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Introduction

Levinas and Literature: A Marvellous Hypocrisy

Wait for me: I'm going to pull you out of this hell into which I descended.

Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*

For Ariel

Long before the publication of Levinas's *Inédits* we knew that literature was the philosopher's great temptation. The three volumes of *Inédits*, however, reveal the far-reaching intricacy of this fascination from unsuspected angles, shedding new light on Levinas's singular philosophical style, themes, and argument.¹ In them we find youthful poems written in Russian between 1921–28 (2013, §IV); tender ruminations by the Jewish prisoner of war on the actuality of biblical literalisms (2009, 205–15); surprisingly admiring citations of the ultra-Catholic writer Léon Bloy penned in captivity (2009, 151–162);² evidence of the breakthrough provided by Proust, "poet of the social" (2009, 145), in thinking of love without communion, intimacy without knowing (2009, 71–74, 144f., 179–81);³ extensive, suggestive notes on metaphor that were later modified into publications (2009, 227–42, 296f., 329–31, 350f.; 2011, 323–47);⁴ transcriptions of poems by Baudelaire with lines Levinas later incorporated, uncited, into his philosophical essays (2009, 177f.);⁵ and revealing references to the writers he so admired from Shakespeare through Dostoevsky to Blanchot. Most intriguing are the lengthy fragments of two novels Levinas began to draft in captivity (2009, esp. *Carnet 5*) and continued to work on through to the early 1960's (2013, §§ I–III),⁶ in other words, at the very same time that he was composing major philosophical essays, including *Totality and Infinity* (1961), and those on Judaism published in *Difficult Freedom* (1963).

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¹ Levinas, 2009, 2011, 2013. For valuable introductions see Calin and Chalier 2009; Nancy 2013; Davis 2015; Hammerschlag 2019a; Hand 2013, 2019.

² See *infra* Bierhanzl, this vol.; as well as Hand 2013.

³ See *infra* Cohen-Levinas, this vol.

⁴ See *infra* Wolosky, this vol. A translation of some of these notes appears in Levinas 2012. For illuminating commentaries see Calin 2012, 201; Faessler 2012.

⁵ See *infra* Schulte-Nordholt, this vol.

⁶ See *infra* Nancy, Cohen-Levinas/Nancy, Sebbah, this vol.; as well as Calin and Chalier 2009, pp.14–19; Davis; Nancy.

Configured between philosophy, on one side, and religion, in particular Judaism, on the other, it is now clear that literature provided Levinas with a third way of *enacting* the unique *sens* of the Other. More precisely, as both Levinas's aborted novels and his literary exemplars suggest, the advantage of literature consists not so much in *showing* the moral sense of the other—since its truth is strictly “invisible”, falling outside the limits of consciousness, beyond empathy and intuition—but in attesting to the formidable difficulty of discerning this sense. It is as if literature affords a way of tracing the sense of goodness under the conditions of its absence. Levinas's novelistic fragments point to a reality lulled into self-content, mistaking the order of the world for its ground, even in the midst of war, until war proves that there is no stable ground to civilized life and that order—even the “im-*mense stability*” that is France (2013 3, 38)—is only a veil for the catastrophic chaos that perennially lurks about. War tears away the drapes of civilization (2009, 112, 160), as Levinas describes it in the “scene of Alençon” he envisaged as the moral center of his novelistic ambitions, a scene that speaks “not simply of the end of illusions but of the end of meaning” (2009, 132). The torn drapes reveal the horror of being without any order whatsoever, existence without a world.⁷ Far from presenting the Other, then, as does the psychological novel, the literature that interests Levinas explores the implications of a world deprived of the sense of the Other, a world verging toward the abyss of indeterminate, meaningless existence.

