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Languages of the Universal: Levinas' (*scandalous*) doctrine of Literature

> Ma condition – ou mon in-condition – est mon rapport aux livres. C'est l'a-Dieu même.[1]
> Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset* (9)

Literature occupies a privileged role in Levinas' life and work. Classic authors such as Racine, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Cervantes, but also modern writers such as Blanchot and Celan appear time and time again throughout his oeuvre. Alongside, of course, with references to the Bible. In the opening pages of *Ethics and Infinity* Levinas tells us how much literature counted for him, and how it shaped his relation to the world: ". . . the Russian classics – Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and also the great writers of Western Europe, notably Shakespeare, much admired in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* [. . .] is it a good preparation to Plato and Kant registered in the degree program in philosophy? It takes time to see the transitions" (Levinas 1985, 22). The transition from Shakespeare to Plato is not immediately perceptible. Nevertheless, for Levinas, literature paved the way to philosophy. "Let no one ignorant of Literature enter," would be the inscription engraved on the door of Levinas' academy, had he one.

The centrality of literature in Levinas' oeuvre is an undeniable fact.[2] Some commentators have understood it merely in terms of illustration: his recourse to literature would be a means to illustrate philosophical ideas.[3] This study will challenge this view. It will try to demonstrate how literature is not only a means for Levinas, but that one can find, in his corpus, a theory of literature, or at least

1 "My condition – or my un-condition – is my relation to books. It is the very movement-towards-God [*l'a-Dieu*]" (Levinas 2007b, xv).

2 Despite Jill Robbins's claim that "Levinas speaks very rarely about the literary, and when he does it is almost always in dismissive terms" (see Robbins 1999, 39 (see also xxi)). In order to sustain her claim, Robbins draws heavily on Levinas's article "Reality and Its Shadow." Nevertheless, if indeed Levinas's 1948 article is critical about art in general, the object of his critique is not literature, but, precisely, art. And literature in Levinas cannot simply be understood, as Robbins claims, as a "genre of art" (Robbins 1999, xxi). In confusing between art in general (which is, indeed, strongly criticized by Levinas) and literature, she misses the fundamental place of literature in Levinas's philosophy. In this paper, I will try to elucidate this place. For a nuanced analysis of art in Levinas, see Gerald L. Bruns, "The Concept of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas' Writings" (2002).

3 See for instance, Robbins, *Altered Reading* (2009, xx).

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an implicit doctrine of literature. This doctrine – that is to be found mainly in his Jewish texts – is sustained by an explicit phenomenology of the book.[4] Revealing this phenomenology of the book, therefore, amounts to stressing the *philosophical* centrality of literature in Levinas's thinking.

Before broaching the subject I wish to highlight again the textual fact just mentioned, a fact that will orient this study: Levinas's phenomenology of the book – as well as its related doctrine of literature – is to be found mainly and almost exclusively in his Jewish texts. Attentive to this textual symptom, the following lines will be guided by the following hypothesis: In order to be understood fully, Levinas's doctrine of literature should be interpreted in light of one of the central theme of his Jewish philosophy, namely, the theme of chosenness and universality. Levinas's theory of literature is part of his philosophical struggle with the question of the relation between universality and singularity. Moreover, in his theory of literature Levinas is perhaps formulating, under cover, his most extreme version of the relation between singularity (Israel) and universality (the nations). Its *scandalous* version. This is what I will try to demonstrate in this chapter.

1 Levinas' Phenomenology of Writing: Literature and Inspiration

In the introduction to *Beyond the Verse,* in a very original – and unique – passage, Levinas formulates a phenomenology of *the act of writing*.

> A contraction of the Infinite in Scripture [. . .] Scripture would begin with the line which is outlined in some way, and thickens or emerges as a verse in the flowing of language – no doubt of every language – in order to become text, as proverb, or fable, or poem, or legend, before the stylet or quill imprints it as letters on tablets, parchment or paper. A literature before the letter! (Levinas 2007b, xiv)

A line that emerges as a verse, as a contraction of the infinite into a text. This is what every act of writing does: "A contraction of the Infinite in Scripture." The term "contraction," and even more so "contraction of the Infinite," sends us

4 The question of the relation to literature could be addressed to most contemporary French thinkers – Sartre, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, or Derrida, to name just a few, each of whom, in his own way, reserves a particular place for literature in his *oeuvre*. It would be enlightening to understand when and why this reference to literature started to play such a central role in Philosophy.

