary, outright refused in *Autrement qu’être* where it is precisely anarchy that deranges the ontological order and the temporalization of time, and is thus the “modality” of the otherwise than being: it does not have the status of a principle but is instead “an openness that does not cease to open itself and declares itself as such.” But to be so, it must signal itself in consciousness, otherwise “it would *reign* in its own way. The anarchical is possible only when contested by language which betrays, but conveys, its anarchy, without abolishing it, by an abuse of language [Si l’anarchique ne se signalait pas dans la conscience – il *règnerait* à sa façon. L’anarchique n’est possible que contesté par le discours qui trahit, sans l’annuler, son an-archie par un abus de langage.” AE, 158, n.1. It is thus that “anarchy does not *reign*, and thus remains in ambiguity, in enigma, and leaves a trace which speech, in the pain of expression, seeks to state. But there is only a trace. [“L’an-archie ne *règne* pas et se tient ainsi dans l’ambiguïté, dans l’énigme, laisse un trace que le discours, dans la douleur de l’expression, essaie de dire. Mais la trace seulement.]” AE, 160, n. 2.

unyielding criticism of the worship of art by contemporary society and philosophy for which Art “would be the only divine order. Heidegger, when he speaks of art. And Valéry, in *Canticle of the Columns*,”¹⁴⁰ derived perhaps from Nietzsche’s pronouncement of “the death of God” and the despair and doubts that said death has raised, and whose void is supposed to be fulfilled by Art — whence the triumph of the sacred, of paganism and its places, where goodness “burns the sacred groves in which the echoes of the past reverberate,”¹⁴¹ of *myth*.¹⁴² We have been over this; and I said it in the last chapter, this idolatry of the beautiful says more about the reception of art, than it does about, if I dare say it, its *essence*. It is *not* in the “essence” of art to be idolatrous figuration, which is (but) one aspect of it, a strong one, no doubt, and often (as is the case, for me, at his very moment) difficult to go beyond, to see beyond it. But what if ... we look back? What if, instead of trying to look beyond, we try to look beneath, back? Not at the end, but at the start, at what made this “end” first possible, at *how* this end came to be? — Isn’t that what Levinas has been trying to do all along? Not just regarding art, but in his work as a whole? Isn’t that the first (perhaps the only) phenomenological teaching: to proceed by questioning from the very low toward the high, which allows for the restitution of the concrete being to the horizon of its appearing, forgotten in its ostension? A questioning that takes on, in *Autrement qu’être*, the form of the reduction of the Said to the Saying, the incessant *Unsay*ing of the Said, but also the infinite exegesis that resounds in art, or the skepticism that pervades all language; a questioning in which art is not *accidentally* implicated, but appears, itself, if I may put it so, as a modality of such questioning. Hence the ambiguity of that “retaining” that art engenders; for is not to

140. “Dans la philosophie contemporaine, et c’est là sa modernité, le seul ordre qui serait divin, c’est celui de l’art. Heidegger, quand il parle de l’art. Et Valéry, le *Cantique des Colonnes*: Douces colonnes, ô / L’orchestre des fuseaux! / Chacun immole son / Silence à l’unisson.” DO, 28.

141. “... goodness is *other* than being ... It destroys without leaving souvenirs, without transporting into museums, the altars raised to the idols of the past for blood sacrifices. [... la bonté est *autre* que l’être ... Elle détruit sans laisser de souvenirs, sans transporter dans des musées les autels érigés aux idoles du passé pour des sacrifices sanglants; elle brûle les bosquets sacrés où se répercutent les échos du passé.” AE, 35-36.

142. Virtually absent from *Autrement qu’être*, the term “myth” and its derivatives are however pronounced in relation to theology to which, as we saw above, Levinas “criticism” of the “retention” of the immemorial past is equally directed. It is in another note that we read: “Thus the theological language destroys the religious situation of transcendence. Infinity is “presented” an-archically; thematization loses the anarchy which alone can accredit it. Language about God rings false or becomes a myth, that is to say, can never be taken literally. [Ainsi le langage théologique détruit la situation religieuse de la transcendance. L’Infini se “présente” an-archiquement; la thématization perd l’anarchie qui, seule peut l’accréditer. Le langage sur Dieu sonne faux ou se fait mythique, c’est-à-dire ne peut jamais être pris à la lettre.] AE, 192, n. 1.

retain *also* to save? To save a trace of, an echo of? But of what? Well, *perhaps* of what first made it possible...

Here I am. / Sign given of this signification of sign, proximity also delineates the *trope* of lyricism: to love by telling one's love to the beloved – love song, possibility of poetry, of art. [Me voici. / Signe donné de cette signification de signe, la proximité dessine aussi de *trope* du lyrisme: aimer en disant l'amour à l'aimé – chant d'amour, possibilité de la poésie, de l'art.]¹⁴³

The work of art, the poem, the literary work, can indeed become idolatrous figuration, the dissimulation of the immemorial past, the arrest of the movement beyond being; and it may be that poetry does not succeed in reducing rhetoric,¹⁴⁴ that it is doomed to remain *belles-lettres* and to perpetuate ghosts,¹⁴⁵ and that painting can never be more than nudes on the wall, and architecture, stone cathedrals, and literature, frozen words, and music, plain melancholy. But it may also be, if indeed art and poetry are, as Levinas is proposing here, *born from proximity*, then maybe in them glows the inspired essence of language itself, the insinuation of a sense “refusing simultaneity, not entering into being, not composing a whole,”¹⁴⁶ that is, a sense irreducible to the synchrony of the signifier, refusing to settle into the eternity of the idea signified, of which, I believe, they are not just the recount, but the very *event*. But before going into that, allow me to say a few words on this proximity at the root of art and poetry.