To be sure, the exposure of the real behind the stage of civilization and the drapes of intelligibility points to the constitutive role of the Other in grounding the conditions of possibility for meaning. But the sense of the Other is not realized through empathy or intuition; it is indicated or intimated by a phenomenological reduction of intelligibility to humility, epistemic as much as moral, a reduction of the very possibility of meaning to an acknowledgment, without knowledge, of the Other. Interpretation presumes not only ‘distanciation’ but also separation; the latter has ontological priority over intuition and thereby renders interpretation endless. Baudelaire’s immortal ennui exposes the weariness of existence itself; Shakespeare’s tragedies are marked by the diabolical inescapability of being, which is why death is not just feared but also desired (2009, 174); and Marcel’s self-regard converts into love only when faced with the mystery of Albertine’s evanescence which her absence finally manifests. Blanchot, ever-present when Levinas thinks of literature, epitomizes the risk that literature poses to the very possibility of ethics; the risk of substituting the Other for an image, reducing the sense of the Other to one’s own sensations.⁸

⁷ See *infra* Sebbah, this vol.

⁸ See *infra* Hart, this vol.

“In Blanchot’s art reality becomes truly ghostly, while in romanticism ghosts appear in a world with real contours. Influence of Hamsun’s “Mysteries”, of Gogol’s “Portrait”, “Nevski prospect”? Reality unfolds like a dream. The fluidity of things and space. Words and actions strike, but not by what is striking in them.” (2009, 406f.) Around 1953,⁹ still echoing the critique of art and literature articulated in “Reality and Its Shadow” (1948), Levinas differentiates his account of language from his friends’, whose approach occludes the essential role of ethics in the ontology of meaning. “The event of language— . . . Blanchot: Language is situated before the relationship with others – in a strangeness of self to self. Me: Language is . . . invocation. Recognition of the Other as such – Teaching that is not maieutic.” (2009, 415)

In *Existence and Existents*, the most important of the works published in the wake of the War (1947), Levinas deploys his critique of literature with greatest effect and in consonance with the contemporaneous “Reality and its Shadow”. Literature here serves as an approach to the “limit situation” of a world verging toward elemental *il y a* existence, an eidetic reduction of the historical experience of war, of “a world in pieces,” “a world turned upside down,” that also recalls “the ancient obsession with an end of the world.” (Levinas 1978, 21) For Levinas it was war, radically conceived, that raised the specter of a world reduced to elemental worldlessness. “Hitlerism,” he wrote in July 1946, was “the presentiment of the denouement of history . . . the drunkenness of the end of the world” (Levinas, 1946, 1), and it is no doubt for this reason that the fragments of both novels are set amid the debacle of war-torn France. Behind the opening lines of *Totality and Infinity*—“war suspends morality; it divests the eternal institutions and obligations of their eternity and rescinds ad interim the unconditional imperatives” (Levinas 1969, 21)—there is the *mise en abyme* of the tearing away of the drapes of civilization. Today one might think of COVID-19, the virus evoking a phenomenological resemblance to Levinas’s descriptions of the *there is*, an indistinct menace from which determinate existents “hypostasize” – binding to themselves in fear, physical pain, egoism, possession (think of the hoarding the virus provoked), being *chez soi*, and so on— thereby individuating a self, an existent, within the indeterminate, elemental existence lurking about.¹⁰ It is as if behind the stage of the world and

⁹ The comment appears on the back of an invitation card dated 1953. For further comments on the dating of the philosophical notes in Levinas 2009 see the editor’s note, pp. 224–26.

¹⁰ Levinas 1987. The lectures published as *Time and the Other* (1987) were delivered in 1946/47 and are consistent with the conceptual schema published in *Existence and Existents* in 1947 and “Reality and its Shadow” (1948). These works, like *Time and the Other*, constitute “the birth and first formulation” of the descriptions and analyses in *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1987, 30).

the drapes of civilization lurks a virus, neither living nor dead, an irreal existence threatening the reality of individuated existents which has made visible the fragile interdependence of sense and solidarity, grounding the individuation of entities—the very condition for intelligibility—on the sense that each other's wellbeing is one's own. The ontologically deficient assumptions of liberalism are thereby also made plain. Or one might think, with no less elemental horror, of nuclear or climate change dystopias, as in Cormac McCarthy's postapocalyptic novel *The Road*, in which a nameless father bears the burden of "impersonal vigilance" that Levinas describes (1978, 60/98), watching over a world deprived of beings, a world reverted to elemental being.

"He walked out in the gray night and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable . . . The crushing black vacuum of the universe. . . Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it."

