



EDITED BY

MICHAEL L.
MORGAN

≡ The Oxford Handbook of
LEVINAS

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

Reading Levinas Today

MICHAEL L. MORGAN

BACKGROUND

THE earliest book in English and one of the earliest books in any language on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* by Edith Wyschogrod, published by Martinus Nijhoff in 1974.¹ There was some interest in Levinas in France, Belgium, and Amsterdam in the 1970s, but Wyschogrod's book marks his first real presence in the Anglo-American world of philosophy. That is slightly over four decades ago. Levinas is no longer a secret. In the 1980s interest began to grow, especially in England, where a generation of young students of Continental Philosophy studied at Essex with Robert Bernasconi, and then, in the 1990s, the floodgates opened. Since then, interest in Levinas and his work has exploded, not solely in philosophical circles but also in departments of literature, religion, psychology, political science, and on and on. And not only in universities do we find readers enthralled with him and his work; in wider circles, too, lay readers have flocked to him and to his valorizing of otherness and in particular responsibility to and for all others and of sensitivity to the claims of the destitute, the weak, the afflicted, the disenfranchized, and more—"the orphan, the widow, and the stranger" among us.

But, for all the interest in him, Levinas is notoriously challenging to read and understand. Even his most casual or occasional pieces—and he wrote many of them—are often obscure and impenetrable. And his major philosophical writings—in books and essays—pose an extraordinary challenge, and not only for nonspecialists. It would be fair to say that Levinas is more frequently misunderstood than understood, and his notoriety may come at the price of frequent misreadings of slogan-like statements or expressions and not be based on grasping clear and powerful statements or being attracted by well-articulated views that people find appealing and even thrilling. In short, for all the attention given to him and given the frequency with which he is alluded

or referred to, there may be at least two Levinases, the one a mere façade associated with slogans and clichés and the other a deep and profoundly challenging philosophical thinker whose writings and thought provoke the most grueling study and often puzzle and amaze as much as they persuade.

This background of understanding and misunderstanding, of prominence and hiddenness, of appeal and apparent obfuscation, is the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to Levinas. And it is the background for this anthology or at least one of its backgrounds. There are others.

There is, for example, the context of his life. Levinas was truly an intellectual and public figure of the twentieth century. He was born in 1906 in Kovno, in Lithuania, to Jewish parents, and he died in 1995 in Paris, where he had lived since the early 1930s. His philosophical training was in phenomenology; he was an early devotee of this movement and the person who is credited with bringing Husserl's phenomenology to French intellectual circles. He also wrote the first article in France on Heidegger. In the 1930s he participated in Parisian philosophical life, and he began a long period of employment and association with the École Normale Israélite Orientale (ENIO), the teacher's college of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an organization devoted to educating Jews in the eastern Mediterranean basin in the values of the French Enlightenment and the French liberal tradition. Incarcerated during the war in a German prisoner of war camp in Fallingbomberg, in northern Germany, he returned to become the director of the ENIO and to continue his work as a Jewish educator and as a philosopher. In 1961 he published his first great work, *Totality and Infinity*, received a university appointment, and at the same time continued his association with ENIO and became a participant in French Jewish intellectual life. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, at the encouragement of his friend Henri Nerson, he met and studied with the obscure, itinerant Talmudic savant, Chouchani, and in the 1950s and thereafter held his own Talmudic study sessions at the ENIO and then, after it was founded, at the annual meetings of French Jewish intellectuals. From the 1960s on, then, Levinas's notoriety and reputation increased; he taught, wrote, gave frequent interviews, and gave talks and lectures, until his death in Paris in 1995. A longtime friend and associate, Shlomo Malka, has written a biography of him, and he himself often provided, especially in the many interviews that are now available, autobiographical glimpses into his past, his associates, those who influenced him, and so on.²

In a very famous comment, which is included in a short item entitled "Signature," the final chapter in his collection of Jewish writings, *Difficult Freedom*, he calls attention to the special influence on his life and thought of the event that is now called "the Holocaust." Having quickly itemized dates and features of his career to that point, he says, "This disparate inventory is a biography. It is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror."³ Here, then, is another background for his thinking, Nazi and Stalinist fascisms, the Holocaust, and subsequent genocides. We might confidently underscore this comment of his and its importance. Some students of Levinas have argued that his central ideas and indeed his entire intellectual and philosophical project might usefully be viewed as a response to the Holocaust, Hitler fascism, and

totalitarianism. In his very provocative essay on Levinas and evil, Richard Bernstein, for example, has made this claim and sought to demonstrate it.⁴ There may very well be some truth in this proposal; while Levinas does not discuss either Nazism or the Holocaust often, he certainly leaves hints that the horrors of Nazism, Stalinism, and totalitarian regimes more generally are on his mind, and his “ethical transcendental metaphysics” does introduce responsibility into our understanding of human existence in a central way, so that it becomes impossible, on his account, to say that such horrors and such suffering are not our business. In fact, on several occasions, he makes it clear that he takes the sweep of twentieth-century history, from World War I through Hiroshima, subsequent genocides, and more, to mark a nadir of the human condition, a point when our mutual responsibilities have failed to a dramatic degree.

Another context for Levinas’s thinking, then, is a century of moral, social, and political decline—and crisis. Levinas never seeks to diagnose this decline by arguing, for example, that it is an outcome of rampant and one-sided naturalism or of the domination of ideologies and large-scale bureaucracies and institutions, although there are times when he does show his concern about such matters. Levinas is not a social and cultural critic like the members of the Frankfurt School or others like them. But his thinking suggests that philosophy, social and political thought, and much else have failed to identify in human existence how fundamental are the forces that oppose these tendencies and that call upon us to oppose them ourselves. This is part of what the primacy of the ethical means for him, why it is important to appreciate that ethics is “more fundamental” than ontology. If our infinite responsibilities to and for others are what ethics is, then the atrocities and the suffering of the twentieth century certainly manifest a human failure of enormous proportions. Becoming educated to our responsibilities may be the only hope for a truly just and humane future.

LEVINAS’S MANY FACES

Talk of this kind may sound hortatory and homiletical and not genuinely philosophical. It raises the question how Levinas’s writings and his thought ought to be approached or, alternatively, it raises the question what kind of a thinker he is. There is of course the question how he took himself, how he understood what he was doing. And then there is the question how we, his readers, ought to understand him. As one might expect, during the past four decades or so, readers have approached him in a variety of ways. A handbook like this one is indebted to that variety and, as I think you will see, exemplifies a variety of interpretive perspectives.

Many readers interpret Levinas primarily as a phenomenologist and within the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology. This is especially true, for example, of many French readers, of figures associated with Leuven, and of philosophers trained as phenomenologists and who come to Levinas with Husserl and Heidegger in hand. Many anthologies and collections of works in the phenomenological tradition will include

some Levinas. So, for those who treat Levinas as primarily a philosopher, locating him as a student and follower of Husserl forms one interpretive approach to his work. To others, however, Levinas should primarily be viewed as an important—perhaps even the most important—critic of Heidegger. The evidence that Levinas was first provoked to original philosophical work by Heidegger and his commitment to Hitler and Nazi fascism and that Heidegger was continually in his mind throughout his lifetime—this evidence is extensive and incontrovertible, as Michael Fagenblat has shown in his chapter in this volume, even if the story of Levinas’s critical engagement with Heidegger is complex and by no means easily told.

