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Ideology, Literature, and Philosophy: Levinas as a Reader of Léon Bloy

To admit the effect that literature has on men is perhaps the ultimate wisdom of the West in which the people of the Bible may recognize themselves.

Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (53).

1 Introduction

Reading *Carnet 6* of the *Carnets de captivité et autres indéuits* – published in 2009 and containing long quotes from, and comments on, Léon Bloy's *Lettres à sa fiancée*, in which literature, philosophy, and religion are conjoined – provokes a sort of embarrassment in the reader today. This is linked to the tension between, on one hand, Levinas's admiration for this writer and the trace of a profound inspiration for all of his work provided by his reading of Bloy, and, on the other hand, the profoundly disturbing context in which this reading took place. In his article “Salvation through Literature: Levinas's *Carnets de captivité*,” Séán Hand sketches the tension between these two paths of reading. On one hand, he insists on these two authors' simultaneously thematic, stylistic, and methodological proximity as well as the reasons why Bloy's “pensée absolue” could exercise such a fascination on Levinas: “The extreme and almost ecstatic pronouncements about suffering, the female, glory, and the absolutization of thought [...] as operating in profound dialogue with Levinas's own thematic developments and even exegetical strategies” (Hand 2013, 58). On the other hand, he also evokes the more than disturbing context in which Levinas read Bloy. It was in 1944, when Levinas was in captivity:

[. . .] The contextual isolation of Bloy at this precise moment and place can [. . .] be called uncanny. For less than 50 miles away, at exactly the same time, another diarist is engaged in a similarly intense meditation on Bloy's writing. This writer is none other than Ernst Jünger. This professional soldier, author of the first world war account

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Storm of Steel (In Stahlgewittern), self-conscious diarist, and friend and correspondent of Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, is more particularly a captain and senior member of the German military occupation in Paris.”

(Hand 2013, 61)

Recently, Sarah Hammerschlag has pointed out that this disturbing context could be explained in part by the accessibility of literature in the camps. The *Comité international de la Croix Rouge* distributed book packets in the POW camps, some of which even had libraries. All books, however, were scrutinized by the censor. While all authors in exile, communists, and Jews were prohibited, Catholics like Léon Bloy were accessible.¹ Now, what disturbs the reader of *Carnet 6* and, parallel to this, of the *Lettres à sa fiancée*, lies not only in the historical context of Bloy’s remarks taken up and approved by Levinas, but equally in the ideological content of certain judgments that Levinas seems never to have called into question philosophically (even in his mature works). We are thinking here particularly of Levinas’s concept of the Feminine (or feminine), which is profoundly inspired by Bloy’s idea of Woman. As we shall see, certain passages of the *Lettres à sa fiancée* copied by Levinas bear witness to a particularly violent sexist ideology. For example, when Bloy describes his project of a coming book on Woman² in one of his letters to Jeanne Molbech, his fiancée, he associates the feminine with women’s physiological sex, while this is not the case for the masculine. “The central concept of this book is the physiological sex of the woman around which her whole psychology is wrapped and reeled implacably. In brief, the woman depends on her sex just as the man depends on his brain” (Bloy 1922, 79). Before scrutinizing this central problem concerning the ideological content of Levinas’s concept of the feminine, from his being inspired by Bloy, in greater detail and considering the possibility of going beyond this in literature and in philosophy (with the aid of certain concepts deriving from Barthes and Blanchot), we will attempt to retrace the relations between philosophy, literature, and religion that allowed Levinas as a reader of Bloy to achieve a new style of thought, that is, a new philosophical intelligibility, in accordance with the progressive development of his mature work.

¹ See Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets: Levinas, Derrida, and the Literary Afterlife of Religion* (2016, 200, note 36).

² What is meant here will be his major work, the novel *La femme pauvre*, published in 1897, that is to say eight years after writing the letter to his fiancée in which he mentions his project of a book on Woman, an “important work” of “extreme audacity.” See *Lettres à sa fiancée* (1922, 78), and *La femme pauvre* (2013).