So, what does Levinas mean by proximity? That is a difficult question; but we could try and say what it *is not*. Proximity is not “a spatial contiguity,” it is not “an intentionality,” nor “a configuration in the soul,” or “simple coexistence,” or “a fusion” or “a state, a rest,” or “a subjective experience,” or “a confusion with the other,” nor is it “a deforming

143. AE, 227, note 1 (the note refers to the expression “here I am” [*me voici*] in the text).

144. “... la poésie arrive-t-elle à réduire la rhétorique?” AE, 230

145. “Is the poetic vision which transcends it [politics], forever doomed to remain ‘belles-lettres’ and perpetuate ghosts? Is it not, on the contrary – and this is probably the very definition of poetry – the thing that makes language possible? [La vision poétique qui la transcende, est-elle à jamais vouée à demeurer ‘belles lettres’ et à perpétuer des fantômes? N’est-elle pas au contraire, – et c’est probablement la définition même de la poésie – ce qui rend le langage possible?]” Levinas, “La poésie et l’impossible,” *Bulletin de la Société Paul Claudel*, no. 33 (1969), 6.

146. “... sens se refusant à la simultanéité, n’entrant pas dans l’être, ne composant pas un tout.” AE, 263.

abstraction.”¹⁴⁷ The attempt to describe proximity turns out to be, just like the face,¹⁴⁸ a rather daunting task which, and again like the face, is not the expression of a minus, of a flaw, but attests to the surplus of its signifyingness, whose term is, furthermore, *not* an end.¹⁴⁹

Proximity is the *sense of sensibility* that Levinas seeks out to think in its very immediacy, beyond, thus, its signification as knowledge (where alone, he claims, the sensible is superficial),¹⁵⁰ beyond (or beneath) its function as image of the true,¹⁵¹ in order to propose a subjectivity irreducible to consciousness and thematization; proximity describes the paradox of *obsession* with the other, whose presence, exceeding all representable presence (because it suppresses the distance in which a “consciousness of” could arise) obsesses me, of an obsession that signifies the urgency of an assignment that, prior to all designation, is the demand to surrender oneself unconditionally to my (and mine alone) responsibility for the other: absolute exposure, “denudation never naked enough,” vulnerability, proximity is *contact*:¹⁵² “not manifestation of knowledge, but ethical event ... that founds the universality in which everything can be said,”¹⁵³ saying before language, or language without words or propositions — pure communication — “but without which no language, as transmission of

147. Respectively: EDE, 225; EDE, 235; AE, 137; EDE, 230, 231; AE, 137; AE, 131; AE, 206; AE, 224; AE, 248.

148. See *supra* 175-176.

149. “... la proximité n’est pas une approche simplement asymptote de son ‘terme’. Son terme n’est pas une fin.” AE, 149

150. “Le sensible n’est superficiel que dans son rôle de connaissance.” EDE, 228.

151. “La sensibilité – tel est notre thèse – a une autre signification dans son immédiateté. Elle ne se limite pas à la fonction qui consisterait à être l’image du vrai.” AE, 52, n. 2

152. One is naturally reminded of Levinas’s words in *Le Temps et l’autre* about the caress and contact which “as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This ‘not knowing,’ this fundamental disorder, is essential. It is like a play with something that slips away, a play absolutely without project or plan ... with something other, always other, always inaccessible, always still to come. The caress is the anticipation of this pure future, without content. [Le contact en tant que sensation fait partie du monde de la lumière. Mais ce qui est caressé n’est pas touché à proprement parler. Ce n’est pas la velouté ou la tiédeur de cette main donnée dans le contact que cherche la caresse. Cette recherche de la caresse en constitue l’essence par le fait que la caresse ne sait pas ce qu’elle cherche. Ce ‘ne pas savoir’, ce désordonné fondamentale en est l’essentiel. Elle est comme un jet avec quelque chose qui se dérobe, et un jeu absolument sans projet ni plan ... avec quelque chose d’autre, toujours autre, toujours inaccessible, toujours à venir. La caresse est l’attente de cet avenir pur, sans contenu.]” TA, 82.

153. “Le contact où j’approche le prochain n’est pas manifestation ni savoir, mais l’événement éthique de la communication que toute transmission de messages suppose, qui instaure l’universalité où mots et propositions vont s’énoncer.” EDE (“Langage et proximité”), 236.

messages, would be possible.”¹⁵⁴ It is thus from proximity that Levinas comes to understand language as Saying; from the proximity of the other, the interlocutor, to which the speaking subject ex-poses itself in saying, in addressing the other, that is, *pro-posing* a discourse. As it is also from proximity that, as we saw above, Levinas proposes thinking art and poetry, a pro-position that was first articulated in “Langage et proximité”:

The proximity of things is poetry; in themselves the things are revealed before being approached... over all things, beginning with the human face and skin, tenderness spreads. Cognition turns into proximity, into the purely sensible... The poetry of the world is inseparable from proximity par excellence, or the proximity of a neighbor par excellence. [La proximité des choses est poésie; en elles-mêmes, les choses se révèlent avant d’être approchées... sur toutes choses, à partir du visage et de la peau humains, s’étend la tendresse; la connaissance retourne à la proximité, au sensible pur... La poésie du monde n’est pas séparable de la proximité par excellence ou de la proximité du prochain par excellence.]¹⁵⁵

“Everything begins at this sensible level,”¹⁵⁶ and everything returns to it, to the purely sensible. Even perception, as we read in another passage from the 1967 essay, comes to be conceived as “immediacy, contact and language,” for “even in its subordination to cognition, sight maintains contact and proximity. The visible caresses the eye. One sees and one hears like one touches.”¹⁵⁷ What Levinas is describing above is not the experience of proximity but proximity itself, this relation, “this contact that is unconvertible into a noetic-noematic structure,” this contact in which the caress of the sensible awakens; the caress that here (by

154. “Proximité comme dire, contact, sincérité de l’exposition; dire d’avant le langage, mais sans lequel aucun langage, comme transmission de messages, ne serait possible.” AE, 32.