But if many have read Levinas as a student of Husserl or as a critic of Heidegger, these approaches have perhaps not been as controversial as the approach via Derrida, his several written pieces on Levinas and personal comments on him, and in particular his famous review of *Totality and Infinity*, “Violence and Metaphysics.”⁵ The Derridean approach to Levinas and the Derridean reading of Levinas have had a powerful effect on Levinas’s place in the “pantheon” of late twentieth-century French philosophy and in general Continental Philosophy. Prominent here is the work of Robert Bernasconi and several of his students, among them Simon Critchley, William Large, and Tina Chanter. But there have been many others who have followed this path; it may be the most common tendency among philosophical readers of Levinas.

Another broad path to Levinas is taken by those with a strong interest in Hegel, among German Idealists, and/or Rosenzweig, among Weimar Jewish thinkers and philosophers. Here the focus is on Levinas’s critical attitude toward “totalization” and hence the way in which his thinking poses a kind of post-Kierkegaardian but distinctively social critique of philosophical systems that incorporate all reality in a systematic whole—from Parmenides to Aristotle to Hobbes to Spinoza to Hegel and beyond—that pay insufficient attention to concrete, particular human existence. Many students of Levinas come to him from having studied Hegel extensively, and they find in Levinas either a powerful critique of the Hegelian system or a flawed one.⁶ Also, many students of Levinas come to him from having studied the Jewish “dialogical” and “existential” responses to Hegel, Schelling, and others, and find in Levinas an advanced development of this tradition or a revisionary dimension of it. To many of these readers, Levinas has come to be seen as having made a distinctive and provocative contribution to the tradition of Jewish philosophy, as well as an important contribution to Western philosophy overall.⁷

These avenues are among those travelled by philosophical and most often academic readers of Levinas. But it should not be forgotten that Levinas’s appeal has extended far beyond the borders of these specialists and far beyond the boundaries of academic philosophy. To many, especially during the past four decades during which the general topics of otherness and the other have come to be such a prominent feature of intellectual culture and culture itself, worldwide, Levinas is frequently taken to be the most distinctive voice of otherness—respect for the other, responsibility for the other, and the centrality of the humane treatment of others. Many readers of him—in Europe and North America, in Asia and Africa and Australia—are drawn to him by the centrality of

his insight that our responsibilities to others are infinite. To them, Levinas is the philosopher of the dispossessed, the displaced, the refugee, the impoverished, the suffering, and the hungry. He is the spokesperson for the weak and the oppressed; his philosophy, for all its difficulty and obscurity, in the end speaks to our most humane and caring sentiments. The reasons for this wide appeal are extraordinarily varied, and they may be as mistaken and confused as they are accurate, but clearly they are present, and among intellectual and cultural critics and commentators, they have led some to valorize him for his vision and others to vilify him for his parochialism or irrelevance; what is true of academic readers is also true of Levinas's popular acolytes.

Of particular interest, regarding the breadth and character of Levinas's appeal, are the ways that religious and theological readings of him diverge from and converge with the more philosophical readings. Most notably, there are those who argue that Levinas is primarily a philosopher and that his account of the face of the other and our infinite responsibility for others is primarily and fundamentally a philosophical account. On this view, his teaching career in the ENIO and his position as its director, his writings on Jewish education and culture, and his Talmudic lessons, all this and more concerning the Jewish side of his life cannot be denied nor, from a biographical point of view, can its importance be diminished. But at most his Jewish experience is one area of application for his philosophical thought, which does not require that experience and which applies universally to all social, cultural, and political contexts. Basically and primarily, Levinas was a philosopher.

To others, however, Levinas's philosophical thinking is oriented and shaped by religious and theological concepts, claims, and commitments. Indeed, for some, his philosophy is not just theological; it is Jewish and Jewishly theological in central and determinative ways. The most famous critique of Levinas and others—among them Michel Henry and Jean Luc Marion—as theologically determined phenomenologists is by Dominique Janicaud in his famous work, *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*.⁸ According to Janicaud and those like him, Levinas's philosophy is in fact nothing more than theology masked as philosophy. Not only does Levinas employ a host of terms that have played central roles in theological literature, commentaries on classic religious texts, and even foundational canonical works themselves, he also thinks in theological terms. That is, his fundamental ideas are theological ones, dressed up to look philosophically neutral or, to use other terms, naturalist or secular. In fact, however, they are not. When Levinas refers to the face of the other person or the event of sociality as enigma, transcendence, epiphany, the infinite, and holiness, this vocabulary does not merely give his ideas a theological cast; it shows that the very idea that he is trying to elucidate is itself a theological idea. It is a secularized or naturalized way of talking about the divine, about God, and the utter passivity of the self in the encounter with this entity or being is simply a matter of human submission to divine power or the fact of human finitude when contrasted with God's infinite power and wisdom. In other words, Levinas is not just indebted to Weimar theology; he is a belated Weimar theologian himself. When he looks back to Descartes, Plotinus and Neoplatonism, and Plato, he is looking back on a tradition that has influenced and been appropriated by figures

like Philo, Augustine, Luther, and a host of others, down to Kierkegaard, Barth, and even, in some ways, Buber and Rosenzweig. Such is one line of criticism made against Levinas.

It would be an interesting project in the sociology of philosophy to say more, with sufficient attention to texts and sources, about the reception of Levinas, how he has been read and why, and his place in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century intellectual and cultural circles. I have said enough, however, for us to appreciate the diversity of his readers and hence the multidimensionality of his appeal and his influence. In short, his written corpus is itself rich and various, and his readership has also been extremely wide-ranging and varied. Both of these facts have had an impact on how the present Handbook was conceived, how it has been organized, and what it includes.

THE EDITOR'S APPROACH

Before I turn to the Handbook's organization and conception, however, let me say something about my own approach to Levinas. I have not imposed it on the authors of the chapters included here, but it has affected both the anthology's overall design and my comments to the authors on their separate contributions. When I first came to Levinas, it was after Paul Franks and I had translated and edited a collection of Franz Rosenzweig's philosophical and theological writings. Paul and I were then colleagues at Indiana University, and each of us had long intended to study Levinas. At the time, having worked on Rosenzweig, whom Levinas himself acknowledged as an important influence, the moment seemed appropriate. We scheduled ourselves to teach a class together on both figures, but Paul left for Notre Dame, and I took on the course on my own. Seven years later, I published a book on Levinas that sought to clarify major themes in his work and to do so by placing him in conversation with a number of figures from the so-called Analytic Tradition—from Wittgenstein, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, and John McDowell to Donald Davidson, Stanley Cavell, and Christine Korsgaard. Overall, I adopted an approach from Theodore De Boer, a Dutch student of phenomenology and Levinas, that recommended reading Levinas as a transcendental philosopher, but I did so by using a largely analytic style of interpretation, informed by my familiarity with Jewish philosophy and the history of philosophy, as well as with analytic metaethics, philosophy of language, and so forth. There is evidence in Levinas that he took himself to be engaging in a kind of transcendental philosophy, but the conviction that he might be placed in conversation with twentieth-century analytic philosophy was and has continued to be my own and that of a few others.⁹ Hence, my reading of Levinas—call it an ecumenical reading—is one that straddles the “continental divide” between Continental and Analytic Philosophy, as the two traditions are called, and seeks to translate Levinas into a vocabulary that is more accessible to a wide audience and less indebted to jargon and parochial vocabularies.