immediately to the Kabbalistic horizon – the deepest of Jewish wisdoms, its interior wisdom (*hohmat ha'pnim*) – and more specifically to the Lurianic concept of צמצום [*tsimtsum*]. God, or the Infinite, contracted Himself, in order for the world to be created, in order to *make space* for the world. The Same contracts in order for otherness to be.[5] The infinite does not incarnate itself here, but retreats, contracts. Like a maternal body, contracting itself in order to make place for alterity: an other-in-the-same, to speak the language of *Otherwise than Being*.[6]

But in the text from *Beyond the Verse* the stakes are different: The *topos* of divine contraction is Scripture: "A contraction of the infinite in Scripture" (Levinas 2007b, xiv). God contracting himself means: God in-scribes His self on a piece of parchment.

Hence, the act of writing – the act of drawing a line, of tracing a line (*kav*) – implies the whole drama of creation. Or in Levinas's words: the act of writing, when it is truly an act of writing (which is very rare, and can by no means be identified with the prosaic gesture of inscribing words on a piece of paper or typing them on a computer) is, *by definition*, inspired: "[. . .] the marvel of inspiration where man listens, amazed, to what he utters" (Levinas 2007b, xiv). Again we find here the structure of otherness within the same. To write means to be animated by alterity. As if in writing I make the experience of not being the author of my own speech, of my own words. It is my mouth that utters those words, it is my pen that traces those lines that becomes letters, words and phrases. Nevertheless, I experience language as coming to me *from the other*. I speak, and while speaking, or writing, I surprise myself, I hear myself speaking, I read what I write as if it was dictated by another, written by another. It is not completely me who speaks, not completely me who writes. This is the original act of writing. Inspired writing

5 This idea is alluded to once in Levinas's whole corpus, in one of the most enigmatic passages of *Totality and Infinity*. In order to articulate the metaphysical relation between the same and the other, Levinas speaks of "creative contraction": "Infinity produces itself by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being" (Levinas 1979, 104 (translation slightly modified)). In order for a separated being to exist (the Same), the Infinite (or the Other) has to contract. What is described here is nothing short of the genesis of the metaphysical relation itself: at the beginning, there is a "creative contraction." But Levinas will never repeat this idea, and the notion of creative contraction never reappears in his philosophical texts. As if he here crossed a line. On the concept of creative contraction in Levinas, see Michael Fagenblat, "Transcendental *Ṭsimṣum:* Levinas's Mythology of Meaning" (2020).

6 In this very text (*Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*), the *psyche* is described as structured as a maternal body: "Here the psyche is the maternal body" (Levinas 1998, 67). The maternal body: a body that contracts itself in order to make space for another being. A creative contraction, *in existence*.

occurs whenever the words written are experienced as not being my own. Paradoxically, one becomes an author only when one experiences oneself as not being the author of one's own words.

Inspiration describes the actual *Erlebnis* of writing as an event where the subject is retiring, where the subject, by contracting himself, makes space for transcendence. And thus – inspiration being the condition of possibility of literature – makes space for literature itself.

In his address following the reception of the Jerusalem Prize in 1985 at the Hebrew University, Milan Kundera proposed:

> Now, not only is the novelist nobody's spokesman, but I would go so far as to say he is not even the spokesman for his own ideas. When Tolstoy sketched the first draft of *Anna Karenina*, Anna was a most unsympathetic woman, and her tragic end was entirely deserved and justified. The final version of the novel is very different, but I do not believe that Tolstoy had revised his moral ideas in the meantime; I would say, rather, that in the course of writing, he was listening to another voice than that of his personal moral conviction. He was listening to what I would like to call the wisdom of the novel. Every true novelist listens for that suprapersonal wisdom, which explains why great novels are always a little more intelligent than their authors. Novelists who are more intelligent than their books should go into another line of work. (Kundera 2000, 158)

What Kundera calls "the wisdom of the novel," *la sagesse du roman*, is exactly what Levinas calls inspiration: to be traversed by alterity, to be transpierced by otherness. I am writing, but already I am listening, and reading what I myself am writing. Literature, the true event of the literary, in this sense, always occurs "before the letter" (Levinas 2007b, xiv).