155. EDE, 228. Almost word-for-word of what we read in a footnote of *Autrement qu’être*: “...the caress lies dormant in all contact, and contact in all sensible experience: the thematized disappears in the caress in which the thematization becomes proximity. There is indeed a part of metaphor in that, and the things are taken to be true and illusory before being near. But is not the poetry of the world prior to the truth of things, and inseparable from the proximity par excellence, that of a neighbor, or of the proximity of the neighbor par excellence. [...la caresse sommeille dans tout contact et le contact dans toute expérience sensible: le thématise disparaît dans la caresse où la thématisation se fait proximité. Il y a là, certes, une part de métaphore et les choses seraient variées et illusives avant d’être proches. Mais la poésie du monde n’est-elle pas antérieure à la vérité des choses et inséparable de la proximité par excellence, de celle du prochain ou de la proximité du prochain par excellence.] AE, 122, n. 1.

156. “Tout commence à ce niveau sensible.” SMB, 34

157 “La vision est, certes, ouverture et conscience et toute sensibilité s’ouvrant comme conscience, se dit vision, mais la vision conserve, jusque dans sa subordination à la connaissance, le contact et la proximité. Le visible caresse l’œil. On voit et on entend comme on touche.” EDE, 228.

contrast to *Le Temps et Autre*) is no longer exclusively human, but spreads to the world of things: *poetry*, precisely.

What do you mean, poetry? It is not certain what Levinas means by “poetry” here; does it even make sense to speak of poetry in this way (and did it make sense to speak of music as Levinas did of *Nomos Alpha*)? And yet, we can see the *sense* of it, somehow, I mean, surely you will agree that this formulation is not far from Levinas’s notes on the literary work, and on his own literary procedures, and indeed about art in general, from how it is from the elemental, from the level of the sensible, of sensations, at this “pre-syntactic and pre-logic ... but also pre-unveiling level,”¹⁵⁸ “where all the complex is already present” that everything begins. “The proximity of things is poetry,” “the poetry of the world,” one is instantly reminded of how he wrote that poetry is *things* set to music, and how in his essay on Celan he speaks of the poem (as understood by the poet) as this “moment of pure touch, pure contact, gripping, squeezing that is, perhaps, a way of giving right down to the giving hand,”¹⁵⁹ in which a song rises, a musicality: “a language of proximity for proximity,”¹⁶⁰ not language as kerygma, thus, but as contact. And this means a understanding of poetry, of the poem, not as a cognitive process that grasps and takes hold of things, making them

158 “...il se trouve donc pour Celan que le poème se situe ... à ce niveau pré-syntaxique et pré-logique ..., mais aussi pré-dévoiant.” PC, 17.

159. “... moment du pur toucher, du pur contact, du saisissement, du serrement, qui est, peut-être, une façon de donner jusqu’à la main qui donne. Langage de la proximité pour la proximité, plus ancien que celui de la *vérité de l’être*.” PC, 17-18

160. Similarly to his essays on Blanchot, Levinas’s essay on Celan is both explicit and obscure; because if, on the one hand, the philosopher’s words seem to explicitly recognize art or poetry (a whole issue that I will address shortly) as transcendent along the lines of what he himself seeks through ethics (to put it in a barbarously simplistic manner), or the poem, the poetic language as Saying (but the poetic word is, as we know from AE, precisely, “said”), on the other hand, the propositions he enunciates are more often than not, “spoken” in the voice of the two authors: “For Celan the poem is to be found...,” “Celan shows what he understands of his poetic act as...,” “In Celan’s terms...,” “The word of poetry becomes for Blanchot...,” “Blanchot thus determines writing as...,” in short, in a “confusion” of voices, to which he adds those “precious” little expressions, “as if” and “perhaps” — *as if* precisely taking a distance from what the two authors themselves think and say: which is obviously not a rejection of what they say, but a refusal to accept it at face value, that is, a taking of that (necessary) distance which is (or should be) the essential of the exegetical gesture, which is why these essays are *perhaps* works of literary or art criticism, exegetical works, ~~that pieces of aesthetic or literary theory, that do not just reproduce thoughts, but precisely contemplate them, in commenting, interpreting them, and thus impart them, in the deepest sense of the word.~~ Having said that, I have no doubt, and I think that it is abundantly clear, that Levinas shares many of the ideas of the two authors, which he himself conveys sometimes in his own voice, ~~which~~ however, as said, ~~is~~ sometimes difficult to distinguish. Furthermore, it is also worth pointing out that Levinas’s essay on Celan concerns explicitly, not his poetic works, but two of his proses: “L’entretien dans la montagne” and “Le Méridien,” in which the poet, as noted earlier, ponders himself on the nature of poetry. What I mean is that the privilege that many commentators accord to poetry (in relation to the other arts) in Levinas’s work, is ~~exactly not~~ a given, ~~that is, perhaps, should not be taken literally.~~ See *infra* 260-261.

transparent, i.e., adequate to thought, and thus, bereft of secret, of mystery, and therefore also of an ulterior meaning, a “hidden” meaning, but as a sort of *inclination* towards things, which presents them, perhaps paradoxically, in their opacity, i.e, their strangeness in which they reveal themselves as mystery and which, as such, proposes, goes beyond any literal or plain meaning, like a sign without signifier, or a “wink” [*clin d’œil*], in a return of materiality to the sensible, proximity, a return of the sensible from visibility to proximity, of the visible itself to its sensible nature, the return of the sensible to its unassimilable distance which is the absolute nearness of its proximity and which takes precedence over the withdrawal of theoretical thought. And this proximity of the “poetry” of the world is inseparable from the “proximity par excellence,” that of the neighbor, of the Other, meaning, precisely, that it is born from it.