Reading Levinas across the boundary between the two twentieth-century philosophical traditions has appealed to an increasing number of people. Hence, not only does this *Oxford Handbook* come at a significant moment in the reading and reception of Levinas; it also comes at an especially intriguing moment in the tradition and history of Western philosophy. More and more, philosophers educated on the continent in German and French philosophy particularly have turned to Anglo-American philosophy and found intriguing and productive affinities. And some very prominent analytically trained philosophers have led the way in finding tremendous value in engaging with figures from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to Foucault, Habermas, and Gadamer. Many now see themselves as working in the spirit of this latter tendency; I am far from alone in this regard. In this spirit, I believe that there is some evidence of this tendency in the present anthology, although not by any means in all the contributions to it.

One of the fruitful by-products of making an effort to translate Levinas into terms other than those he uses or those widely used in recent French philosophy and other disciplines influenced by that tradition is that what is original and especially novel in his thought may present itself with greater clarity and impact. In a sense, that is, his importance becomes clearer and more evident when he is understood in conversation with other philosophers and thinkers than with those with whom he did or might have been in dialogue. If we look at his own interviews and conversations, many of which we have available to us, it is obvious how much more accessible and illuminating he is in those settings than in his essays and books. At least informally, this feature of his works is widely noted, even if those who specialize in him warn against privileging these interviews and conversations to his published works. But with such cautions in mind, it is still noteworthy how much clearer these interviews are, and for this reason interviews are an excellent way for students new to Levinas to “hear” him describe central ideas and themes in his work. In these settings, when he is asked by a particular person questions about his work and his thought, he seems to make some effort to answer that person or interviewer in as clear and helpful a way as he feels is possible and in terms with which he feels comfortable, but he also allows himself to be flexible and to be more accommodating to that person’s point of view, background understanding, capacity to grasp what he is saying, and many other contextual factors. Moreover, there are even times when it is easy to imagine that Levinas appreciates that others are “listening in” on his conversation or interview or eavesdropping on it and that he is speaking as much to them as to the interviewer. In short, in these settings, Levinas is speaking to others, and he makes at least some accommodations to them. At least to some degree, he wants them to understand what he has in mind, and he employs a variety of tactics and strategies to accomplish that end.

So, in a sense, by translating Levinas into terms and expressions more familiar to those who think and work in the Anglo-American intellectual world and in particular in the tradition of Anglo-American philosophy, we are imagining how he might accommodate himself to this audience, if indeed they found his thinking interesting and worth exploring and understanding. And by placing him in conversation with various Anglo-American philosophers, and after having them explain themselves, to imagine

what he would say in response, we become audience to their conversation or become like eavesdroppers on that conversation. And if our orchestration of such a scenario is done with care and in an honest and generous spirit, we may learn a great deal about what Levinas's thought means and what significance it may have for his conversation partners but also for us, who are listening in on their conversation. When I myself try to orchestrate and eavesdrop on such conversations, I choose conversation partners for Levinas whom I have reason to think might find something interesting and valuable in how he approaches issues and problems in which they have shown themselves to be interested and with which they have been seriously engaged. This is why I have chosen figures like Charles Taylor, Stanley Cavell, Donald Davidson, and John McDowell; others have done similar things with Wittgenstein and Jürgen Habermas. More recently, for obvious reasons, several commentators have turned to Stephen Darwall and even R. Jay Wallace.

LEVINAS'S CENTRAL IDEA AND BEYOND

In a widely read and excellent introductory essay on Levinas, Simon Critchley made the point that Levinas is a philosopher or thinker with one big idea: that ethics is first philosophy or that ethics is primary.¹⁰ Hilary Putnam first made this suggestion, inspired by Isaiah Berlin's use of a famous fragment by the early Greek lyric poet Archilochus, and Critchley was following his lead.¹¹ It is very tempting to repeat this claim, like a mantra, and to supplement it with the further claim that once Levinas came to see the centrality or primacy of the ethical, he spent the remainder of his career seeking to clarify, deepen, and enrich this idea and perhaps to revise it. While this approach or perspective certainly has some truth to it, it is also possible to see Levinas as a philosopher with several very important and provocative ideas, which are interrelated and which jointly portray a way of reorienting our everyday lives in highly suggestive ways. This reorientation calls upon us to consider our responsibilities to others and indeed to particular other people as central to how we act personally and how we collectively organize our lives, our institutions, and frame our policies, laws, and programs. For many, especially in Western democracies, we think in terms of protecting freedoms first and foremost or of protecting rights or of acting on behalf of our own interests and of those close to us. Levinas acknowledges and even finds a place for such ways of looking at our lives, personal and collective. But he shows, he believes, that our obligations and responsibilities to others and for the needs and concerns of others should orient us and take priority. Furthermore, this sense of the primacy of our interpersonal, second-person relations and the responsibilities integral to them is fundamental to all human existence, for all of us, and as fundamental, it is not grounded in anything else beyond the other person's claim on me to accept, acknowledge, and assist her. In short, the demands others make on me should count first for me, and their seriousness or weight comes from the fact of my being accountable

to her to care for and about her. This way of seeing our lives would involve, Levinas believes, a reorientation of how we live and treat others, for our ordinary way of seeing things, personally and collectively, is typically grounded in our concern for ourselves and those close to us.

On the face of it, this Levinasian proposal might sound very familiar. Is Levinas simply asking us to think first altruistically and in terms of our own self-interest only secondarily? And if so, what is so surprising or novel about this? Have not many moral philosophers, religious thinkers, and others argued for something along these lines? Indeed, is this any more than the claim that ethics should take priority over prudence, concern for others over concern for ourselves?

Levinas's claim is different, at least for the following reason. Typically, other approaches to the questions of the primacy of ethics and of our treatment of others ultimately ground such matters in some feature of our agency, say our rationality or autonomy or both, or alternatively our desires, interests, or preferences. Within religious and theological contexts, they are grounded in divine will and divine command. Levinas breaks radically with such views. He is emphatic about the fact that the primacy of the ethical and the very force of moral normativity are constitutive of our interpersonal or social relationships; they are grounded in nothing else. Moreover, that which accounts for these features is the other person's claim upon the self or subject, a claim that is originally or foundationally unlimited and infinite. Hence, in the hyperbolic terms that he comes to use in *Otherwise Than Being*, our very subjectivity is originally or foundationally wholly given over to each and every other person as a kind of unconditional self-sacrifice or generosity, which he calls "substitution," "hostage," and "obsession." Our proximity to the other person is wholly a responsibility for the other person that, in our everyday lives, is realized in acts of kindness and eventually in institutions and practices that are as humane and just as we can manage, at least ideally so.