2 Bloy and the Style of Levinas's Thought

In the preface to the *Carnets de captivité*, the editors, Catherine Chalier and Rodolphe Calin, state that the style of Levinas's thought, that is, the new philosophical intelligibility he created in accordance with the construction of his work, is the product of a “conjunction” between the literary concern for “descriptions of concrete situations” and the “religious” concern for transcendence. This “conjunction will constitute the very style of Levinas's thought” (Levinas 2009, 25). Now, his reading of Léon Bloy plays a major part in putting this “conjunction” into place. Levinas, reading Bloy, paid a great deal of attention to what Bloy calls the “connectivity” between the prosaic and the spiritual: “the miraculous connectivity that exists between the Holy Spirit and the most lamentable, the most despised, the most soiled human creature, the Prostitute” (Bloy 1922, 82).³ This is also the way he links indissolubly his vocations as writer and exegete: “I would have thus given to my manner as an artist and according to my vision as an exegete the two cruelly symbolic faces of the truth of the divine drama” (Bloy 1922, 80). Another way to formulate this conjunction of what is on this side, as literature, and beyond, as religion, is their common tendency to escape the light. Chalier and Calin speak of the “sense in Bloy of the transcendence of the mystery that is contained in empirical situations, of transcendence understood as that which escapes the light” (Levinas 2009, 25). Levinas notes to this effect, with regard to Bloy, in a formulation prefiguring his path in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* that links the phenomenological method of concretization and the stylistic figure of emphasis, which he elevates to the rank of a philosophical method: “And this order of mystery to which concrete situations are returned – is only there – is only justified by this admiration that goes as far as tears” (Levinas 2009, 151).

Levinas shares with Bloy the exegete the performative strategy of interrupting the system of “professors’ categories” with this wholly literary concern for concrete situations coupled with attentiveness to “religious” transcendence, noting admiringly with regard to the *Lettres à sa fiancée*: “the professors’ categories are replaced by the very transcendence of the order of mystery” (Levinas 2009, 151). In this interruption of the system of categories, the *Lettres à sa fiancée* contain the trace of Bloy’s major project of a definitive destruction of bourgeois speech in *Exégèse des lieux communs*. This two-volume work collects bourgeois speech comprised of stock expressions while interrupting it, destroying it performatively through repetition and ideologically “religious” exegesis, and accompanying this with a joy in the destruction,

³ Levinas copies this passage, in *Carnet 6* (2009, 157).

with a felicity of expression, which are eminently literary. Here is the utterance of the stock expression in a part of the *Lettres à sa fiancée* where Bloy describes his project of a book on Woman to his fiancée: “All the women whom I have come to know in my country, all, without exception, have an idea that must be universal [. . .]. This idea is that they have a secret to which no man is capable of acceding. – ‘Sir, you will never be able to know a woman; there is something about her that will always escape you’” (1922, 76). This idea, corresponding to the combination of exegesis and exorcism that Bloy carries out in *Exégèse des lieux communs*, constitutes at the same time a philistine platitude and a profoundly vertiginous truth about the “unknown Woman.” Bloy continues: “I have heard that a thousand times, and those who said it were often, I assure you, inexpressibly stupid. Poor creatures, who would, it is certain, indeed be embarrassed if they had to explain their famous secret to themselves, that is, unless their thoughts contained turpitude and nonsense, as is probable. It is clearly ridiculous, yet they are right, without knowing it” (1922, 76).

Before coming to the feminist critique of the ideological concept of the feminine in Bloy and Levinas, let us note that Bloy’s exegesis is a way of conjoining literature and “religion” close to Levinas’s method, carried out in particular in *Totalité et infini*, which he calls “concretization.” This issued forth from the phenomenological method in a broad sense and consists of deducing from formal relations the concrete life in which these relations and the terms of these relations are brought to our attention. He thus explains this method of concretization, which he also calls “*deduction* – necessary and yet non-analytical,” in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* “The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) – into events which this structure simulates, but which sustain it and restore its concrete significance, constitutes a *deduction* – necessary and yet not analytical. In our exposition it is marked by terms such as ‘that is’ or ‘precisely’ or ‘this accomplishes that’ or ‘this is produced by that’” (Levinas 1979, 28).⁴ Here, then, is the concretization of