"One vast sepulcher of salt. Senseless. Senseless."

"Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans. Mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence." (McCarthy, *The Road*, 138, 237, 293)

The nameless father in *The Road*, like the paternal subjectivity defended in *Totality and Infinity*, attains no other redemption from the horror of existence than the desire for his son's life above his own.

"He carried him up to the camp and covered him with blankets. He tried to get him to drink some water. . . . You'll be alright he said. He was terrified. . . I will do what I promised, he whispered. No matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone."

They went on. Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel. The nights dead still and deader black. So cold. . . He'd stop and lean on the cart and the boy would go on and then stop and look back and he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from an unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle. (McCarthy, 264f., 292f.)

Levinas's abandoned attempts to write his own literature of disaster show that the last thing he can be accused of is moral naiveté or being a moral "perfectionist," as has too frequently been thought. "My literary methods: 1) Describe everything at the level of "sensation", in the elementary, in this elementary where the whole complex is already present. 2) The real situation is soberly described . . . over a precipice" (Levinas 2009, 194). Literature attests to humanity's verging from sense to senselessness, even as the transformations it brings to language are the very signs of our always provisional transcendence of the disaster of being. Literature

thus has the potency of a *pharmakon*, at once poison and medicine, descent into egoism and senselessness, but also orientation toward the Other.

On the one hand, then, Levinas adopts a cautious, even critical approach to literature which he conceives, like all art, in terms of the work's "formal structure of completion" (1989, 131), the sensations of which draw the subject from reality to its shadow, from objects to their images, from concepts that refer to objects in the world to pure sensations that refer the subject back to the formally complete work of art. Levinas's critique of art and literature is essentially Platonic, reiterating the old suspicion of pleasures roused by mimetic idols. It is articulated most severely in "Reality and its Shadow" and the contemporary work, *Existence and Existents*, where the phenomenological sense of a work of art is again situated in the shadows of being. "Instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost in the sensation itself, and it is this wandering about in sensation, in *aisthesis*, that produces the aesthetic effect. Sensation is not the way that leads to an object but the obstacle that keeps one from it . . . In art, sensation figures as a new element. Or better, it returns to the impersonality of *elements*." (1978, 53/85f.) Borrowing a term from Jean Wahl, Levinas proposes that works of art induce a "transdescendance" into an elemental realm in which objects become images accessed through sensations disengaged from their worldly referents (Levinas 1989, 137; cf. 1969 35/24). The idea implies that the experience of art deviates from the moral and epistemic seriousness of the world.

Levinas's critique of art and literature was so opposed to Sartre's account of the writer as paragon of "engagement" that *Les Temps Modernes*, where "Reality and its Shadow" was published in 1948, prefaced Levinas's article with a defense of its esteemed editor, signed under the auspices of the journal *T.M.* but written by Merleau-Ponty.¹¹ This is not the place to explicate Levinas's critique of aesthetic experience in detail.¹² Two brief observations will suffice. First, *T.M.*'s Sartrean defense of the writer as a creator of means of communicating that foster human liberty somewhat misses the point of Levinas's analysis, whose critique of aesthetic experience does not target the ontologically derivative, psychological uses of art, which may indeed serve worldly values, as much as the *original sense* of something-as-art within the economy of being. At stake in Levinas's analysis of aesthetic experience is his lifelong preoccupation with deformalizing the temporal grounds of intelligibility. Approached as a

¹¹ *Les Temps Modernes* 38 (1948), 769–770, reprinted in in Merleau-Ponty (1997), 121–24. For brief and instructive comments see Séan Hand's introductory remarks to "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas Reader*, 129. My thanks to Arthur Cools for discussion about this intriguing preface.