Hilary Putnam and Simon Critchley may be right that Levinas has one big idea, but this observation may be deceptive. For it is an idea that is rich, complex, and highly ramified in its implications and modes of realization. Levinas certainly is attentive to what distinguishes the face-to-face or infinite responsibility from those features, relations, and dimensions that occupy our everyday lives insofar as these are lives filled with experiences, cognitive and practical. This relation with transcendence, infinity, and indeed divinity is not simply another ordinary, common relation or dimension of our lives; it is "extraordinary," or better, it occurs in our lives obliquely or as an "intrigue" or "disruption," as a "trace," all expressions intended to point us in the direction of that which is both a part of our lives and yet, in a way, not a part of our lives. It is, in other words, orienting or determinative for what makes our natural lives, embodied and involved with a world filled with items to be consumed and used, meaningful and indeed a world of what he calls "Goodness" or what others have called "value" or "purpose." Such value or goodness is constituted by our responsiveness to the claims of others, simply insofar as they are present to us and dependent upon us, not for a reason but rather, in an enigmatic way, as a reason. But identifying such a dimension in our lives and seeking to find ways to describe or at least to call attention to it is one thing; appreciating its

implications for our everyday lives is another. It is something that Levinas already says a good deal about in *Totality and Infinity*, and it is a chief theme of *Otherwise Than Being*, especially Chapter V. It is what Levinas means by the face-to-face and responsibility as a “critique of freedom” and as what the Saying contributes to the Said. Our social and political lives, indeed even language, communication, rationality, and institutions, cannot exist without the face-to-face of human relationships, and indeed they all ought to be evaluated in terms of how well or how poorly they realize the core of those face-to-face relationships, the unconditional responsibilities we have for each and every other person. In a sense, intersubjectivity itself is both a transcendental condition for human existence and the ground of the standards by which that existence ought to be evaluated.

If these thoughts bring to the fore what is central to Levinas’s philosophical vision, they only suggest the richness of the contexts into which that vision must be placed and the questions that naturally arise about it, about his philosophical influences and development, about the nuances and complexity of his thought, about what his views might imply for various domains of our lives and for thinking about them, and more. In this collection, these influences, complexities, and implications are on full display. And for this reason, the Handbook is intended both to clarify central features of Levinas’s central insight and also to display the many influences on him, the ways in which his thinking is related to the tradition of Western philosophy and to religious thinking, and its implications for a variety of themes and topics.

STRUCTURE OF THIS HANDBOOK

The *Oxford Handbook* includes thirty-eight chapters, grouped into five parts. Rather than give a summary of each chapter, let me say a word about why I have organized the Handbook in this way, about the particular subjects discussed in each section, and about what themes and topics are included, might have been included, and which may be added to the online version of the Handbook in the future.

The first section includes nine chapters that deal with Levinas’s background, influences on his thinking and writing, and some examples of how he reads figures in the tradition of Western philosophy. In grappling with Levinas’s writings and his thinking, it is both illuminating and important to appreciate his historical situation. That historical situation covers a large part of the twentieth century, but its core contains the impact of World War I and the Communist revolution in 1917, the flourishing of Husserlian phenomenology and the emergence of Martin Heidegger as a major philosophical voice, the legacy of French liberalism taught in Strasbourg and in France in the 1920s and 1930s, the growth of existentialism and existential philosophy in the interwar period in France, World War II and the Holocaust, the course of French anti-Semitism and the relations between Judaism and Christianity, especially in postwar France and beyond. Significant aspects of this situation or context are treated in several of the chapters in this section. Levinas’s relations to figures such as Maurice Blanchot, Edmund

Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida are examined in chapters by Kevin Hart, Bettina Bergo, Michael Fagenblat, and Edward Baring. Ideally it would have been good to have discussions of Levinas's relations with the thought of predecessors such as Henri Bergson and with that of contemporaries including Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, Jean Wahl, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Henry, and Vladimir Jankélévitch and perhaps also Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, and others. It would also have been valuable to have a contribution on Levinas's debts to Russian literature, especially Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, and Turgenev. A chapter on Levinas's place in the development of French philosophy from the 1930s through the 1960s had been planned, although for various reasons it was not completed. Still, we have been able to include discussions of those figures who seem most important. It is hard to argue with the centrality of Blanchot, Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida for understanding Levinas's methods, his central insights, and his development.

Part I also includes three chapters on Levinas's reading of the Western philosophical tradition, from the Greeks—especially Plato and Neoplatonism—through German Idealism. Tanja Staehler's discussion of the role of Plato for Levinas deals with the figure who is arguably Levinas's most central classical source, and Martin Shuster examines Levinas's responses to Fichte and Hegel, who represent major figures against whom, in contrast to whom, Levinas sets his own program. Inga Römer addresses the theme of rationality in Levinas and in the course of clarifying what reason means for him, she deals with his readings of Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Kant, his central interlocutors in early modern and Enlightenment philosophy.

Finally, and yet arguably of central importance, we include in this section a chapter by Robert Eaglestone on Levinas and the Holocaust, a theme which Bob Plant also addresses in his chapter on Levinas and biography, in Part V, and also an examination of the recently published prison notebooks of Levinas and unpublished early notes, papers, and reflections. Both topics are of the greatest importance for dealing with Levinas historically and philosophically. There are those, as I mentioned earlier, for whom Levinas's central theme, the primacy of justice and the ethical, is at least in part his response to the atrocities of the Nazi death camps and to the legacy of totalitarianism and fascism from the years of Nazi and Stalinist rule. No thoughtful interpretation and appraisal of Levinas can ignore the special prominence of the Nazi horrors and destruction for him. Nor can continuing engagement with Levinas fail to consider the previously unpublished notebooks, largely from his time in the Nazi prisoner of war camp and the years following. Seán Hand and Howard Caygill have written on these documents, as has Sarah Hammerschlag, whose chapter here reviews their central themes.¹²

Against the background of these treatments of influences on Levinas and of his readings of the tradition, we turn, in Part II, to central themes in his philosophical thinking. The chapters in this section focus on several aspects of his central insights about ethics, the second-person or face-to-face relation, meaning and history, and ethics and politics. As in Part I, there are any number of themes that might be added to this section, but the eight chapters included collectively give a good overview of Levinas's "big idea." To begin, Levinas is a metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical philosopher who distinguishes

between holistic or idealist philosophies and those that admit transcendence or “radical otherness” and argues for his special version of a metaphysics that admits transcendence, what he calls a heteronomous philosophy. In this section, three chapters discuss Levinas’s conception of transcendence and its meaning for him, his conception of the face of the other, and his notion of subjectivity as substitution, a conception of the self that privileges its primordial passivity and self-sacrificing character. Peter J. Giannopoulos’s rich discussion of transcendence is followed by Diane Perpich’s account of Levinas’s use of the notion of the face, especially in his early work, and then by Robert Bernasconi’s magisterial overview of Levinas’s conception of subjectivity as the “me.”