Proximity, then, cannot be “said” in everyday language nor indeed in the language of thought, but *signifies* in the caress of love which “overflows with exorbitance” the *said*s [*dits*] in which it is *said* — “in our books ... in the songs, poems, and admissions” — “in so many different ways and through so many themes, and in which it is apparently forgotten;”¹⁶¹ forgotten but not lost, or rather, it needn’t be. Proximity, the-one-for-the-other, the signifyingness proper to the Saying is not irrevocably “falsified,” distorted without return, but resounds in these *said*s — it is not *added to* them, but instead, *disturbs* them,¹⁶² which is how it imprints its trace on the

thematization itself which it undergoes, hesitating between, on the hand, structuration, the regime of a configuration of be-ings ... and the regime of the non-nominalized apophansis, on the other, where the *Said* remains *proposition* – proposition made to the neighbor, “signifyingness bestowed” to the Other. Being, the verb of a proposition, is, to

161. “La caresse de l’amour, toujours la même, en fin de compte (pour celui qui pense en comptant) – est toujours différente et déborde de démesure, les chants et les poèmes et les aveux ou elle se dit sur tant de modes différents et à travers tant de thèmes ou, en apparence, elle s’oublie.” AE, 282.

162. “Expression – saying – is not added on to the significations, ‘visible’ in the clarity of the phenomenon, to modify them, to confuse them and introduce into them ‘poetic,’ ‘literary,’ ‘verbal’ enigmas; the significations *said* offer a hold to the *saying* which ‘disturbs’ them, like writings awaiting interpretation. But herein lies – in principle – irreversible antecedence of the Word with respect to Being, the irretrievable delay of the *Said* behind the *Saying*. Of this antecedence, the significations which, meanwhile, suffice to themselves, bear a trace, which they forthwith contest and efface. [L’expression – le dire – ne vient pas s’ajouter aux significations, ‘visibles’ dans la clarté du phénomène, pour les modifier et pour les brouiller et pour introduire en elles des énigmes ‘poétiques’, ‘littéraires’, ‘verbales’, les significations *dites* offrent prise au *dire* qui les ‘dérange’, comme des écrits attendant interprétation. Mais c’est là l’antériorité irréversible – principielle – du Verbe par rapport à l’Être, le retard non-rattrapable du Dit sur le Dire. De cette antériorité, les significations qui, en attendant, se suffisent, portent la trace qu’aussitôt elles contestent et effacent.] EDE (“Énigme et phénomène”), 212.

be sure a theme, but it makes essence resound without entirely deadening the echo of the saying that bears it and brings it to light. Resonance always ready to congeal into nouns, where being will be congealed into a copula and the “Sachverhalt” nominalized, *the apophansis is still a modality of the Saying*. [à la thématization elle-même, qu’elle subit hésitant entre structuration, régime d’une configuration d’étants ..., d’une part, et le régime de l’apophansis non-nominalisée, de l’autre, où le Dit reste *proposition* – proposition faite au prochain, “signifiante baillée” à Autrui. L’être – verbe de la proposition – est thème, certes, mais il fait résonner l’essence sans assourdir entièrement l’écho du Dire qui la porte et lui donne le jour. Résonance toujours prête à se geler en noms, où l’être se figera en copule, où le “Sachverhalt” se nominalisera, *l’apophansis est encore modalité du Dire*.]¹⁶³

But you will say, not without reason, that is true of all language! All language is born from proximity and thus every said is borne by the Saying. What is it that makes art and poetry different, special, if you will? Speaking of which, allow me to briefly attempt that “clarification” that was promised not two pages ago. Now, when Levinas refers to poetry is he thinking of poetry per se, the poem, as distinct from art (from aesthetics), is he referring to it as an aesthetic category among others, or does he mean poetry as the essence of art? Like when he says, in “Le regard du poète,” “the work of art, the poem is placed, for Blanchot, outside the realm of the Day”¹⁶⁴ does he mean, asks Armengaud, “the work of art, that is, the poem,” or “the work of art, namely the poem”?¹⁶⁵ The question lingers. Because poetry is art but it is also *language* (though as you recall, Levinas refused calling it so, for instance in *Totalité et Infini*),¹⁶⁶ or if you will, an art that uses discourse — it is a Said (not a Saying) that “inseparable from the verb, overflows with prophetic meanings,”¹⁶⁷ while art is *said*, but it is not *properly said*, what is *properly said* in art is the exegesis it calls for which is nonetheless internal to it (but well go into that later). In all the texts we have analyzed so far, there would appear to be no essential difference between art and poetry, and again, in chapter II of *Autrement qu’être*, poetry stands alongside music and painting as temporalizing resonance, as modalities of essence, that renew themselves and appeal to exegesis much as, later on, Levinas speaks of the “poetic said and the interpretation it calls

163. My emphasis. AE, 79.

164. SMB, 12.

165. Armengaud, “Faire ou ne pas faire,” par. 38.

166. See *supra* 203-204.

167. SMB, 79

ad infinitely,”¹⁶⁸ so poetry, much as all other arts is not exempt from interpretation. On the other hand, and while Levinas is (understandably) hesitant to “place” poetry at the origin of language, he does suggest it now and again,¹⁶⁹ and yet the question still lingers. But does it matter? Well, according to Levinas, not so much.