¹² The best commentaries include Armengaud; Bruns; Charles; Colléony; Hammerschlag 2019b; Hart; Taminiaux.

work of art, an object never accedes to the temporal grounds of meaning but languishes in a “meanwhile” that falls short of reality, as if the essential experience of art suspends or delays time, abiding in “instants” disengaged from the temporality that opens and maintains the intelligibility of objects in the world. “In this situation the present can assume nothing, can take on nothing, and thus is an impersonal and anonymous instant (Levinas 1989, 138). The critique of *littérature engagée* was, then, merely collateral damage to Levinas’s purposes, whose real ambition consisted in an oblique *reductio ad absurdum* of recent, remarkable work by Bataille and Blanchot, both of whom prize literature’s unworldliness by embracing the elemental ontology Levinas shuns (Bataille, Blanchot). Or perhaps Levinas had in mind Heidegger’s account of the work of art as that which “holds open the Open of the world” (Heidegger 2002, 23)¹³. Far from opening the world, Levinas argues that the work of art induces fascination with the exotic, transforming objects in-the-world into elements of an indeterminate “existence without a world” (Levinas 1978). Art provokes an essentially de-worlding effect, exchanging concepts for de-worlded affects. The second point, of particular relevance to this volume, is that Levinas’s critique of aesthetic experience does not differentiate between literature and the other arts. In 1948, poems fair no better than statues, paintings or pieces of music; indeed they exemplify “closed wholes whose elements call for one another like the syllables of a verse . . . disengaging themselves from reality.” (Levinas 1989, 132) So too in the contemporary *Existence and Existents* literary examples are extensively deployed and quoted, sometimes without citation, to effect a reversion of phenomena from sense to mere sensation. In poetry, “a word detaches itself from its objective meaning and reverts to the element of the sensible . . . Behind the signification of a poem which thought penetrates, thought also loses itself in the musicality of a poem which has nothing to do with objects and perhaps varies solely in function of what thought sets aside, what it liberates itself from.” (Levinas 1978, 54/87) Literature plunges the subject into a sea of words that resembles nothing as much as the ghostly demarcations of the *there is*.

On the other hand, however, Levinas sometimes adopts a conspicuously different approach to the “poetic word,” which he singles out among the other arts for its unique ethical sense. Not incidentally, the ethical exigency given to literature, alone among the arts, coincides with Levinas’s deepening appreciation of

¹³ Heidegger’s essay “On the Origin of Art” was not published until 1949/50 but was delivered in typed lectures in 1935–36. Whether it circulated before publication or whether Levinas anticipated Heidegger’s thought from other publications I have not been able to determine.

the ontological import of religious categories like prophecy, revelation, the Book, exegesis, and commentary. The transcendental advantage of literature consists not in uniting subjects through knowledge or communication between separated states of mind but, uniquely among the arts, in the way it inscribes the Other *in the very instant* of aesthetic disengagement from the world, establishing a relation to the Other *at the very moment* of participation in the anonymous irreality of elemental existence. Alone among the arts, literature is proximity to the Other in the instant of apocalypse, when the relational structure of the world gives way. The transcendental advantage of literature consists in its way of awakening the self to the elusive presence of the Other within the elemental conatus of existence, at the very moment when the sense of the world verges toward senselessness—

zuweilen, wenn
nur das Nichts zwischen uns stand, fanden
wir ganz zueinander

at times when
only the void stood between us we got
all the way to each other

—just like “ethics,” the poetic word testifies to the *maintenance* of sense in the midst of the debacle of senselessness. *Il maintient le maintenant*—like a handshake in which the possessive conatus of the body is opened to the other, “ethics” *maintains* the fleeting instant of sensation across the duration of concrete temporality.¹⁴ Citing Celan—“I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem”—Levinas embraces the possibilities of such a literature; “To make oneself completely into a sign, perhaps that is it.” (Levinas 1996, 43)

Levinas’s theory of literature thus undergoes a decisive bifurcation. On the one hand, literature is placed on the side of impersonal, elemental existence and primitive religion, along with all the arts. On the other hand, due not least to his ongoing reflections on metaphor and their theological implications, literature is redeemed, as it were, from the shadows of art, just as a certain conception of “religion” is distinguished from the primitive and mystical religions that jettison subjectivity and morality. Literature is now able to enact a Saying that leaps out of the dense shadows in which it transpires. If the characters, narrators, and poetic