The section continues with J. Aaron Simmons’s discussion of Levinas on society and politics in terms of the introduction of what he calls “the third party.” For Levinas, society or community is ideally a “fraternity” based on just laws, institutions, policies, and conduct. Thus, as Simmons shows, by introducing the third party and plurality, we have the foundations for Levinas’s ethics of responsibility and its role vis-à-vis politics. In the next chapter, then, Robert Stern clarifies and interprets Levinas’s second-person account of our social existence by comparing and contrasting it with that of the Danish philosopher and theologian Knud Løgstrup. In particular, Stern argues that Levinas lapses into a divine command theory, thereby compromising the role of interpersonal responsibility that he seems so vigorously to advocate. In my chapter on God and the trace in Levinas, I examine in detail Levinas’s attention to language of the divine and the role that he takes divinity to play in the obligatory force that is constitutive of our face-to-face relations with others; in this way, I try to show how his philosophical account of moral normativity provides Levinas with a reinterpretation of the meaning of traditional theological language. In a way, then, I try to show how Stern’s rather literal reading of divine command in Levinas might be juxtaposed with an alternative reading of his position and its difference from traditional theistic accounts.

Throughout his career, Levinas took the face-to-face encounter or the fact of sociability as the orienting dimension of our everyday lives, individual and collective, private or personal and political, to be central to our temporality as human agents and to the very notion of the meaning of history and of our historical existence. Two chapters in this section take up these themes, the relation between temporality and our relations with others, and in addition the role of ethics for our social, political, and moral lives. James R. Mensch takes up the former theme, with Levinas’s debt to Husserl and to Heidegger on full display, and Martin Kavka’s chapter explores the various accounts of “Messianism” that he finds in Levinas’s early and late works. Messianism registers the theological notion of redemption and the roles in our lives of human agency, hope, social and political projects on behalf of justice and humane practices, and the possibility of meaningful human existence and relations with others.

These last chapters in Part II, on time and messianism, call attention to the subtle and complex ways that Levinas’s philosophical project is related to religious and theological vocabulary, ideas, and texts. Such are the explicit themes of Part III, entitled “Religion and the Religious Dimension.” As I mentioned earlier, there are interpreters of Levinas

who take him—along with Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion in particular—to represent the lapsing of phenomenology into theology. His concepts of the face-to-face and infinite responsibility are taken to be holdovers from religious texts and religious experience. In order to assess such a charge, however, it is necessary to understand why Levinas has respect for religious texts and religious life, how he deals with those texts, especially the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, what he thinks about Christianity, and how he understands the relation between Judaism and the state of Israel as a Jewish state, that is, what he means by Zionism. These are the themes of the chapters in Part III.

Several of the six chapters in this section deal with texts and how to read them. Eli Schonfeld analyzes what Levinas says about reading the Bible, while Ethan Kleinberg and Oona Eisenstadt focus on the Talmud and on writings in which Talmudic readings play a large role. In a sense, this is also the case with Annabel Herzog's provocative chapter on Levinas's understanding of Zionism and the state of Israel, insofar as she finds Levinas's richest views on these matters expressed in his Talmudic lessons that deal with territorial, economic, and political issues. The chapters by Jeff Bloechl and Jeff Hanson, then, turn to Christianity, Levinas's lifelong engagement with Christian themes and tropes, and to the role of Christianity in his thought. Finally, a discussion of Levinas's indebtedness and comments on various Jewish thinkers—from Maimonides and Spinoza to Buber, Rosenzweig, Chaim of Volozhin, and even more recent figures like Emil Fackenheim—would have been desirable, and here too (as in other cases) plans for such a chapter did not produce a result at this time. It is our hope, however, that at some point an essay on these figures will be included on the Handbook's website and eventually might appear in a subsequent edition.

In a sense, the first three sections, then, deal successively with Levinas's historical and philosophical background, the philosophical formulation of his understanding of ethics as first philosophy, and finally the way in which that philosophical formulation engages with religious and theological traditions, in particular Judaism and Christianity. In Part IV, the eight chapters take this core and extend it into a variety of areas, some of which Levinas himself touches upon and some to which his thinking may be taken to apply in suggestive and intriguing ways. In short, these chapters are examples of how his conception of the ethical may have an impact on our lives. The variety is evident from the chapter titles. Claire Katz, drawing on many things that Levinas himself says about teaching and education, suggests ways in which a Levinasian ethics might influence educational practices. Colin Davis discusses several attempts to draw upon Levinas in order to think about film and to interpret specific films, and Benjamin Wurgaft examines the various roles that food and nourishment play in Levinas's descriptive analysis of the human condition. Seán Hand examines Levinas's early literary efforts and the fragments of novels left among his wartime papers and explores the implications of this work for his later thinking about aesthetics, ethics, and philosophy. Joshua Shaw considers the roles of war for Levinas and engages Levinas with just war theorists in order to clarify the implications of Levinasian ethics for thinking about justifications for war and about acceptable and forbidden conduct during war. By focusing on tort law and especially by examining a classic case in tort law, William H. Smith asks what a Levinasian approach

might say about the dominant traditions of interpreting torts, the economic tradition and the humanistic or interpersonal or relational tradition. Kris Sealey examines the role of Levinasian ethics in the development and articulation of critical theory about race, and David M. Goodman and Eric R. Severson survey a growing literature on interpersonal responsibility, caring for others, and clinical psychology. Finally, Kevin Houser gives us an example of how to employ Levinasian insights in order to develop a critique of some standard ways of thinking about justification, of giving and receiving reasons, and of the implications of such views for our understanding of agency and moral psychology. Houser's project exemplifies as well how Levinas and his thinking can be fruitfully placed in conversation with so-called analytic philosophy and figures as diverse as Stanley Cavell, Wittgenstein, Christine Korsgaard, P. F. Strawson, and T. M. Scanlon.

The final part is entitled "Critical Assessments of Levinas." In some ways, there have been moments of such critical assessment in chapters in earlier sections, so one should not think that all critical reservations or problems have been reserved for this section. Nor are these chapters exclusively about very well-known objections to Levinas or do they aim at a comprehensive catalogue of such objections. Rather, what we have in this section are some examples of how to engage with Levinas in a critical spirit. In the literature on his thought, there are various well-known objections, for example, that his treatment of women and the feminine is biased, one-sided, conventional, anthropocentric, and false and that his ethics is so abstract and ethereal that it is wholly irrelevant to our ordinary lives and especially to our social and political lives. Also, Levinas has been criticized for his Eurocentrism and for the dismissive and even demeaning comments he made about Asian cultures. In short, Levinas's writings often express a traditional set of biases that seem to fly in the face of his strong commitment to justice and especially infinite responsibility for others.

The original plans for this Handbook included contributions on several of these issues, for example, the implications of Levinas's thought for colonialism and his Eurocentric bias. Here, as in a few other cases, for various reasons, these contributions were not completed. Throughout the volume, however, and in this final section, controversial themes are addressed, and they can be read as examples of the kinds of critique to which his writing and his thinking have been and might be subjected. Joshua Shaw's chapter, for example, deals with the moral and political implications of Levinas for moral questions that just war theory also debates, and William H. Smith's chapter on a Levinasian approach to tort theory addresses directly how we ought to think about liability and responsibility for harm and injury in a Levinasian spirit. Kris Sealey's chapter on critical thinking about race confronts directly the question of what Levinas provides for thinking about injustices of the past, colonialism, and slavery. To these and other cases, where chapters in the volume address controversial issues, the contributions to Part V add the following.