We are affected by language before we express ourselves. The self is transcended by literature: language precedes us. This is the truth of Heidegger's radical formulation: "Die Sprache spricht" (Heidegger 1985, 11 *et al.*). And between Heidegger and Levinas, the crucial question is not whether inspiration is at the heart of writing and literature (or poetry), but rather: what/who inspires? Being or the Other? Who is the subject of the fundamental experience of language, the poet or the prophet? Or rather: in its core, is subjectivity poetic or prophetic? Levinas's answer is clear: subjectivity, in its essence, is prophetic, i.e., inspired by the Other. The Other is the source of inspiration, of language. From this we can draw our first conclusion, our first thesis: language, *every language* (and not only the Greek of the pre-Socratics, or the German of Trakl and Hölderlin) is prophetic. Levinas formulates it explicitly: "That is the resonance of every language 'in the name of God,' the inspiration or prophecy of all language" (Levinas 1998, 152).

Inspiration is universal. This truth is taught not by pre-Socratic fragments, or by German poets, but by the Hebrew prophet: "'God has spoken, who can but

prophecy?' (Amos 3:8) Prophetic receptivity already lies in the human soul" (Levinas 2007b, 141).[7]

Inspiration and prophecy are universal categories. Therefore, as such, they function as fundamental categories in Levinas's *philosophy*: in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, for instance, he develops, in a purely philosophical language, the thesis of subjectivity as inspiration, of the soul (âme, *anima*) as *animated*, affected by otherness. In a paragraph called "inspiration," Levinas writes:

> There is a claim laid on the same by the other in the core of myself, the extreme tension of the command exercised by the other in me over me [. . .] Through this alteration the soul animates the object; it is the very *pneuma* of the psyche. The psyche signifies the claiming of the same by the other, or inspiration, beyond the logic of the same and the other, of their insurmountable adversity. It is an undoing of the substantial nucleus of the ego that is formed in the same. (Levinas 1998, 141)[8]

This is my starting point: inspiration and prophecy are universal categories that appear both in Levinas's philosophy of subjectivity and, as part of his doctrine of literature, in his phenomenology of the act of writing.

2 From The Book to Books: Levinas' Doctrine of Literature

After having stressed the universality of inspiration and prophecy, after having pointed out the sameness of these categories, let us look deeper into the text and try to detect the difference, the otherness.

The line, writes Levinas, "emerges as a verse in the flowing of language – no doubt of every language – in order to become text, as proverb, or fable, or poem, or legend, before the stylet or quill imprints it as letters on tablets, parchment or paper" (Levinas 2007b, xiv). From the verse to the poem and the legend; from the tablets to paper. This is not a random inventory. It is a meticulously calculated sequence which establishes a gradation: from the more to the less, from the inspired text *par excellence*, to what echoes it, to what stands in its light or in its shadow. The verse written on tablets: this is the event of inspiration in its full intensity. Scriptures, Holy Scriptures (*Ecritures saintes*), are the exemplary model of an inspired text. Unique in its kind, this text is inspired by the infinite and has

7 Levinas refers to this verse time and time again in his later texts.

8 Further, Levinas develops the notion of prophecy, in the paragraph called "Witness and Prophecy" ((Levinas 1998, 149–152).

an infinite potential to inspire.[9] In this typology of inspired texts, *literature comes second*, even if immediately after Scriptures. As if in its trace:

> A religious essence of language, a place where prophecy will conjure up the Holy Scriptures, but which all literature awaits or commemorates, whether celebrating or profaning it. (Levinas 2007b, xiv)

There is a continuity between Scriptures and literature. Both inspired, each in its own way, each in its own degree, inspire. In other words: those texts invite interpretation, those texts are an invitation to propose readings (or midrash). This is what singularizes an inspired text: its ability to inspire, its propensity to generate speech, to oblige the subject to answer. Where there is a possibility of exegesis, something of the inspired quality of Scriptures is present. And literature, exactly like scriptures, has this quality.