Perhaps we were wrong in naming art and poetry that exceptional event – that sovereign forgetfulness – that liberates language from its servitude with respect to the structures in which the *said* maintains itself. Perhaps Hegel was right as far as art is concerned. What counts – whether we call it poetry or what you will – is that a meaning can proffered beyond the closed discourse of Hegel; that a meaning that forgets the presuppositions of that discourse becomes *fable*. [Et peut-être avons-nous tort d’appeler art et poésie cet événement exceptionnel – cet oubli souverain – qui libère le langage de sa servitude à l’égard des structures où le *dit* se maintient. Peut-être Hegel avait raison pour ce qui concerne l’art. Ce qui compte – qu’on l’appelle poésie ou comme on le voudra – c’est qu’un sens puisse se proférer au-delà du discours achevé de Hegel, qu’un sens qui oublie les présupposés devienne *fable*.]¹⁷⁰

That is indeed what matters, this exceptional event that art and poetry, or art, notably poetry, or art, that is to say, poetry, *are* — not its recount, but this event itself, this rupture which is not, however, “a purely aesthetic event.”¹⁷¹ Again, the question lingers. But, if art is, as we said earlier, born from proximity (even if he writes, “possibility of poetry, of art” where a similar ambiguity remains, but let us leave it at that) and if exegesis is inherent to the work, then art would not be a purely aesthetic event, would it? Then art would *perhaps* be... beyond aesthetics? Art beyond aesthetics! Is that what Levinas is trying to say? It may very well be; but what matters, as I was saying, is this exceptional event “that liberates language from its servitude with respect to the structures in which the *said* maintains itself.” I shall call it art.

An event that, returning to *Autrement qu’être*, brings to light precisely that tension between thematization, noun, nominalized apophansis (to which no verb is refractory) and non-nominalized apophansis where the Said “remains proposition ... ‘signifyingness bestowed’ to the Other;” this resonance “always ready to congeal into nouns” but which,

168. AE, 263.

169. Notably in “Max Picard et le visage,” “La poésie et l’impossible,” and “Paul Celan: De l’être à l’autre.”

170. SMB, 33.

171 SMB, 79.

through its absolute exoticism and essential renewal, art allows the nominalized terms to begin to function again as modalities of essence, thus disturbing or bewildering the nominalized apophansis, incapable of encompassing its *epos*. Art, one might say, engenders a certain *erosion* of being which “translates” to a discontinuity, an *interval*, in the flowing and loop of time, in its synchronized order, and thus a defection of the egologic identity, a *fissure* “in the solidity of the dissimulating correlations” — of the Saying tended toward the Said — which also an *opening*, where alone an echo of an anterior and unfathomable sense resounds, where “an echo of the Saying makes itself heard in the said – promise of the possibility of going back from the said to the Saying.”¹⁷² Irreducible exoticism that, as Levinas will write in his final essay on Blanchot, “appeals to the saying *properly said*, to the saying that thematizes, even though it must unsay itself so as not to alter the secret it exposes.”¹⁷³

Levinas long “adjourned” analysis of the (philosophical) criticism of art is here, at last, resumed, and with two *essential*, but interrelated differences, the first of which being precisely that he no longer speaks of “philosophical criticism” or “philosophical exegesis” (the ambiguity with which we were left at the end of “La réalité et son ombre”) nor just “criticism” (as was the case in “La transcendance des mots”) but precisely *exegesis*, a term which is, as we know, far from indifferent under Levinas’s pen, not for the Levinas of full maturity for whom it is, on the contrary, as Rolland reminds us, “a decisive category.”¹⁷⁴ Now, the fact that the concept of “exegesis” belongs to another domain of discourse, not philosophy, but the Talmudic text, the rabbinic commentary on the verses of scripture, should not deter us from understanding it here in its most profound sense; neither a method, a methodology nor a theory, exegesis is, one might say, a *gesture*, not of explanation, but of questioning, that is both indispensable — insofar as it brings to light this surplus of meaning, this truth, if you will, from the very materiality of what it comments upon and which is of itself already virtually significant, where a truth is already at work, a sense other than that properly enounced; hence the idea that it “contains more than it contains,” and whose aim is not to arrive at a definite or definitive truth, by which one could be blinded, as philosophers

172. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 18.

173. SMB (“Exercices sur ‘La Folie du Jour’”, 1975), 56.

174. Rolland, *Parcours*, 146.

often are,¹⁷⁵ but to renew it, which is why this gesture is also inexhaustible, *infinite* — for each interpretation brings something new to the work: it renews the work, the work is renewed in each new encounter with it, and this is the eternal youth of the work, its fecundity, its freshness, “as if we saw it for the first time,” and “in that sense, the work is ‘without return.’”¹⁷⁶

Thus, the second difference from the 1948 essay: exegesis is not a discourse extrinsic to the work of art, a foreign speech that comes from the outside, that *intervenes* to “rescue” the work of art from its inborn inhumanity but is instead intrinsic in it, it is implicit in the very work of the work of art, and whose failure to recognize “in the predicative propositions that every work of art – plastic, sonorous, poetic – awakens and makes resound ... is to show oneself to be as profoundly deaf as in the deafness of hearing only nouns in language.”¹⁷⁷ Already the “preface, manifesto, title or aesthetic canon” which appear in the “emergence and presentation of the work of art,” as its own “non-eliminable meta-language,”¹⁷⁸ are exegesis — Said properly said, verbal said, as is every discourse that accompanies the work, the *prose* to which the work, essentially exotic, essence in dissemination, appeals as “poetry” or “song.” And it is this appeal

bringing the modality of the essence said in the work back to the depth of the *essence properly said* – such as it is heard in the predicative statement – that is justified by the notion of world: essence *properly said* – verb – logos that resounds in the *prose* of predicative propositions. Exegesis is not tacked onto the resonance of essence in the work of art – the resonance of essence vibrates within the *said* of the exegesis. [C’est cet appel ramenant la modalité de l’essence dite dans l’œuvre au fond de l’essence *proprement dite* – telle qu’elle s’entend dans l’énoncé prédicatif – que justifie la notion de monde: essence *proprement dite* – verbe – logos qui résonne dans la *prose* de la proposition prédicative.