It has been tempting to many readers of Levinas to ask if the idea of the face and Levinas's conception of the face-to-face apply only to human beings or if they could also be said to apply, say, to animals and also to natural objects or even to nature as a

whole. In other words, does Levinas have anything to say about our treatment of and relations with animals or about ecology and respect for nature? The chapters in Part V by Peter Atterton and by David Boothroyd deal with these themes. And Cynthia Coe's chapter on feminism and maternity in Levinas takes up the controversial roles of these ideas in Levinas's career and especially how appreciating the significance of temporality enables us to understand developments in his use of these terms. Coe draws on many of the most influential critiques of Levinas in order to show how his shift away from a narrative framework points toward an appreciation for maternity that is more in tune with the spirit of feminist critiques, even if Levinas himself never moved in this direction.

Furthermore, a broader question not unrelated to these more specific ones concerns Levinas's response to naturalism as a worldview or overarching attitude. Without giving some precision to such a notion, of course, it will be difficult to answer the question, and this is not the place to develop such a precise account. But even without so doing, one might easily be tempted to take Levinas to be opposed to any of the standard views of naturalism current in twentieth-century philosophy, especially those that have implications for ethical considerations and moral obligations. But succumbing to such a temptation might be hasty, as Fiona Ellis argues in her chapter that seeks to place Levinas in league with someone like John McDowell and his conception of a modified naturalism.

Finally, this section includes two chapters that raise questions about the very status of Levinas as a philosopher. William Large's examination of the problem of language for Levinas raises the so-called Derridean question about whether Levinas has succeeded or indeed could possibly succeed in identifying and talking about a dimension of human social experience that lies beyond expressibility, beyond being and beyond being said. Levinas's notions of the intrigue, the interruption, and the trace, and even more tellingly of transcendence and the infinite, certainly seem to be oriented toward a dimension of human existence that occurs as oblique to all the rest, to our ordinary, everyday lives and experiences. But can he succeed in holding on to such notions and to engaging in philosophy without mystifying it?

How is the matrix of Levinas's philosophy the life of the philosopher? Broadly speaking, this is Bob Plant's question in his rich and provocative placing of Levinas in the context of the Nazi Holocaust and the century of horrors that surround it. It returns us to the question raised in Robert Eaglestone's chapter and by a commentator like Richard Bernstein: in what sense is the Levinasian philosophy a response to the horrors of Auschwitz? More generally it raises the question of how philosophy and history are related to one another and what philosophy reveals about suffering, evil, and hope.

Overall then, the volume is organized in terms of a series of stages, from background and influences, through a treatment of main themes and dimensions to a number of "applications," and finally concluding with objections and suspicions.

Finally, it has been one of the goals of this volume to express in various ways the depth and seriousness of Levinas's thinking and at the same time the diversity of its "reach." One of the ways to show this "reach" and to underscore the historicity of the "Levinasian moment," as we might call it, has been to invite a very diverse group of contributors. We

hope that we have succeeded in this regard. Many of the contributors are established, well-known, and extensively published readers of Levinas, while several are younger readers. Moreover, while most of the contributors currently reside and/or teach in North America, many come from other countries and cultures, and they also reflect various other forms of diversity. If there is such a thing as bad homogeneity, hopefully we have avoided it. Decisions about topics and contributors could also be more diverse than they have been, but whatever the ideal of diversity might be, we hope to have at least begun to honor it.

NOTES

1. Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974; New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).
2. Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas. His Life and Legacy* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006).
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 291 [orig. 1963 and 1976].
4. See Richard J. Bernstein, "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 252–267; reprinted in Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil* (New York: Polity Press, 2002), 166–183.
5. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by A. Bass (New York: Routledge, 1976), 97–192; see also Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by P. Brault and M. Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
6. This is true, for example, of Adriaan Peperzak and Edith Wyschogrod.
7. See especially Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, NJ: 1994) and Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
8. See Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).
9. Here I am thinking of Simon Glendinning, Bob Plant, Søren Overgaard, and, to a certain degree, Dan Zahavi.
10. Simon Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6.
11. Hilary Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58.
12. Howard Caygill, "Levinas's Prison Notebooks," *Radical Philosophy* 160 (March/April 2010): 27–35; Seán Hand, "Salvation through Literature," *Levinas Studies* 8 (2014): 45–65.

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PART I

.....
LIFE, BACKGROUND,
AND INFLUENCES
.....

CHAPTER 1

LEVINAS'S PRISON NOTEBOOKS

SARAH HAMMERSCHLAG

AMONG Levinas's papers, sorted and archived after his death in 1995, was an envelope labeled *Carnets de captivité, 1940–1945*.¹ Inside were nine small notebooks, the two smallest inserted inside the sixth and seventh. Although they span from 1937 to 1950, they are labeled as wartime notebooks and contain material predominantly from Levinas's years as a Jewish prisoner of war. The notebooks are intermittently dated, sometimes on the cover, sometimes within, with occasional references to the places of their composition. The writing is mostly in pencil, sometimes transitioning to pen. Despite Levinas's generally legible handwriting, the entries are occasionally unreadable, scribbled perhaps in haste or in the dark. Some of the pencil marks have been rubbed out, and the writing sometimes bleeds off of the notebooks' irregular edges.

In the 2009 publication of the first volume of Levinas's *Oeuvres Complètes*, a transcription of these notebooks was included. In their prefatory note to these materials, the editors Rudolph Calin and Catherine Chalier provide the aforementioned description of the notebooks' physical appearance and the conditions in which they were saved and thus recovered. This description serves predominantly to explain the broken nature of the text and the challenges that the editors faced in transcribing their contents, but it also attests to the conditions of their composition. The very fact that the notebooks are of such small format suggests both the wartime shortage of paper and the needs of the moment. Levinas must have carried them from Rennes, where his unit was captured in June of 1940 by the invading German army, to the Frontstalags in Rennes, Laval, and Vesoul, in which he was alternately held as a prisoner of war until 1942, then to Stalag 11B at Fallingbomel near Magdeburg, Germany, where he remained until May of 1945, working on a forestry detail, in a barrack reserved for Jewish prisoners—the word JUD in indelible ink on his uniform—and then back with him to Paris after the camp was liberated in April of 1945.

Despite the crush of events that occasioned them, the notes rarely make reference to contemporary happenings. But by their fragile materiality and fragmentary form they

record nonetheless something of the precious nature of time stolen for thought amid grueling physical labor. They allow us a glimpse into what it must have been like to attempt to read, think, and plan with the prospect of one's death so close at hand. Levinas and his fellow Jewish soldiers were separated by the Geneva Convention from the fate of civilian Jews rounded up around the continent. "That mere leaf of paper," as Levinas put it in an essay written soon after the war, was all that stood between them and Auschwitz.² It was the most contingent of existences.

Philosophy, of course, is supposed to be thought freed from contingencies, to reflect the truth, either by distilling its universality from the particularities of experience or by grasping it *a priori*. Thus, the texts that we deem philosophical are most often scrubbed clean of the circumstances of their origin in thought and the traces of the conditions of their composition. Despite occasional references to his years in captivity and much speculation by scholars as to the impact of the war on his thinking, the same can be said for Levinas's philosophical works. They provide a description of sociality that is supposed to transcend not only their author's perspective but their cultural roots as well. These notebooks thus return to Levinas's corpus what was effaced in his philosophy, even as glimpses still remained in the more occasional writings.