¹⁴ The analyses of “the instant” in “Reality and its Shadow,” *Time and the Other*, and *Existence and Existents* provide the background of elemental sensations verging toward senseless images that is finally resolved in Conclusion 9 of *Totality and Infinity*, “The Maintenance of Subjectivity”. The maintenance of subjectivity across the discontinuities of the instant is accomplished through fecundity, being oneself for the sake of the Other. One can say, then, that the instant is the now-time of egoism, *le maintenant* the now-time of subjectivity.

figures in literature remain “fixed images” that draw us away from real people and real responsibilities in the world—as the critique of the aesthetics of literature proposes—nevertheless *a certain literature* is regarded as “a door, in this loosened self, leading beyond being” to a place without a world, but where, as Levinas cites Blanchot’s saying, we “are together, but not yet” (1989b, 156). Levinas’s appraisal of Blanchot’s work testifies to this bifurcation.¹⁵ Blanchot’s writing no longer attests to the self talking with itself as it drifts endlessly into the irreal oblivion of the space of literature; Levinas now finds in Blanchot’s work a door leading beyond being toward the Other, the very temporality of being-toward-the-Other, being together, but not yet. While this second conception of literature is reflected throughout Levinas’s later thought, the case of Blanchot is particularly instructive on account of the reversal it clearly marks. We have noted how Levinas at first views Blanchot’s writings as exemplifying the literature of existence without a world (see also Levinas 1978, 58n.1). In “The Servant and Her Master,” however, published in 1966 in response to Blanchot’s *L’attente l’oubli* (1997 [1966]), Levinas adopts an entirely different approach to Blanchot’s work and, by implication, to a certain literature, which he personifies as a domestic servant in the house of her master, the Logos, “the speaker of truth,” “coherent language,” “logic”. As servant, she indulges her master’s pretensions, his “extravagant behavior,” his “reputation for loving wisdom”; and yet she knows “the failures, the absences, the escapades of him whom she serves”. She must accordingly attend to the ambiguity of her position; on the one hand she must obey the logic that ensures the master’s house is kept in good order—through the use of appropriate rhetoric and grammar, for example—, on the other hand she cannot but admit the disorder which her master refuses to acknowledge. This disorder of the poetic word is a “madness” (*folie*) that the master will not tolerate.¹⁶ Inspired by a poem of Lermontov he could doubtless declaim, Levinas translates “(in bad prose)” and avows the “utterances . . . of the madness of desire (*la folie du désir*) . . . In them the tears of separation, In them the trembling of reunion”

¹⁵ It is tempting to schematize this bifurcation chronologically, as though Levinas changes his view of literature from the critical appraisal in 1948 through to the ethical appraisal that emerges most clearly from the mid-1960’s. It is probably more prudent, however, to speak of shifting emphases. A decisive exception to a chronological periodization of Levinas’s two conceptions of literature could be illustrated by “The Other in Proust,” also published in 1947, thus in the very midst of Levinas’s cautionary, critical appraisal of literature, for it clearly indicates the uniquely ethical potential of “poetry”. Even so, the more Levinas reflects on the importance of metaphor, which invariably correlates with an increasing appreciation of the ethical significance of “religion,”—roughly, from the mid-1950’s—the more literature is singled out among the arts for its unique contribution to the ethics of being.

¹⁶ See *infra* Hart, this vol.

(Levinas 1989b, 158). The essay concludes with a question suggesting that the servant, literature, is less the subordinate than the lover of the Logos she serves.

Housekeeper or Mistress? A marvellous hypocrite! For she loves the madness she keeps watch over.

There is little doubt that Levinas sides with the servant who loves the madness, the folly, of literature, even if he also respects the need for an order of truth and logic, its status and validity “in the world”. *Otherwise than Being* (1991 [1974]) amply confirms this, not only with its quite mad, disruptive, anarchic style, its writing against the logos of the Said, but also with its explicit descriptions of subjectivity, the soul itself, as a madness in the heart of reason occasioned by the inextricable intimacy of the other. “The soul is the other in me. The psyche, the-one-for-the-other, can be a possession and a psychosis; the soul is already a seed of folly” (1991, 191n3; cf. 50, 84). A similar invocation of the folly or madness of subjectivity, “already a psychosis,” refers the metaphor to the female lover in the *Song of Songs*, “possessed by the other, sick” (1991, 142), the footnote citing *Song of Songs* 6:8, “I am sick with love” (1991, 198n.5).