> Hence, in the very anthropology of the human [. . .] the eminent role played by so-called national literatures, Shakespeare, Molière, Cervantes, Goethe and Pushkin. Signifying beyond their plain meaning, they invite the exegesis that is spiritual life. (Levinas 2007b, xiv)

From the Book of books to (simply) books, from the Hebrew Bible to literature, the continuity of inspiration is attested by exegesis. Exegesis is a modality of meaningfulness: it is through reading and interpreting that meaning is made manifest. Pushing this logic to its last consequences, Levinas eventually writes: "The fact that sense comes through the book testifies to its biblical essence" (Levinas 2007b, 110). A book – βιβλίον – is essentially biblical. This is Levinas's radical thesis. Hence the status he accords to books as such in his thinking:

> One may wonder whether the book, as a book, before becoming a document, is not the modality by which what is said lays itself open to exegesis, calls for it; and where meaning, immobilized in the characters, already tears the texture in which it is held. (Levinas 2007b, 110)

The book is an extraordinary entity. In the world of objects, it transcends objectivity from within. A book can of course be apprehended as an object among objects (it has dimensions, color, content, weight, even smell; like the human body, it is a *res extensa*). One can use a book as a mere object (for decoration, or for any other possible usage). Nevertheless, taken for what it is, in its original givenness, the book defies the rules of objectivity. It is not seen, or apprehended, as a tool among tools, and this sense it defies Heidegger's

9 Levinas develops this theme of the infinite potential of Scriptures to inspire in "On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures" (Levinas 2007b, 101–114).

categories of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*. It is not, says Levinas, "one thing amongst others, demonstrating in handbooks – like a hammer – its affinity with the hand" (Levinas 2007b, xiv). And in *Ethics and Infinity* this idea is pushed even further: "I think that in the great fear of bookishness, one underestimates the 'ontological' reference of the human to the book that one takes for a source of information, or for a 'tool' of learning, a *textbook*, even though it is a *modality* of our being" (Levinas 1985, 21–22). The book is a modality of our being, says Levinas: our relation to books is not identical to our relation to things in the world. We respect books, we handle them with care, but not in order to not damage them (as one would handle furniture with care, or any fragile object), but as an act of respect for what they are. As if the fragility of books is fully interior. As if books are fragile because they can so easily be profaned (like the face, like transcendence itself). The book, therefore, curves ontology, it requires us to think anew human existence: "Aristotle's 'animal endowed with language' has never been thought, in its ontology, in terms of the book" (Levinas 2007b, xiv). What would this ontology thought of in terms of the book look alike? Levinas answers: it is "a modality [of Being] by which what is said lays itself open to exegesis" (Levinas 2007b, 110). And he carries on, describing exactly this modality: the book, he writes, "tears the texture in which it is held" (Levinas 2007b, xiv).

The careful reader will easily recognize the following point: Levinas's descriptions of the book (as an ontological event) are *exactly the same* as his most classical descriptions of the apparition of the face. The face, writes Levinas in "Meaning and Sense," "detaches itself from its own form in the midst of the production of its form" (Levinas 1996, 53); it "breaks through its own plastic essence" (Levinas 1996, 53); its presence consists in "divesting itself of the form which does already manifest it" (Levinas 1996, 53). The similarity is striking. Whereas the face tears itself as it where from the texture of visibility, the text – writing, Literature – tears itself from the very texture which allows it to be inscribed: "In propositions which are not yet – or which are already no longer – verses, and which are often verse or simply literature, another voice rings out among us, a second sonorous voice that drowns out or tears the first one" (Levinas 2007b, 110). A voice within a voice, a saying beyond the said. Exactly as in the phenomenological description of the face: "This is what the formula 'the face speaks' expresses. The manifestation of the face is the first discourse. To speak is before all this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form an opening in the openness" (Levinas 1986, 352).

This analogy between writing and the face – as *events of transcendence* – is explicitly formulated in *Ethics and Infinity*:

> The sentiment that the Bible is the Book of books wherein the first things are said, those that *became* said so that human life has a meaning, and are said in a form which opens to commentators the same dimension of profundity, was not some simple substitution of a literary judgement onto the consciousness of the 'sacred.' It is that extraordinary presence of its characters, that ethical plenitude and its mysterious possibilities of exegesis which originally signified transcendence for me. And no less. (Levinas 1985, 23)

But let us return to the question of the difference between the Book of books and the book. As we have seen, in his text, Levinas suggests a hierarchy: the books are in the trace of the Book of books, literature is in the trace of the verse. Or, as we have just seen, books are in their essence biblical (the Bible functions here as the prototype of writing, as the father of all literature, transcending as it where literature as such). We should try to understand this difference further.