175. as Levinas writes In the third of his *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* “When I give answers instead of deepening the questions, I impoverish my text, but after all one must remember that here, in Europe, we like results. [Quand je donne des réponses au lieu d’approfondir les problèmes, j’appauvris mon texte mais enfin, il faut tout de même se souvenir qu’ici, en Europe, nous aimons les résultats.]” Levinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris: Editions de la Minuit, 2010), 134.

176. Levinas, Ponzio, “Œuvre et altérité,” 148.

177. “Méconnaître le Dit *proprement dit* (quelle qu’en soit la relativité), dans les propositions prédicatives que toute œuvre d’art – plastique, sonore, poétique – réveille et fait résonner en guise d’*exégèse*, c’est faire preuve d’une surdité aussi profonde que celle qui consiste à n’entendre dans le langage que des noms.” AE, 71.

178. “C’est cet appel à l’*exégèse* que souligne aussi la fonction *essentielle* qui revient au dit verbal, en guise de non éliminable méta-langue, dans le surgissement et la présentation de l’œuvre d’art – comme préface, manifeste, titre ou canon esthétique.” AE, 71.

L'exégèse ne se plaque pas sur la résonance de l'essence dans l'œuvre d'art – la résonance de l'essence vibre à l'intérieur du *dit* de l'exégèse.]¹⁷⁹

Said properly said, said that thematizes, exegesis is thus required to interpret the implications of the work, it is required “for the intelligibility of its own debris in dissemination,” and thus to communicate it to others: “enouncing and thematizing the Said but signifying it to the other – the neighbor – of a signification to be distinguished from that of the words in the Said.”¹⁸⁰ But even so, doesn't this Said that thematizes the work close itself off in its very Said? Does not exegesis end up totalizing the work? It can, but that is why it needs to be contested, in its very saying, by way of an unremitting *interruption*. The fact that exegesis is intrinsic to the work,¹⁸¹ and that it is, furthermore, enounced to the other whose exteriority transcends this said, attest to the impossibility of this totalization, which is precisely what we are told on section V.5 “Scepticisme et raison”:

And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are enounced, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is outside the Said, outside all it embraces. This reference to the interlocutor permanently breaks through the text that the discourse claims to weave in thematizing and enveloping all things. In totalizing being, discourse qua Discourse thus belies the very pretention of totalization. This reversion is like that which the refutation of skepticism brings out. [Mais l'ultime discours ou s'énoncent tous les discours, je l'interromps encore en le disant à celui qui l'écoute et qui se situe hors le Dit que dit le discours, hors de tout ce qu'il embrasse. Cette référence à l'interlocuteur perce d'une façon permanente le texte que le discours prétend tisser en thématissant et en enveloppant toutes choses. En totalisant l'être, le discours comme Discours apporte ainsi un démenti à la prétention même de la totalisation. Retournement qui ressemble à celui que met en évidence la réfutation du scepticisme.]¹⁸²

This reference, this “appeal,” if you will, to skepticism is crucial for the very enterprise of *Autrement qu'être* — that of thinking and enouncing, precisely this “barbarous turn of phrase” [*tournure barbare*]¹⁸³ that gives it title, and which cannot be simply stated, as if the

179. AE, 71-72.

180. “... énonçant et thématissant le Dit, mais le signifiant à l'autre – au prochain – d'une signification à distinguer de celle que portent les mots dans le Dit.” AE, 78.

181. “The reflection of discourse on itself does not enclose it within itself. [La réflexion du discours sur lui-même ne l'enferme pas en lui-même.] AE, 264.

182. AE, 264.

183. AE, 273.

Saying were absolutely synchronous with the Said that thematizes it, as if the significance of the Saying were completely exhausted in its translation to a Said, and were therefore without betrayal. No Said, whatsoever, equals the Saying whose translation can only be accomplished at the price of a betrayal, one that philosophy is called upon to reduce. But this reduction would nonetheless “let *be* the destructuring it will have operated,” and thus “once again let the otherwise than being be as an *éon*,”¹⁸⁴ if it were operated simply by parentheses, and if this saying in which the otherwise than being is stated were not immediately and incessantly *unsaid*. A saying and an unsaying itself that cannot be at the same time, insofar as such simultaneity “would be already to reduce being’s other to being and not being;”¹⁸⁵ thus Levinas claiming that “we must stay with the extreme situation of a diachronic thought,”¹⁸⁶ which alone will warrant philosophy the audacity to destroy “the conjunction into which its Saying and its Said constantly enter.”¹⁸⁷ Well, the “invincible force” of skepticism “at the dawn of philosophy,” in its affirmation of “the impossibility of a statement while venturing to *realize* this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility,”¹⁸⁸ resides precisely in its recognition of the gulf that divides the Said from the Saying, whose simultaneity it precisely refuses, by rejecting “to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in the saying and the *negation* that this affirmation states in the Said,” as though, “sensitive to the *difference* between my exposition – without reserve – to the other, which is Saying, and the exposition or statement of the Said,” it were insensitive to the contradiction with which reflection refutes it.¹⁸⁹ And this difference to which skepticism

184. “Exposer un *autrement qu’être* – cela donnera encore un Dit ontologique ... La réduction de ce *Dit* se déroulant en propositions énoncées ... laissera *être* la déstructure qu’elle aura opérée. La réduction laissera donc à nouveau être comme un *éon*, l’*autrement qu’être*.” AE, 76.

185. “Ce *dire* et ce *se dédire* peuvent-ils se rassembler, peuvent-ils être en même temps? En fait, exiger cette simultanéité, c’est déjà ramener à l’*être* et au *ne pas être*, l’*autre* de l’être.” AE, 20.