⁴ Didier Franck is the author of the most precise and rigorous analysis of this method of non-analytic deduction. Cf. Didier Franck, *L’un-pour-l’autre. Levinas et la signification* (2008, 52): “The use of the expression ‘under the aspects of . . .’ indicates consequently the very particular relation that obtains, in the manner in which Levinas proceeds, between the example and the meaning, for the former can be mistaken for the latter, for the former is the staging and the operating theatre of the latter in virtue of a radicalization of the principle of all phenomenology according to which ‘access to the object is part of the object’s being’. If one intends by literature an order of the Said where the meaning cannot be disassociated from the dramatic situations that articulate it and where the echo of the Saying can always be found in one way or another, Levinas’s descriptions, which link examples in as many meanings, have a literary character while excluding any lack of proper conceptual rigour. Once again, without knowledge of this method and this style everything here remains and will remain incomprehensible.”

the expression “to know a woman” penned by Bloy, when he continues to present his project of a book on Woman: “The central concept of this book is the physiological sex of the woman around which her whole psychology is wrapped and reeled implacably” (Bloy 1922, 79).

In order to do justice to the originality of Levinas’s philosophical project, it is necessary to mention here that this method of concretization is not solely of phenomenological or literary inspiration but that he derives it equally from Talmudic texts. Indeed, in such a text, the concrete example does not play the role of an illustration or of a particularization of the concept of which it is an example; rather, it contributes to extending and bursting the concept into an irreducible multiplicity of meanings. In other words, the example creates a new meaning, which is not contained in the concept: “[. . .] in Talmudic texts multiple meanings coexist; it is a way of thinking in which the example is not the mere particularization of a concept but in which the example holds together a multiplicity of meanings [. . .]” (Levinas 1990, 60). Now, in the precise context of the concretization of the expression “to know a woman,” we can in the same way suppose a Biblical inspiration, a source common to Bloy’s Catholicism and to Levinas’s Judaism. For in Biblical language, “to know” does not mean purely intellectual knowledge; to know someone can mean prosaically “to have a sexual relation with someone,” as witnessed by the current expression “to know someone in the Biblical sense.” In *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II explains:

To know in Biblical language does not only mean purely intellectual knowledge but also a concrete example like, for example, the experience of suffering, of sin, of war and of peace. [. . .] ‘Knowledge’ penetrates into the domain of relations between persons when it concerns the solidarity of the family [DT 33,9] and especially conjugal relations. It is precisely in referring to the conjugal act that the term underlines the paternity of illustrious persons and the origin of their descendants [Gn 4,1; Gn 4,17–25; Is 1,19] as significant facts of genealogy, to which the tradition of priests (hereditary in Israel) attributed great importance. The term ‘knowledge’ could equally refer to all the other sexual relations, even the illicit ones [Nb 31,17; Gn 19,5; Jg 19,22].

(Jean-Paul II, 1980)

Gn 4, 1–2 speaks only of the knowledge of woman on the part of man as if to emphasize the latter’s activity (“Man knew Eve, his woman. She was with child and gave birth to Cain”). But one can also speak of the reciprocal character of this “knowledge” in which man and woman participate by means of their body, of their sex. Since the verb could be used for both sexes, as in “The two daughters of Lot had not known men,” it is not necessarily the case in the Bible that one has to consider woman as an object (of knowledge) of which man takes possession.

To return to *Lettres à sa fiancée* and to the “concretization” of the expression “to know a woman” according to which “woman depends on her sex” (Bloy 1922, 79), we can already notice in the text Levinas read very carefully in