First, I wish to stress a textual fact: the term Levinas uses whenever he characterizes literature is not "general literature," or "world literature," or "classic literature," but "national literature," *literature nationale*. In *Beyond the Verse*, for instance, we read:

> The infinite life of texts living through the life of the men who hear them; a primordial exegesis of the texts which are then called national literature and on to which the hermeneutics of universities and schools is grafted. Above and beyond the immediate meaning of what is said in these texts, the act of saying is inspired. The fact that meaning comes through the book testifies to its biblical essence. The comparison between the inspiration conferred on the Bible and the inspiration towards which the interpretation of literary texts tends is not intended to compromise the dignity of the Scriptures. On the contrary, it asserts the dignity of "national literatures." (Levinas 2007b, 110)

National literatures: this locution is carefully chosen. The plural form is used here: national literatures. There is a plurality of literatures, many literatures. Why is this important for Levinas? Because the plurality of literatures articulates the plurality of languages. The plurality of literatures reflects the (factual) plurality of languages. In the inventory of authors Levinas quotes, this plurality is clearly manifested: Shakespeare, Molière, Cervantes, Goethe and Pushkin. English, French, Spanish, German, Russian. And one could go on. But – and this is the second point – the plurality of languages echoes, although indirectly, esoterically one may say, *the plurality of nations*. In biblical Hebrew, *Am* (nation) and *Lashon* (language) are synonymous (as for instance in Isaiah 66:18). For each language, a nation. Nations are first and foremost languages (and not states, political entities). The plurality of languages corresponds therefore to the plurality of nations. And if language, in its essence, is an implicit reading of the

world, then we can propose the following *definition* of a nation: in its metaphysical essence, a nation is a particular, possible, reading of the world.

This metaphysics of nations is an explicit teaching of the masters of the Talmud. In the beginning of his introduction to *In the Time of the Nations*, Levinas refers to it:

> Seventy nations, or seventy languages. This is a metaphor that in the Talmudic manner of speaking, in the oral Torah, designates all mankind surrounding Israel; mankind taken as a whole, in its entirety, although split up by differences that group men into nations.
>
> (Levinas 1994, 1)

In order to articulate the meaning of mankind, one needs to refer to the plurality of languages. A plurality that is not – if one follows the Talmudic teaching – indefinite. In other words: there is a limit to the possible readings of the world. Not everything is possible, not every reading is a reading, not every language is a language. Against the nihilistic vision of the world (for which plurality rhymes with relativity, with the renouncement of truth – "everything is interpretation," "everything is subjective," etc.), the Talmudic vision of the world proposes the idea of a *limited plurality*, reflected concretely in the fact there are limited possible readings of the world: seventy languages. No more, no less. Accordingly, there are seventy nations, no more, no less.

We understand better Levinas' usage of the term "national literatures." Indeed, if we add up what we have established until now – national literature, i.e., language in its inspired modality, expressing a particular reading of the world which is not subjective, even though it passes through particular subjects (Racine, Shakespeare, Goethe, etc.) – and once the Talmudic subtext of Levinas's text is revealed, it is not difficult to recognize the metonymic relation between what Levinas refers to as "national literatures" and the Jewish definition of the nation (*goy*) as such. But one should add to this account a last point, probably the most difficult one, not theoretically, but existentially: the fundamental difference between the Book of books and national literatures. If nations are in their essence languages, and if languages express themselves first and foremost in what is called national literature, then, for Levinas, the nation whose essence is expressed in the Hebrew Bible, is Israel. In other words: the separation of the separated language (*lashon ha-kodesh,* which is the language of Scripture, the very language revealed *as* Scripture) corresponds to the separation of the biblical people, i.e., the people of Israel. In the language of the talmudic sages, this is expressed by the idea that there are not seventy languages, but seventy-one languages. And accordingly, seventy-one peoples, the one being separated from the seventy.

This is what can be called Levinas' scandalous thesis. Scandalous, at least to the western ear, to the universalistic-philosophical ear, which immediately

interprets separation or hierarchy in a political way; which is incapable of hearing the asymmetry of election as an asymmetry of responsibility and obligations and not as an asymmetry of rights. This scandalous thesis – central to the wisdom of Judaism – appears therefore only in Levinas's Jewish corpus. Moreover it appears there in a hidden form (i.e., in terms of a doctrine of literature). In terms of literature, this asymmetry can be expressed in the following manner: whereas the sacred text (the verse) is *saturated with meaningfulness* – and this is where its sacredness resides – national literatures, each in their *particular* way, only echo this event of meaningfulness, this event of transcendence. The plurality of languages, as Levinas puts it, is in the aftermath of the one language: they "await or commemorate" Scriptures, "whether celebrating or profaning it" (Levinas 2007b, xiv).