That said, they are not a diary, nor a narrative account of life in the stalag, but, rather, something of a laboratory for ideas. They provided a means for Levinas to maintain his identity as a philosopher and thinker while undergoing an arduous ordeal, to transform his suffering into something more widely communicable. They include reflections on his experiences, but often these appear primarily as material for philosophical or literary contemplation. For example, in the last entry before his transfer to Germany, to a work commando, he describes how the simplicity of existence in captivity shed new light on normal life. "One discovers that there are many superfluous things—in one's relationships, in one's food, in one's work."³ When he describes what he saw in the forest in winter, it appears already as a landscape, "Black and white. A drawing rather than a painting. Maybe more moving for this reason. Simplified, in which one can see the great lines."⁴ Even at the most plaintive moments in which he describes the prisoners' isolation from events, the emptiness of their days, his vocabulary is already philosophical, "a sense of the nightmare. Reality immobilized—absolute estrangement. Night in broad daylight."⁵ The winter sun, a light without warmth, is the kiss of death.⁶ The vestiges of normal life that appear as the prisoners return to and from work in the forest—a girl combing her hair, an apron hanging on the line outside an abandoned house—appear as "quasi obscene."⁷

Even when it is a question of his family, his reflections quickly become abstract. Writing about his daughter, who, along with his wife, spent most of the war in a convent, he writes, "Simone—catécism . . . for once a problem that is not material is serious. Usually you worry about a daughter's health, her conduct, her marriage. And suddenly it is a question of her salvation."⁸

These references to what he was seeing, feeling, and processing come in snippets, embedded among reflections that are purely philosophical. A page after the description of the apron, the following note appears: "The true socialist problem is a problem of

ownership. Not only the problem of capital that permits enslavement, but a problem of the relationship to things—the phenomenon of possession.”⁹ One can speculate on the relationship between these entries, but we do not know whether they follow consistent trains of thought or are merely a smattering of diverse impressions.

What we do know is that he made use of much of what is in the notebooks, many of its images and ideas appear in essays published decades later sometimes largely out of context. In an essay on Derrida, for example, he compares Deconstruction to the fall of France, using language straight out of the notebooks. In the essay “Honneur sans drapeau,” published in 1966, he analyzes the war’s lesson in almost the same terms he had used as a prisoner of war in France, suggesting that it had taught its survivors to understand what was superfluous, when the “splendors of life have been swept away like tinsel.” They could do without “meals and rest, smiles, personal effects, decency and the right to turn the key to one’s own room, pictures, friends, countrysides and sick leave, daily introspection and confession.”¹⁰ Multiple times in the notebooks, he refers to the “falling of the draperies” as an image for the ripping away of all the artifice and decor of civilization.¹¹ This image then reappears in fragments of an unpublished novel that he composed both in the camps and after. “There was no more France [Plus de France]. It had departed in a night like an immense circus tent, leaving a clearing strewn with debris,” he writes.¹² In “Honneur sans drapeau” this image is developed to evoke the fragility of civilization and its accouterments, to show that the war taught its survivors not to trust in the solidity of society’s furnishings.¹³

The very fact that Levinas was planning a novel during his imprisonment is one of the notebooks’ surprises, given Levinas’s postwar writings, which often focus on art and literature. Although he seems never to have pursued publication of the two novels planned in the notebooks, they make up a large portion of the notebooks’ contents along with reading notes from the books that Levinas was able to borrow from the camp’s small library. All of these materials were a part of what Levinas understood to be his intellectual project, and he organizes them himself into a tripartite structure. “Work to be done,” he writes in an early note from 1942, from the Stalag in Germany and then divides his tasks into philosophical, literary, and critical components. Under philosophy he provides four themes: (1) Being and Nothingness, (2) Time, (3) Rosenzweig, and (4) Rosenberg. Under literary tasks he lists (1) Triste Opulence and (2) L’irréalité et l’amour, and under critical tasks he lists Proust. Although it is not possible to perfectly correlate the entries in the journals to these exact subthemes, it is clear that they represent the organizing structure of his thinking during these years. Let us consider the material in the notebooks thus according to these themes.

PHILOSOPHY

Under the philosophical rubric, these four categories do not ultimately represent four different projects but the points of reference that would come to implicitly organize his

philosophy. “Being and Nothingness” is also the title of Sartre’s 1943 book published in France while Levinas was a prisoner, of which he was unaware until after the war. There is thus something uncanny in the coincidence of their projects even if both represent a means to translate and reorient Heidegger’s philosophy. Levinas himself obliquely refers to the intersection of their interests in the opening to *Existence and Existents*:

The stalag is not evoked here as a guarantee of profundity nor as a right to indulgence, but as an explication of the absence of any position-taking with respect to those philosophical works published with much acclaim, between 1940–1945.¹⁴

This book published in 1947 most clearly represents Levinas’s first attempt to address this theme and thus to “leave the climate” of the Heideggerian world and to refigure Being as that which shelters within itself an elemental evil.¹⁵ Many of the observations recorded in the notebooks reflect this perspective and thus the trajectory in Levinas’s philosophy to theorize being’s transcendence.

Possible means for this escape appear already in the notebooks. In notebook seven, for example, he writes, “Accomplishment. Symbol. Essential notions for the escape from existence. Sacrament. Figuration.”¹⁶ It is clear thus that Levinas experimented with theories of language to conceptualize transcendence at the very same time that he is beginning to theorize the face-to-face relation. Thus, in his notes he writes, “How to reconcile my thesis: the speech act [la parole] dispossesses the one who speaks and the thesis the metaphor is the going beyond [dépassement] of signification. How to show that the power of verbal transcendence [du dépassement verbal] is placed in the relation with the Other?”¹⁷ By 1962 he has solved this dilemma, writing an essay collected in the second volume of the *inédits*, in which he describes metaphor as a “depreciation of transcendence.” Even as it gestures toward the beyond, toward transcendence, it does not provide a passage to it, “for it would be an abstraction, an exit out of context that the universality of metaphor precisely contests. The universalization of metaphor is a condemnation of transcendence.”¹⁸

The theme of transcendence is also tied very closely to the other themes listed under his “to do” list for philosophy. Already in *Existence and Existents* and then in *Time and the Other* this possibility for transcendence is linked to an analysis of presence, and both futurity and a radical past get thematized toward these ends. This, too, links up with what he labels “Rosenzweig” and “Rosenberg” in his list.