1944 a philosophical-literary trait that he will develop in the work of his maturity. This concerns the radicalization of the method of concretization through emphasis. The concretization of the idea of knowing a woman through the sexual relation with a concrete woman is immediately followed, under Bloy's pen, by a methodological remark justifying the use of emphasis in order to reach the "absolute truth," "absolute thought" in "absolute expressions" (Levinas 2009, 159): "The idea is not new, but it is possible to renew it and even to give it a terrifying expression by pushing it to the most extreme consequences, and it is this I propose to myself in the hope of encountering absolute truth." (Bloy 1922, 79) In the same way, the emphatic passage from "suffering with" to "suffering in others" – an authentic Christian figure of the person in whose heart "there are all human hearts" (Levinas 2009, 158; Bloy 1922, 89) and which recalls in many respects the concretization and the emphasis of *one-for-the-other* in the vulnerability of *the other in the same* of maternity in *Otherwise than Being* – constitutes another profound resonance between Bloy's text and the expression of Levinas's late thought. After having shown that the originality of the style of Levinas's thought resides in the connection between literature defined formally as "a regime of the Said where the meaning cannot be dissociated from the dramatic situations in which it is articulated" (Franck 2008, 52) and the "religious" attention to transcendence, both of which traits can be found in reading Léon Bloy, it is now necessary to make the content of the two terms of this connection more explicit. In what way do Levinas's concepts of "religion" and of "literature" bear a trace of his reading of Bloy?

Let us begin with the conception of religion. In *Carnet* 6, Levinas notes with regard to Bloy's conception of Catholicism: "Everyone dwells in the categories of Catholicism. The same work has to be done for J." (Levinas 2009, 151) Or in an analogous passage: "Existence as a whole is integrated into the divine drama." (Levinas 2009, 153) In a parallel, Levinas has thus drawn from Bloy the idea according to which Judaism is not a category of religious belonging but an ontological category that makes of this religion "the locus of a new interpretation of man and of his subjectivity" (Levinas 2009, 22). Other notes in the same *Carnet* develop this idea of a new interpretation of man within Judaism and allow us to note retrospectively the importance of this philosophical concept of Judaism for the expression of Levinas's thought in all his work up to that of his maturity: "to take the point where one begins in Dasein or in J[udaism]. Judaism as a category" (Levinas 2009, 22); to interpret man and his subjectivity beginning in "I am" or the "I" understood from the outset from the past of creation and of election" (Levinas 2009, 22). Hammerschlag, in connecting three aspects – the Catholic sources in the *Carnets*, *Être Juif* of 1947, and the definition of religion in *Otherwise than Being*,

notes: “We can thus trace a line connecting three moments: Levinas’s interpretation of Catholic sources during the war, his formulation of *Being Jewish* in 1947, and his definition of religion in *Otherwise than Being*. This is not to say that the Catholic sources are necessary to the later thought, or to argue their priority over the Jewish sources, but only to reveal the connection between the comments from the notebooks and a mature expression of Levinas’s thought” (Hammerschlag 2016, 49) As far as the conception of subjectivity being elected from the outset is concerned, formulated in the *Carnets* as the sentiment imposed on the Jew particularly by Hitlerism as being “ineluctably riveted to his Judaism” (Levinas 2009, 21), an idea concretized and radicalized in the “sacrificial turn” of *Otherwise than Being*, it is not short of echoes. Here, again, we find a context that is more than disturbing, apprehending the suffering of the Jews as an extension of Christ’s redemptive works. Hammerschlag, too, underlines the attention paid by Levinas, the reader of Bloy, to the connection between suffering and election: “Levinas’s interest in Bloy is, on one level, not surprising. Bloy’s 1892 *Salvation by the Jews* had revived the notion that the suffering of the Jews was redemptive, a carrying on of the work of Christ. While such a view functioned to justify Dreyfus’s suffering in such a way that it was itself a redemptive event, it was, nonetheless, for some a powerful counter account to Drumont’s.” (Hammerschlag 2016, 300, note 36)

As far as the second part of our analysis is concerned, the literary dimension of Levinas’s thought, we shall try to show that the regime of the Said does not only constitutes a modality of Levinas’s phenomenological method, but that it equally bears a content that is at the same time ideological and ontological. On the ideological level, the concept of literature is intimately linked to the concept of the feminine, inspired to a large extent by Bloy’s idea of Woman. On the ontological level, literature is a regime of the Said, allowing one to lay bare “the most brutal materiality” of the *il y a*.

3 Woman and the Feminine

Here is an emblematic passage concerning this point, which is decisive for our argument.