We thus find ourselves in a paradoxical proximity to the very disaster Levinas sought to avert. On the first conception, literature opens reality to an existence without order, tearing the drapes of civilization, isolating experience in pure sensations of images detached from objects, approaching and conjuring the *il y a*. By the late 1950’s, however, the obverse problem has surfaced, namely, the problem of the excess of order besieging the modern world, the reign of the Said, the inevitable homogenization entailed by concepts and the discursive tyranny of everyday life, modern bureaucracy, and information technologies. It now becomes precisely a matter of the disorderly and disruptive function of literature that is prized, its irony with respect to truth, coherence and logic, its metaphorical extension of thought beyond the correlates of the empirically given, all of which offer a much valued interruption to the merciless orders of the Said in which the singular sense of the Other is suppressed. Levinas thus begins with a critical appraisal of literature’s complicity in the dissolution of order and ends with an affirmation of its capacity to disrupt a world that has become immoderately ordered. He begins with an account of literature’s collaboration with the conceptlessness of sheer existence without a world and ends with an avowal of literature’s way of loosening the concepts that grasp the world so tightly as to stifle the unique sense of the Other. If literature participates in the anonymous, impersonal irreality of aesthetic disengagement, as Levinas still thinks, one nevertheless finds oneself oriented through literature toward the Other—not to others in the world, dear reader, but to the Other, the one without whom no sensibility would make sense—,

. . . like a man lured on by a syllable without any meaning,
 A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed sureness,
 That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter.¹⁷

Literature is both elemental and personal, poison to a peopled world but medicine to the impersonal, anonymous existence in which we are immersed. Alone among the arts, literature affords the promise of a Saying within the impersonalism of elemental existence, just as monotheism introduces prophetic Saying into primitive and mystical religion. Literature is singled out among the arts for its way of measuring up to the folly of proximity. The “poetic word,” like “ethics,” like “prophesy,” is necessary if one is to evade all that would reduce sense to platitudes—the natural topography of concepts—, dilute it within the insincerity of eloquence, or abandon it to the fallen language that dominates everyday life and so-called social media (Levinas 1993). A late essay, “Everyday Language and Rhetoric without Eloquence,” picks up this theme in order to defend the alliance between the simplicity of everyday speech in which the other is approached directly and types of literary rhetoric that rage against the orders of discourse, “taking eloquence and wringing its neck,” as Verlaine famously put it, the “anti-literature” that rebels against the repressive stability of the discursive orders that be. One might note, as Blanchot did in the very year this essay was published, that the language of “ethics” is not immune from the very problem it was designed to solve, since what Levinas calls “responsibility” is a “term which the language of ordinary morality uses in the most facile way possible by putting it into the service of order (Blanchot 1995, 26).” Hence the need, *for the sake of the Other*, for a literature that sows seeds of madness into the master morality, which is as much a part of the order of the Said as the discourses of politics, science, social media etc, and sometimes even more so.¹⁸ Indeed, Levinas’s essay alludes to the Terror of anti-literature (Levinas 1993, 140), famously analyzed by Jean Pauhan (2006 [1941]), long time accomplice of Blanchot, in his defense of a rhetoric of terror that stands up to false eloquence. *Otherwise than Being* exemplifies this rhetoric of terror without eloquence, “as if in order to regain one’s lost sincerity, ordinary language were not enough” (Levinas 1993, 140). Levinas’s suspicion of the eloquence of literature, then, left him with no alternative but to be a writer, thus fulfilling Paulhan’s dictum that “No writer is more preoccupied with words than the one who at every point sets out to get rid of them, to get away from them, or to reinvent them” (Paulhan, 76). In this lies the marvellous hypocrisy of Levinas’s approach to literature, which points not only toward impersonal

17 Wallace Stevens, “Prologues to What is Possible” (Stevens, 438).

18 Hence the anarchical function of the literature Levinas prizes; see *infra* Cools, this vol.

existence without a world but also toward the mystery of existence made intelligible only by being personal; not only to the *il y a* but also to *Autrui*; not only to ‘primitive religion’ but also to prophetic monotheism.