Without excluding other languages (or other nations) from the economy of inspiration (all literatures, by definition, are inspired), the sacred language, given though the Book of Books, and the separated nation, are designated as a principle of unity that allows the plurality of nations to exist *as a plurality* open to the infinity of meaning [*sens*]: "mankind taken as a whole, in its entirety, although split up by differences that group men into nations." (Levinas 1994, 1).[10] Seventy-one: this is the cipher of the universal.

Through his reflection on literature, Levinas is able to formulate a *concrete* thinking of the universal. The plurality of languages, which cannot be reduced to unity, which testifies to the singularity of every nation, suffices to cast doubt on the *abstract* idea of universality (universal reason, universal truth, universal man, etc.). Universality – this is the underlying theoretical assumption of all of Levinas's reflection here – can be thought only if the essential difference of humanity, the plurality of humankind, is taken into account (and not in terms of divisions *per genus proximum et diferentiam specificam*). Against the myth of sameness, of a universal nature of man in general, Levinas – inspired by the Talmudic sages – theorizes the reality of difference within sameness. But in order to do this, he has to suggest – even if through hiding it – the scandalous thesis of election. Seventy-*one*.

10 Of course – and this is a fundamental teaching of Levinas – if one interprets this dissymmetry, this separation, as a privilege, or as an advantage, everything is lost. This separation, this chosenness, is always understood by Levinas as a surplus of duties, as a surplus of responsibilities. In this respect, the one nation should be envisaged – if to speak in topological terms – not as above the seventy nations, but as responsible for the seventy nations, and therefore, strictly speaking, as below the seventy (the ethical relation being, by essence, asymmetrical: the other, who commands me, is always higher than me).

3 Literature as Profanation: Otherwise Inspired

Literature, writes Levinas, "awaits or commemorates" Scriptures, "whether celebrating or profaning it." In order to complete this study of Levinas's doctrine of literature, I wish to look closer into that passage. The question to be asked is: what does it mean that literature, a certain modality of literature, commemorates Scriptures *through its profanation*?

In order to answer this question, let us look, through a concrete example, at how literature functions in Levinas's text. The Talmudic reading "And God created woman" permits us to examine closely the relation between scriptures and literature, because Levinas opposes there a passage from Racine's *Phèdre* to some verses from *Psalms*.

Racine's *Phèdre* is quoted several times in Levinas's corpus. The first occurrence is in *Existence and Existents*:

> The pure nothingness revealed by anxiety in Heidegger's analysis does not constitute the *there is*. There is horror of being and not anxiety over nothingness, fear of being and not fear for being; there is being prey to, delivered over to something that is not a "something." When night is dissipated with the first rays of the sun, the horror of the night is no longer definable. The "something" appears to be "nothing." Horror carries out the condemnation to perpetual reality, to existence with "no exists."
>
> > The sky, the whole world's full of my forefathers.
> > Where may I hide?
> > Flee to infernal night.
> > How? There my father holds the urn of doom . . .
>
> Phaedra discovers the impossibility of death, the eternal responsibility of her being, in a full universe in which her existence is bound by an unbreakable commitment, an existence no longer in any way private. (Levinas 1995, 62)

In this passage, Levinas distinguishes himself from Heidegger, and more precisely, he distinguishes his notion of *there is* (*il y a*), from Heidegger's nothingness as revealed through anxiety. The central feature of *il y a* is the impossibility to escape, the experience of being irremissibly trapped in Being. Phèdre's phrases catch this experience in all its intensity: Phèdre does not find a place to hide from the gaze of the oppressive father, of the angry father. She has no place in-the-world. But she cannot flee this world. This is her tragedy. And this is – according to Levinas – the essence of tragedy itself: the impossibility of escape. Tragedy – in Racine, or in Shakespeare – expresses the in-humanity of the

experience of Being as *il y a*: an otherness that crushes the subject, that does not let one be. The tragic experience of being is inhumane.[11]

Let us now turn to Psalm 139:

> You hedge me before and behind; You lay Your hand upon me.
> It is beyond my knowledge; it is a mystery; I cannot fathom it.
> Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too.
> If I take wing with the dawn to come to rest on the western horizon,
> even there Your hand will be guiding me.