Neither does this mystery of the feminine – the feminine: essentially other – refer to any romantic notions of the mysterious, unknown, or misunderstood woman. Let it be understood that if, in order to uphold the thesis of the exceptional position of the feminine in the economy of being, I willingly refer to the great themes of Goethe or Dante, to Beatrice and the *ewig Weibliches*, to the cult of the *Woman* in chivalry and in modern society (which is certainly not explained solely by the necessity of lending a strong arm to the

weaker sex) – if, more precisely, I think of the admirably bold pages of Léon Bloy in his *Letters to his Fiancée*, I do not want to ignore the legitimate claims of the feminism that presupposes all the acquired attainments of civilization. I simply want to say that this mystery must not be understood in the ethereal sense of a certain literature; that in the most brutal materiality, in the most shameless or the most prosaic appearance of the feminine,⁵ neither her mystery nor her modesty are abolished. Profanation is not a negation of mystery, but one of the possible relationships with it. (Levinas 1987, 86)

We will analyze this link, at the same time ideological and ontological, between the feminine and the *il y a* by drawing on certain feminist critiques.

Bloy and Levinas indeed share a brutally reductive dualism regarding the subject of Woman or the feminine. In the *Carnets de captivité*, Levinas copied a long passage on Woman from Bloy's *Lettres à sa Fiancée*, preceded by the note “the basis of his ideas” (Levinas 2009, 156). Here is the beginning of this passage: “For woman, a creature temporarily, provisionally inferior, there are only two ways of being: the most august maternity or the title and the quality of an instrument of pleasure, pure or impure love. In other words Holiness or Prostitution; Mary Magdalen before or Mary Magdalen after” (Bloy 1922, 80). Setting aside the passage in *Time and the Other* in which Levinas lays claim explicitly to Bloy's conception of Woman, which he associates with “the most brutal materiality, [...] the most shameless or the most prosaic appearance of the feminine” and which he opposes to “mystery of the feminine” in “the ethereal sense of a certain literature,” the description of the “feminine face” in section IV of *Totality and Infinity* (cf. 1979, 260–264), which bears the title “Beyond the Face,” is also the imprint of a sexist dialectic that approaches “rape culture.” Michel Lisse has indicated precisely this logic of the feminine in Levinas, “where the chastity and the decency of the face is maintained at the limit of the obscene that is still repulsed but is already very close and full of promise” (Levinas 1987, 260): “The feminine is at the same time mystery and the animal, the Virgin and the child, inviolable and violable at the same time, the saint and the whore, even if these two latter words are not those of

⁵ These formulations on the part of Levinas concerning the prosaic character of the apparition of the feminine translate in a highly precise manner the “terrifying impression” that Bloy gives to the idea of Woman in making it depend on her sex. On the other hand, Levinas owes to Bloy the vertiginous idea according to which the profanation of the mystery is not its negation but constitutes a possible relation with this mystery. Transgressing Catholic orthodoxy, Bloy attributes the cult of *latréia*, which relates solely to God, to Woman and pushes the sacrilege to the extreme by linking the cult with prostitution: “For example, the cult, the true latreian cult of woman, as virtuous as one supposes her to be, for the exterior sign of her sex, which she unconsciously values as being equal to Paradise. Imagine it, this cult, in immediate conflict with the absolute necessity of venal prostitution. Push this idea to the extreme, this conception of sacrilege, and the proudest of men will tremble before the monster that his spirit will have evoked” (Bloy 1922, 79).

Levinas [. . .]. Hence Levinas's logic of thinking the feminine [. . .], virginity and the loss of virginity, the membrane and its perforation, respect and the desire for profanation, the untouchable at the same time the purest and most impure." (Lisse 2015, 299)

Stella Sandford has shown that the feminine in Levinas is associated (being an heir to Bloy) with sexual difference and with eros (as well as with "childhood without responsibility" and the "pure life 'a little stupid'" of animality (Levinas 1979, 263 and following)) in a way that the masculine, for its part, is not:

[. . .] it would be ludicrous to ascribe to Levinas, the man, the view that he does not believe women to have human status. Nevertheless, the implication of these texts is indeed that the feminine is opposed to the human in a way 'the masculine' is not. To the extent that Levinas attaches an increasing importance to the distinction between the truly 'human' in its apparent neutrality from the being of the human in his or her sexuate incarnation or the human being under the mark of sexual difference, the unequal status of the feminine and the masculine becomes more and more apparent. Only the feminine being appears in her sexuate incarnation or under the mark of sexual difference. As a consequence the human and the masculine are conjoined in such a way that the former loses its claim to neutrality. (Sandford 2000, 53)

Sandford also insists on the fact that Levinas's retrospective proposal, in the "Preface" to *Time and the Other*, dating from 1979, to enlarge his concept of femininity as "a difference contrasting strongly with other differences" to masculinity or virility, that is to say to "the difference between the sexes in general" (Levinas 1987, 36), cannot operate on such a basis of inequality: "[. . .] it is particularly obvious in this discussion that no reversal of genders could turn it into an abstract point about sexual difference [. . .] (one could not, that is, seriously say: 'The masculine essentially violable and inviolable, the 'Eternal masculine' is the virgin or an incessant recommencement of virginity')." (Sandford 2000, 53) In the same way, Levinas's recognition of the legitimate claims of feminism precisely in the passage of *Time and the Other* in which he also refers to the concept of Woman in Bloy does not seem convincing, not only because of its brevity. As Lisse notes, "[. . .] it is indeed woman as 'the weak sex' to whom the man has to lend a 'strong hand' who serves Levinas as a reference in order to think the feminine. Feminism finds itself at the same time celebrated, acknowledged, and dismissed in the space and the time of a proposition." (2015, 298)

Despite the evolution of Levinas's thought on this question from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being* and the introduction of a feminine element – maternity – into the very heart of ethical subjectivity, Catherine Chalier and Stella Sandford show, each in her own way, that the fundamental dichotomy proposing to non-metaphorical women only two alternatives – the irresponsibility of the lover and the protective mother – is far from eluded in the work of the

philosopher's maturity. Chalier evokes the non-metaphorical women "who do not want to recognize themselves either in the inverted face of the lover or in maternal succour" (1982, 35) and their right to speak, to choose for themselves a name that they would like to bear. And they indicate the risk of justifying in philosophical language an injustice and a violence that are indeed historical in Levinas's discourse on maternity as election, before any choice, to suffer for the other.

It is not surprising to note how they have so often understood themselves in effacement before the other. For them it was, in fact, an election before any choice. To say this election, an election by the Good to which they can but respond, is to interrupt their silence on the question. History also says, very simply but this time very violently, that they really did not have a choice. To consecrate them as women was to consecrate them as holders of a body they did not have to say because it was an offering. (Chalier 1982, 44–45)

Chalier remains a follower of Levinas to the extent that she proposes to women a correction of this ultimate meaning of the feminine in the context of a Levinasian ethics, which is an ethics of the face without metaphor. The Saying that does not say a word, in the later Levinas, is also the relinquishment by women of "all the metaphors" (Chalier 1982, 45) alluding to them. "Neither the Virgin Mary nor even Beatrice, a woman has to also hear her name in the ethical utopia, where language speaks as justice and resistance towards the Same. For this, it is incumbent on them to put an end to their effacement of themselves behind metaphors that they have not chosen." (Chalier 1982, 44–45)

Sandford, for her part, formulates a radical critique of Levinas's whole philosophical project as a philosophical, more precisely a phenomenological, justification of a metaphysics of eros, and she contends that maternity in *Otherwise than Being* does not represent a true alternative to the meaning of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity*.⁶ "Once this community, and the wisdom of love that informs it, appear in *Otherwise than Being*, the trope of maternity drops out, much as the