The impetus for a second conception of literature coincides with a growing awareness of how metaphor already steers language away from the fascination that reduces words to worldless images. It is clear that metaphor, for Levinas, is not just one literary trope among others but the essential feature that gives language ontological status equal to thought and perception. Metaphor marks the way language approaches *this-as-that*, a structural relation which, following Heidegger’s analysis of the as-structure of intelligibility (Heidegger 1962, §32), integrates metaphor into the hermeneutic circle through which the sense of being is accessed. Metaphor is thus not added to understanding but expresses the as-structure of understanding in linguistic form, unsettling any stable hierarchy between language, thought, and perception. For Levinas, moreover, metaphor not only attests to a linguistic way of articulating an understanding of *this-as-that* but orients the horizontal movement of understanding along its implicit, vertical axis. Metaphor exposes the dimension of “height” within the horizontal movement of meaning (see Faessler). If all art, including literature, transdescends toward the *il y a*, literature, alone among the arts, also transascends toward the Other. Levinas provides a metaphor to express this vertical function. Metaphor is language “standing on tiptoes, in a kind of levitation” (Levinas 2009, 350). Metaphor elevates the as-structure of being, bends the curvature of intersubjective space upward in such a way that “the transitivity of being”—the movement of being through which a being maintains its identity—is oriented toward “height”. Stevens gives voice to this elevation of the perceived into the sensed:

How easily the blown banners change to wings . . .
 Things dark on the horizons of perception,
 Become accompaniments of fortune, but
 Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
 Not of its sphere, yet not far beyond,

 The human end in the spirit’s greatest reach,
 The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
 Of the unknown.¹⁹

Metaphor works as the vertical axis of language, providing an essentially theological orientation, even if God is never invoked, as when the nameless father in *The Road* envisions his anonymous son “glowing in that waste like a tabernacle”. The *Inédits* make it clear how Levinas’s interest in literature, nurtured from his

¹⁹ Wallace Stevens, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” (Stevens, 432).

youth but intensified in captivity as a Jewish prisoner of war, converged with his emerging conviction that theology, without dogma, was indispensable for coming to terms with the moral orientation of meaning—“without God there would be no metaphor. God is the very metaphor of language – the fact of thought that rises above itself. (This does not mean that God is only a metaphor. For there is no other metaphor than the movement bearing towards Him).” (Levinas 2009 1, 233) Although this strong formulation was excluded from his published writings on metaphor (Calin 2012), the thought persists: the *this-as-that* structure of experience is opened by the inscription of metaphorical height, concealing the trace of God in the as-structure of things, a sense of the Other, the still small voice, in the cleft of the identity of a thing with itself, as in Exodus 33. Levinas’s second conception of literature affirms the folly or anarchy of love as a way of interrupting the oppressive, platonistic or universal orders of the Said; this folly is developed because of his faith in the theological orientation of metaphor as such.²⁰ Another locution, written on the back of an invitation card from 1953 but omitted from his published essays, dares to wonder if the trace of the Infinite, the endless movement of metaphor that elevates the as-structure of meaning, reaches its finality in the solidarity of a people: “the idea of the culmination of all things in Israel: Love in relation to poetry. The end of metaphors” (Levinas 2009, 343). Cryptic, but clear enough to show how the *Inédits* constantly bring the question of literature to reckon with the biblical and prophetic tradition,²¹ even if one might retort that ‘Israel’ is not the end but on the contrary the carnal origin of metaphor, “split first of all between the two dimensions of the letter” (Derrida, 92). The essays in this volume reflect and extend on themes the *Inédits* provoke, while further interrogating Levinas’s relation to literary works and theoreticians.²²

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20 For a different account see Hammerschlag (2016, 2019b), who argues for an antithetical relation between Levinas’s conception of literature and religion. The alternative proposed here is that Levinas has two distinct conceptions of literature at work, one aligned with primitive religion and the elemental ontology that ethics opposes, the other allied to prophetic monotheism and the ways of Saying that transcend the Said.

21 See *infra* Schonfeld, Fagenblat, Hoppenot, Liska, this vol.

22 See *infra* Amiel-Houser, Anckaert, Noor, this vol.

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