The contrast is striking: Like the tragic experience of the world, like Phèdre, the biblical experience is an experience of the impossibility to hide, an impossibility to escape. Nevertheless, there is, a fundamental difference. Levinas, in his Talmudic reading, writes:

> Always the hand of God grabs me and guides me. It is impossible to escape from God, not to be present before his sleepless gaze. A gaze which is not experienced as a calamity, in contrast to the terror felt by Racine's *Phaedra*! (Levinas 1990, 167)

Racine and the Psalmist are equally exposed to otherness, to transcendence. But – this is what the text reveal, this is what literature reveals, this is what scriptures reveals, when one is attentive to its voice – the tonality of the experience is radically different: oppressive, as "terror[12]," for the one; for the other: a stretched hand, a guiding hand, a providential presence. Transcendence is experience in *Psalms* as a gesture of tenderness, as the caring proximity of the Other. Or as a call, as an address. And Levinas goes on, quoting the next verses of *Psalms*:

> If I say, "Surely darkness will conceal me, night will provide me with cover," darkness is not dark for You; night is as light as the day; darkness and light are the same. It was You

11 In *Time and the Other* – a text that is strictly contemporaneous to *Existence and Existents* – Levinas refers to Shakespeare in order to manifest the oppressive ambiance of the *il y a*. Hamlet, in his famous monologue, expresses the "tragedy of tragedy": the impossibility of escape, even in death. The horror of the perspective to live forever. The impossibility of death itself: "Hamlet is precisely a lengthily testimony to this impossibility of assuming death. Nothingness is impossible. It is nothingness that would have left humankind the possibility of assuming death and snatching a supreme mastery from out of the servitude of existence. 'To be or not to be' is a sudden awareness of this impossibility of annihilating oneself" (Levinas 1987, 73). Tragedy in general, for Levinas, is this literary genre that repeatedly expresses the impossibility of escape (fate), the entrapment in Being.

12 From the Proto-Indo-European *tre* (to shake), or *tres* (to tremble), which might not be far from this experience of "fear and trembling" that Rudolf Otto describes in his famous analysis of the sacred.

> who created my conscience; You fashioned me in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am awesomely, wondrously made.

Levinas comments: "In the biblical passage, certainly God's presence means: to be besieged by God or obsessed by God. An obsession which is experienced as chosenness [. . .]" (Levinas 1990, 167). This is the fundamental point: the experience of exposure, in *Psalms*, is a *positive* experience. Or in Levinas' lexicon: an experience of chosenness. Exactly the same way in his phenomenology of the face, the encounter with the other is experienced as a *positive* impossibility of escape (the impossibility of avoiding the commandment emanating from the face of the other, the impossibility of indifference), which constitutes – for Levinas – the very *Erlebnis* of chosenness. The verse – contrarily to the tragic drama – conveys this experience. Pushing the analysis to its last consequence, we can now reformulate Levinas' (scandalous) thesis: there is *a particular Hebrew experience of the absolute*, which is radically opposed to the Greek (tragic) experience of the absolute.

> He [God] does not let you go or He catches up with you again. You are always exposed! But in this spirited psalm you are discovered with joy; it is the exaltation of divine proximity that this psalm sings: a being exposed without the least hint of shadow.
>
> (Levinas 1990, 167)

The absolute exposedness to the Absolute – the obsession of the Absolute – is experienced as joy. Rather than provoking terror, "fear and trembling," transcendence, *as an experience of the impossibility of escape*, provokes exaltation. This "unexpected reversal from curse to exultation" is what characterizes the Hebrew *experience* of the Absolute.[13] This is what differentiates the psalmist from the author of tragedies: not the Event itself (the radical exposure to transcendence, to otherness), but the way the Event is experienced. For the one, terror; for the other, exaltation.