186. “Nous devons en rester à la situation extrême, d’une pensée diachronique.” AE, 20.

187. “...rend possible l’audace de la philosophie détruisant la conjonction où entrent sans cesse, son *Dire* et son Dit.” AE, 76.

188. “Penser l’*autrement qu’être* exige, peut-être, autant d’audace qu’en affiche le scepticisme qui ne doute pas d’affirmer l’impossibilité de l’énoncé tout en osant *réaliser* cette impossibilité par l’énoncé même de cette impossibilité.” AE, 20.

189. “Le scepticisme ... est un refus de synchroniser l’affirmation implicite contenue dans le dire et la *négarion* que cette affirmation énonce dans le Dit. Contradiction visible à la réflexion qui la réfute, mais à laquelle le scepticisme est insensible ... comme si au scepticisme était sensible la *différence* entre *mon exposition* – sans réserve – à l’*autre*, qu’est le Dire et l’exposition ou l’énoncé du Dit.” AE, 260. The double

is sensitive, between the Saying and the Said, between which it opens an interval, is where the essential of language lies, its inspired or prophetic essence, its para-doxical origin on the hither side of time, its “latent diachrony” dissimulated by the coherent speech, by which language

would exceed the limits of what is thought by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable – implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of the system, or from the logical definition of the concept. A virtue that is laid bare in the poetic *said* and the interpretation it appeals to ad infinitum. A virtue that shows itself in the prophetic said, scorning its conditions in a sort of levitation. It is by the approach, by the-one-for-the-other of Saying, related by the Said, that the Said remains an insurmountable equivocation, sense refusing simultaneity, not entering into being, not composing a whole... Language is already skepticism. [Le langage excéderait les limites du pensée en suggérant, en laissant sous-entendre, sans jamais faire entendre – implication d’un sens distinct de celui qui vient au signe de la simultanéité du système ou de la définition logique du concept. Vertu qui se met à nu dans le *dit* poétique et l’interprétation qu’il appelle à l’infini. Vertu qui se montre dans le dit prophétique méprisant ses conditions dans une espèce de lévitation. C’est par l’approche, par l’un-pour-l’autre du Dire, relatés par le Dit, que le Dit reste équivoque insurmontable, sens se refusant à la simultanéité, n’entrant pas dans l’être, ne composant un tout... Le langage et déjà scepticisme.]¹⁹⁰

Much as Levinas had argued in “La servante et son maître,” that the word poetry “overflows with prophetic meanings,” here too the analogy between the poetic said and the prophetic said is clearly stated: “shown” in the prophetic said, this shifting of meaning, between the Saying and Said, this impossible simultaneity of sense that is also inseparable from proximity is, instead, “laid bare” in the poetic said and the infinite interpretation it calls forth, by which the latter is by itself inspired, meaning that “what it is capable of saying goes beyond what it wants to say; that it contains more than it contains,”¹⁹¹ that in it glows a sense other, prior, without context, a sense that, antecedent, overflows the speech that captures it and which, non-synchronizable, cannot be fitted into an order — precisely that irreducible *disturbance* of the Saying of proximity, saying before the said which, as noted earlier, is not added on to the poetic said but disturbs it instead, and thus imprints its trace in this said

use of the term “exposition” [*exposition*] here is certainly telling of the unsurpassable equivocation of language, of the Said.

190. AE, 263.

191. “... son pouvoir-dire dépasse son vouloir-dire; qu’il contient plus qu’il contient.” Levinas, *L’au-delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques* (Paris: Les Éditions de la Minuit, 1982), 135.

which bears it... but which it forthwith contests and effaces. Indeed, the poem can forgo its inspired nature, lose the diachrony at its source, and stand as the “bad height” of the exalted sentiments of *belles-lettres*, pure rhetoric, ensorcelling rhythm, and scorning at the proximity that bore it, answering instead to the demon of language — becoming myth in the slumber of being. The fact that the poetic said lays bare that saying before the said by which language would exceed the limits of thought, does not therefore preclude, I believe, the possible forgottenness of this saying at its source, or deter the poet from restoring his proud sovereignty as creator, presuming his poem to be self-sufficient and thus dispense with its own meta-language, dispense with interpretation; nor does the fact that poetry is an art of discourse, where exegesis does not, properly speaking, have a beginning, because it takes or can take place in its own words — “writing on writing [*écriture sur l’écriture*]¹⁹² (but then does it not risk speaking only to itself?) — exempt it from the demand of interpretation, otherwise why would Levinas write “the poetic said *and* the interpretation it appeals to ad infinitum”? Why not just poetic said?

Interpretation is needed, which in no way diminishes its virtue, its exceptional character, the step further it takes — that loss of the self, that step outside of man, toward the foreigner, the neighbor,¹⁹³ by which it is *perhaps* “the ultimate signification of the human.”¹⁹⁴ Interpretation is needed, so that the poetic said remains *what it already is of itself*, that is, unsurpassable equivocation, exceptional said, containing more than it contains; so that it interrupts itself continuously, and continuously remains discontinuous and contradictory, so that it stands as if at the confines of itself, in a “movement without return,” in its “finality without end,”¹⁹⁵ which is precisely the movement “toward the other” — the very movement that forestalls its totalization in a Said — which “is tradition. But in so doing renews itself;”¹⁹⁶ the very movement of the infinite interpretation to which it appeals, within which alone it shows itself, and in whose saying distinct from the said,

192. AE, 71.

193 “Au-delà di simplement étrange de l’art et de l’ouverture sur l’être de l’étant – le poème fait um pas de plus; L’étrange, c’est l’étranger ou le prochain.” PC, 29.