⁶ We will leave aside here the connection between the feminine and hospitality that is also present in *Totality and Infinity*, just as the Derridean interpretation of this motif, given that Levinas does not owe this stereotype associating the feminine and the economic sphere of the house directly to Bloy. It is interesting to note that Derrida attempts a "feminist" interpretation of this motif. Lisse summarises this interpretation in the following terms: "Derrida shows that Levinas's claim generates two possible readings: either an androcentric hyperbole, marked by a vision of the feminine orientated towards the masculine point of view, or a feminist hyperbole that would maintain the feminine as the condition of possibility of welcoming in general, of absolute hospitality, thus as the 'pre-ethical origin of ethics' [(Derrida 1999, 83)]." (Lisse 2015, 301) Since Derrida has the tendency to understand this masculine point of view as that of someone who "writes like a man" in the biological sense of the term, one has to specify that it is rather a question of an ideological position that can therefore equally be shared by an individual of the feminine sex. With respect to this, see Sandford (2000, 62).

feminine ceases to play a role in *Totality and Infinity* after the elaboration of fecundity as fraternity" (Sandford 2000, 91). Although Levinas substitutes the term of "relation" to that of "paternity," this relation does not represent a true alternative feminine relation. As Sandford explains, "Levinas's text has not been able to effect or install an alternative feminine parenthood because ultimately maternity must and does give way to paternity, that is to the law of the father. Maternity, indeed, as associated with the particularity of the feminine, is outside of any parenthood when this is understood as paternity is, as the institution of a universal order of the human, of sociality, community and philosophy." (2000, 92)

4 The Ideological Content of the Concept of the Feminine and its Possible Overcoming in Literature

This reconciliation between philosophy as "wisdom of love in the service of love" and paternity, of which the ideological content of the concept of the feminine constitutes the hidden face, does not constitute, according to our argument, the only philosophical approach in Levinas's work. There is also, above all in his late works such as *Otherwise than Being* or *Of God Who Comes to the Mind*, a dimension that is subversive of philosophy, irreducible to all ideology, including the ideological content of the sexual difference, which one can characterize as literary, following Didier Franck's analyses or – much earlier than the latter's brilliant analyses in *L'un-pour-l'autre* – following Roland Barthes's interpretation of Bloy as well as that of Levinas by Maurice Blanchot.

According to Roland Barthes, despite the ideological content of Bloy's texts, these participate in literature in the proper sense of the term, with "its resistances to order, its power to oppose being recuperated, and the permanent scandal that it has constituted with respect to collectivities and their institutions [...]" (Barthes 1995, 46). In the same way, despite the ideological content of the concept of the feminine in Levinas, the descriptions of the feminine, in their "literary" dimension as Barthes conceives it, are at the origin of a return from the *il y a* that threatens the institution of ethics as first philosophy impassably. Or, to say this inversely and more precisely, literature as an ambiguous form of language (in the later Levinas, the literary force of his thought is marked by an ambiguity between *il y a* and *illéité*, between Saying and Said, between reason and scepticism), as an irreducible multiplicity, eludes any recuperation by a duality between the masculine and the feminine – which in fact

sets one back to the dual unity of masculine privilege. It is in this way that ambiguity, which is elevated to the level of a method in Levinas's later works and is practiced with such joy,⁷ reintroduces a rupture of the system into philosophical discourse, a rupture that foils all duality, including the duality of sexual difference. It is Blanchot, in *L'Écriture du désastre*, who allows such an interpretation of ambiguity as philosophical method doing justice to the resistance to order, which is the meaning of literature.

The question that is always to be questioned: 'Does the multiple amount, finally, to just two?' One answer: whoever says two, only *repeats* One (or dual unity), unless the second term – inasmuch as it is the Other – is infinitely multiple. Or unless the repetition of One maintains only to dissipate unity (perhaps fictively). Thus there are not two discourses: there is discourse – and then there would be dis-course, were it not that we 'know' practically nothing. We 'know' that it escapes systems, order, possibility, including the possibility of language, and that writing, perhaps – writing, where totality has let itself be exceeded – puts it in play.