We can now return to the enigmatic passage of *Beyond the Verse*: literature, writes Levinas, can be a profanation of transcendence. Indeed: profanation is *a possible modality of the relation to transcendence*. A modality that is expressed, for instance, in tragedy. In this sense, literature, national literature, on occasions, expresses *the other side* of transcendence, or what Levinas calls: *il y a*. From Shakespeare and Racine to Blanchot, literature is inspired (by transcendence) – but instead of experiencing transcendence, the (oppressive) presence of the Other, as chosenness, it is experienced as tragedy, or as absurdity. The total

13 See Levinas, "Being Jewish" (2007a, 208 (translation slightly modified)). For an in-depth reading of this problematic in Levinas see Benny Lévy, *Etre Juif: Etude Levinassienne* (2003).

exposure of subjectivity to otherness, in this horizon, is experienced as an exposure that crushes subjectivity (like the alterity of death).[14] Nevertheless, for Levinas, all those experiences (tragedy, absurdity, anxiety of death, *il y a*, anonymous Being, etc.) are *effects of a primordial exposure to transcendence*.[15] In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas formulates this relation between positive transcendence (the face, transcendence as experienced by the psalmist) and negative transcendence (the *il y a*, transcendence as experienced by the tragedian) in its most striking way:

> But the absurdity of the *there is*, as a modality of the-one-for-the-other, signifies. The insignificance of its objective insistence, recommencing behind every negation, overwhelms me like the fate of a subjection to all the other to which I am subject, is the surplus of nonsense over sense, through which for the self-expiation is possible, an expiation which the oneself indeed signifies. The *there is* is all the weight that alterity weighs supported by a subjectivity that does not found it. (Levinas 1998, 164)

Subjectivity is originally affected by transcendence. Even when the subject does not acknowledge it. Even when transcendence is veiled, and appears as *il y a*, or Being. Even when profaning transcendence, subjectivity is *in its trace*. Even when profaning transcendence, (national) literature is in the trace of the (Hebrew) verse.

4 Languages of the Universal

At least one thing is clear: national literature, in Levinas, does not mean simplistically ethical literature, literature with an ethical message. Literature is not literature because it illustrates anything having to do with morality. Levinas's doctrine of literature is far more complex and fundamental: Literature, is the site of a

14 See Levinas, *Time and the Other* (1987, part III).

15 The passage from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being* can be understood as a deepening of this fundamental intuition. Separation in *Totality and Infinity* (synonym in this text to the concept of atheism) conditions the metaphysical relation: it is only as a separated being that a genuine relation to otherness is possible (against the idea of fusion, or participation). Thus, atheism, even though being a mode of being that exists away from transcendence, conditions at the same time the possibility to enter into a relation with transcendence. In *Otherwise than Being*, this intuition is radicalized: subjectivity, in this text, is described as anarchically affected by otherness (there is no moment of separation anymore). From the beginning, even before it begun, subjectivity is for the other. Or, in the language of *Otherwise than Being*, the other is in the same. This otherness can be experienced either as the otherness of being (*il y a*), or as the otherness of transcendence.

plurality of fundamental expressions (literatures), of the original (and universal) exposure to otherness. This exposure can manifest itself through a radical ethical language, as for instance in the famous passage from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that Levinas quotes time and again: "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others" (Levinas 1998, 146). But literature can also exist as profanation (of transcendence, of Scripture), as for instance in tragedy, both ancient and modern. In either case, what characterizes literature—or language as such—is the effect of a primordial exposure to otherness. And this is the reason why, ultimately, literature testifies to *the ethical structuring of subjectivity* (its essential "being-for-the-other"). Either positively (as attention to transcendence), or negatively (as profanation of transcendence).

Levinas's doctrine of literature is intimately linked to the question of the relation between universality and particularity. More precisely – if read without ignoring the Talmudic horizon that inspires Levinas throughout all of his writing – this doctrine is intimately related to the question of the relation between Israel and the nations. By changing registers (from the existential phenomenology of subjectivity as being-towards-transcendence to the question of language and literature), Levinas is able to express the relation between the one and the multiple, between chosenness and universality, *without ambiguity*.[16] This thinking detaches itself from the (philosophical) universality of the idea of "man in general," in order to think through *concrete humanity*, i.e., the unity of separated, distinct and concrete nations, who express their uniqueness through actual languages and specific literatures. In articulating the relation between Israel and the nations through the question of language and literature, Levinas is able to think universality in all its concreteness. He is able to think radically – even at the risk of proposing a scandalous thesis: the uniqueness of the Hebrew (language), the seventy-*one*, Israel's *concrete* election – the *Languages of the Universal*.

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16 For the question of the ambiguities in Levinas's relation to the universal, a subject that touches on the core of Levinas's Jewish philosophy, see Benny Lévy, "Judaïsme et philosophie: La septante n'est pas une tâche" (2004).

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