194. PR, 19.

195. PC, 30.

196. “Mais certes, ce récit est lui-même sans fin et sans continuité, c’est-à-dire, va de l’un à l’autre – est tradition. Mais, par là, il se renouvelle.” AE, 263.

new meanings arise in its meaning, of which exegesis is the unfolding, or History before all historiography. Thus, signifies the ladder-proof equivocation that language weaves. Is it then not an aberration or a distortion of being which is thematized in it, a twisting of identity? [Des sens nouveaux se lèvent dans son sens dont l'exégèse est le déploiement ou l'Histoire avant toute historiographie. Ainsi, signifie l'équivoque indémaillable que tisse langage. N'est-il pas, dès lors, aberration ou distorsion de l'être qui s'y thématise, entorse à l'identité?]¹⁹⁷

While it may very well be that a painting, a musical composition, a sculpture, or a film do not “overflow with prophetic meanings,” like the poem does, for their images, their symbols, their particular languages, must be translated to language properly speaking, to words, and thus, from the outset, betray themselves; but can we not see in the very *ambiguity of art*, in its being between two times, in the erosion it imposes on being, in its interruption of the flowing of temporalization through which entities are consecrated, named, and thus in its keeping the verbs in this limbo of the deaf resonance of essence — whose very insignificance is “the overflowing of sense by non-sense,” a surplus of non-sense which is “all the weight that alterity weights supported by a subjectivity that does not found it” which, as we saw, *signifies* in the one-for-the-other of Saying, in proximity — awakening them from the slumber of rest in identity — a similar distortion of being, a twisting of identity? Is not being what it is, *and* its image? Is not reality what it is *and* its shadow? And is not language an amphibology, both name and verb? And is not in this amphibology in which “be-ing dissimulates being” where the otherwise than being (whose truth is itself produced between two times, without entering in either of them) ambiguously shines, where the trace of infinity shows itself in a blinking light?

Neither art, nor poetry, nor literature are at the height of the otherwise than being. Nothing is. But art insinuates itself into the interstices of this blinking, giving itself *ambiguously*, between the lines, between times, through equivocations, provocations, innuendos, never definite, contradicting itself, as if it were always referring to something beyond or before itself; does not perhaps a latent or secret diachrony, inhabit it? More susceptible, to be sure, to being distorted in the “marvelous and deceptive schematism” of the image, of the marble, than in the word, more susceptible to becoming idol and myth, in its “arrest of statue and plasticity,” and to there remain, impassive, self-sufficient, giving itself over to be seen but not heard, existing as if only for itself, indifferent to the other. Indiscreet *exposition* —

197. AE, 263.

wanting to say it all, even to its own failure — *ambiguous* exposition — marvelous and deceptive; ambiguous body that reaches out and closes itself off, that shows and profanes, that induces speech and silences every word, that violates and cries.

Proud of its extravagance, art escapes all angelism while contesting the language of reason, the imperialism of logos to whose refutations it is insensible, but whose understanding it takes hold of, and adjourns reflective thought. Thus, art allows itself to be interpreted, to be interrupted again and again, to be unsaid and resaid, in new forms, always new, always different, never repeating itself, never enough; it lives of this renewal: transforming and interrupting itself, and it is this incessant adjourning that makes its youth, “as if it could always come back for the first time,” to be seen for the first time by an Other, which is where, perhaps, lies “its human significance, its appeal to the other” — its *beauty*.

I am reminded of a visit I once made, as part of a religious ceremony, at the beginning of the war, to the church of Saint Augustine in Paris... There, in a little corner of the church, I found myself placed beside a picture representing Hannah bringing Samuel to the Temple. I can still recall the feeling of momentarily returning to something human, to the very possibility of speaking and being heard which seized me at that moment. [Il me souvient d'une visite que, lors d'une cérémonie religieuse, j'ai eu l'occasion de faire au début de la guerre, à l'église Saint-Augustin à Paris ... Là, dans un petit coin de l'église, je me trouvais placé près d'un tableau représentant Anne amenant Samuel au Temple. Il me souvient encore cette impression de retourner momentanément à l'humain, à la possibilité même de parler et d'être entendu, qui m'a saisi alors.]¹⁹⁸

The authentic relation, concreteness of soul, the very personification of the relation. That is what I saw in the church. What proximity! That proximity remained within me. [Cette femme disait la véritable prière du cœur: le déversement d'une âme. Relation authentique, concrétise de l'âme, personnification même de la relation. Voici ce que j'ai vu à l'église. Quelle proximité! Cette proximité resta en moi.]¹⁹⁹

It all depends on the particular work, a particular time, a particular emotion. The work of art is said, it belongs to ontology, to the comprehension of being, but it is born from proximity, and maybe retains a trace of that source, of that saying before the said which it is, of the saying that bore it but which it contests and effaces. But it is in reference to this source in proximity that its exoticism ought *perhaps* to be understood and returned to, so that a beauty

198. Levinas, “Une religion d’adultes,” in DL, 29. Talk given in 1957 at the Abbey of Tioumliline in Morocco.

199. Levinas, “Judaïsme ‘et’ Christianisme,” in *À l’Heure des Nations* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988), 163. First published in *Zeitgewinn. Messianisches Denken nach Franz Rosenzweig*, edited by Gotthard Fuchs and Hans Hermann Henrix (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1987).

other, more radical, that searches the thing in its nudity rather covering it with a form, can offer itself to an “aesthetic tenderness that can be called chaste eroticism... tenderness, compassion, and perhaps even mercy, reminiscent of the Bible.”²⁰⁰

Art is neither first nor ultimate for Levinas, but not only does it not need redemption, as it is, *perhaps*, necessary for the very possibility of articulating the otherwise than being.

200. JA, 510.

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Musical compositions

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