(Blanchot 1986, 134)

Simon Critchley follows Blanchot in his interpretation of literature in Levinas. He poses the following rhetorical question: "Is literature ever decisively overcome in the establishment of ethics as first philosophy?" (Critchley 2005, 83). The answer is, of course, negative. Literature, inasmuch as it is an ambiguous form of language making meaning and non-meaning, *il y a* and *illéité*, Saying and Said, reason and scepticism, alternate, is never exceeded in a linear manner by ethics as first philosophy. If, despite the ideological (that is, metaphysical) presuppositions never called into question philosophically (in particular the ideological concept of the feminine that associates this latter with eros and sexual difference and is thus contrasted to the human in another way than the concept of the masculine), Bloy and Levinas continue to fascinate us or to make us share their passion, the reason is the radically literary dimension of their thought, in the sense that Barthes or Blanchot gives to literature – literature that "strikes the ideological choices [...] of a sort of inconsistent irrationalism" (Barthes 1995, 47). This is because in the "space" of this ambiguity practiced with true happiness and without any limit of objects (including, particularly in *Of God Who Comes to the Mind*, the ambiguity of God and the *il y a*, that is, in "the sombre paradox of God's malevolence," the ambiguity of good and evil), we can question again the totality of Levinas's ideological choices.

⁷ In "Difficile éthique," the preface to my book *La rupture du sens*, Gérard Bensussan proposes enlarging "the power of equivocation," to which Levinas's analyses of the erotic in *Totality and Infinity* "give a hyperbolic extension," up to the whole of the meta-conceptualities of Levinas's ethics. According to Bensussan, this extended equivocation is practiced "with true joy." See Bensussan, "Difficile éthique" (2017, 9).

If we continue today to share Bloy's passion, it is not for his ideological choices but for the "happiness of expression" that he practiced with such vivacity.

[. . .] this style so carried away and primed that says nothing other, finally, than the passion of words [. . .]. The systematic invective carried out without any limit of objects (the surrealist slap given to Anatole France's corpse is quite timid compared with Bloy's profanations) constitutes in a certain way a radical experience of language: the happiness of invective is nothing other than a variety of this happiness of expression that Maurice Blanchot has justifiably turned into the expression of happiness. [. . .] It is without a doubt this invincible voluptuousness of language, to which an extraordinary 'richness' of expressions bears witness, that afflicts Bloy's ideological choices with a kind of inconsistent unreality: that he was furiously Catholic, offending in a jumbled way the conformist and modernist Church, the Protestants, the Freemasons, the English, and the democrats [and, we can add, women], that this fanatic of the incongruous fell for Louis XVII or Mélanie (the shepherdess of *La Salette*) is nothing more than variable matter that does not abuse any of Bloy's readers. The illusion is composed of the ideas, the choices, the beliefs, the declarations, the causes; the reality is composed of the words, the eroticism of language, that this poor writer, bereft of a salary, practiced furiously and of which he makes us still today share the passion.

(Barthes 1995, 47)

That which, in the same way, continues to fascinate us in Levinas is his writing, which captivates us and holds us in the ambiguity of the experience of literature in Blanchot's sense (an experience that is metaphysically and ideologically "neutral" without being for that matter impersonal (cf. Critchley 2005, 83)). "[. . .] might not the fascination (a word favoured by Blanchot) that Levinas's writing continues to exert, the way that it captivates us without our ever feeling that we have captured it, be found in the way it keeps open the question of ambiguity, the ambiguity that defines the experience of language and literature itself for Blanchot, the ambiguity of the Saying and the Said, the skepticism and reason, of the *il y a* and *illeity*, that is also to say – perhaps – of evil and goodness?" (Critchley 2005, 80). The question remains open whether, in our experience of the ambiguity of literature, that is, in the experience of the neutral in Blanchot's sense, where we have lost all ideology and all metaphysics of the feminine, we have not also lost transcendence itself (which is, however, so characteristic of Levinas's style of thought). Blanchot would say that the experience of the neutral, which is infinitely multiple, also eludes being recuperated by the conceptual pair of immanence and transcendence.⁸

⁸ See Critchley (2005, 87, note 35): "Blanchot's reservations on the subject of whether the neuter can be described as transcendent should be noted here. In *The Infinite Conversation*, he writes: 'One of the essential traits of the neutral, in fact, is that it does not allow itself to be grasped either in terms of immanence or in terms of transcendence, drawing us into an entirely different sort of relation'(p. 463)."

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