Rosenzweig is not explicitly evoked elsewhere in the text, but “Jewish Being” or what he refers to in shorthand as “J. comme categorie” appears multiple times. Seventeen years later in the essay “Between Two Worlds,” given at the first meeting of the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de langue française, Levinas explicitly connects this thought with Rosenzweig, writing that Rosenzweig “founds Judaism in a new way . . . *Jewish existence* (and I write existence as one word) *itself is an essential event of being: Jewish existence is a category of being.*”¹⁹ “Partir du Dasein ou partir du J” Levinas writes in the second notebook just after the list of his projects. It is clear thus that this “event” is one that allows him to take leave of Heidegger, as Rudolph Calin and Catherine Chalier point out.²⁰ But

perhaps just as significant is the fact that Dasein and “J” are presented here as comparable categories.²¹ What might it mean to consider Judaism as an ontological category?²² The note itself can be read as a juxtaposition of Heidegger to Rosenzweig, one that reveals a transition from one guide to another at the same time that it reveals that Levinas himself recognized a parallel between the two thinkers. Rosenzweig offered Levinas a way to translate Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein into a Jewish register. One means by which this is manifest in the notebooks is an emphasis on the three categories marked out in *The Star of Redemption* as creation, revelation, and redemption. It is by means of these three that Levinas in the notebooks conceptualizes Jewish existence. Createdness is developed primarily in terms of the relation of paternity, what it means to find oneself as created. “When one calls suffering a test—it is like when one says for a being creature. One gives it meaning.”²³ Then in an entry tucked in on a separate page soon after, he contrasts this notion of paternity and thus createdness with its philosophical counterpart of cause. He writes, “In classic philosophy paternity is exhausted by the notion of cause. See Aristotle. It is in contrast to this that I pose paternity as an original relation.”²⁴ This theme of paternity as createdness is then more fully developed in the 1947 essay “Being Jewish,” in which Levinas defines Jewish being very much in terms of this relation:

Jewish election . . . is the very mystery of personhood. Against every attempt to understand the ego starting from a freedom, in the world without origin, the Jew offers to others, but already lives, the emotional schema of personhood as son and as elected. . . . In a new sense then, to be a son, and to be created is to be free . . . it is to refer in one’s very facticity to someone who bears existence for you.²⁵

Election and creation are tied together here, but revelation as the experience of being called is also a reoccurring theme in the notebooks. But it never occurs as a form of presence or with reference to the present; rather, it always refers either back to creation or forward to salvation. He treats in a couple of places the prophetic figure of Samuel and for the first time the theme of *Hineni* (in Hebrew in the notebooks)—the experience of responding to a call when one does not know whether one has been called.²⁶ To say “Hineni”—“here I am”—is, he suggests, already to ask the question, “did you call me?” Following Rosenzweig, redemption is the becoming collective of the I, “the ‘I’ in the ‘we.’”²⁷ In the second notebook, for example, he writes, “J as a category: when individual salvation becomes collective.”²⁸

In “Being Jewish,” these thoughts are integrated and being Jewish is defined in contrast to an existence starting out from the present. Understanding the present as a starting point, Levinas claims, is common to Christianity, and to the scientific mentality, and shared finally by both Sartre and Heidegger against whom he sets himself apart in the essay “Being Jewish.”

Of the themes listed under philosophy it is perhaps “Rosenberg” that feels the most disconnected from the notebook’s actual content. “Rosenberg” refers, we can presume, to Alfred Rosenberg, the infamous theorist of Nazi ideology and the author of *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) in which the German people are theorized as

the mythic people par excellence and the Jews as “the rejection of myth,” the anti-race. Levinas in the notebooks and in numerous essays afterward accepts this dichotomy as the very means to define Judaism. He represents Judaism as *sur-naturel*, defined by its separation from the natural. Already in 1934 in his essay “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” Levinas had theorized the Nazi ideology in terms that likely developed out of an engagement with Rosenberg, though he is not dignified with a mention in the essay. He describes the Nazi ideology as ensuing from “the concretization of spirit,” forming a society “based on consanguinity,” for which reason it has been rendered “false and deceitful,” “the work of forgers.” In a 1990 prefatory note to the essay he further specifies the project as “expressing the conviction” that the West has not sufficiently inoculated itself against the dangers of “an ontology of a being concerned with being—a being to use the Heideggerian expression “*dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht* [which deals with this being itself in his being].”

In the notebooks we can thus see the exigency of this last thought motivating both Levinas’s search for a model of transcendence that would not rest on the traditional dichotomy of body and spirit and his interest in thinking such a model directly in contradistinction to Heideggerian ontology. There are a number of entries that follow this line of thought by articulating the nature of what Levinas here and later calls “paganism.” “Father land—a pagan notion,” he writes.²⁹ “The nation as access to the real, the world of Heidegger,” he notes in the third notebook, making explicit the connection between paganism, nationalism, and Heidegger.³⁰ In contrast, for Levinas, “Land or earth [Terre]” is already associated with damnation: “point of the fall. The Earth presses. Being = weight, but known internally, in its existential significance.”³¹

Levinas continued in later works to develop both prongs of this analysis: the association between Heidegger, paganism and nationalism—which, he wrote, “emerged from Germany to flood the pagan recesses of our souls”—and the concept of Jewishness as “the negation of all that.”³² Following Rosenberg, in the 1963 essay “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us,” the Jewish people are defined as the antimythic people par excellence.³³

LITERATURE

Under the category of Literature, Levinas lists two projects in the notebooks: “Triste Opulence” and “L’irréalité et l’amour.” The sections of the notebooks devoted to pursuing these themes are, for the most part, demarcated by the headings “Novel [Roman]” or “Plan for a novel.” The sketches in the notebooks evolved into two novel fragments, which have been published separately in the third volume of the inédits under the titles *Eros* or *Triste Opulence* and *La Dame de Chez Wexler*. The first of these projects is most evident in the third notebook, though the notes are so fragmentary here that it is difficult to find a through line. The scenes transcribed are often erotic in nature, involving young girls, the caressing of hair, descriptions of jealousy. At one point we get a list of

characters. Claude Rondeau appears to be the protagonist, and this name is picked up in the more sustained version of the novel's notes, labeled there *Eros*.

This novel explicitly explores France after the fall, a world for Levinas from which social mores and the political structures undergirding morality had vanished. It is the world of the "fallen draperies" that has lost its meaning but thus also "from which all the fog had lifted. One reaches the things in themselves," Levinas writes in one novel fragment.³⁴ Here anything is possible. In the more complete version, to represent this world stripped of convention, Levinas describes a scene of wanton abandon: erotic attraction resurfaces in the forgotten corner of the trenches with a school girl. Desire reigns here "without ambiguity, without feeling, like purity itself."³⁵

Although Levinas's literary ambitions may have been sincere, attested by the third volume that includes, in addition to the two novels, Russian poetry from Levinas's youth, the contrast between the subject matter described within them and the trajectory of his thinking is striking enough that one needs an explanation to make sense of it. If the notebooks, as I have been arguing here, were indeed a laboratory, we must ask what purpose the novels served. Scholars recognizing the tension between Levinas's philosophical project and his literary writings have thus offered a variety of explanations. For Seán Hand they upend our presumption about the hierarchy of values in Levinas's work. "Put simply," Hand writes, "Levinas is clearly attentive to literary possibilities . . . for their own sake."³⁶ One must, in light of them, he suggests, re-evaluate the condemnations of art that appear in Levinas's postwar essays. Other scholars such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Rodolphe Calin, and Catherine Chalier have read these literary experiments as supplementary to Levinas's greater project. Calin and Chalier in their preface to the *Carnets* suggest that the novels, particularly *Triste Opulence*, provided a means for Levinas to describe the fall of France and captivity at a remove from his own experience. They allowed him to read these experiences as the world upside down: "The difficult reality of the captivity could from the beginning there be captured at a distance, be rendered unreal in order to become a novel."³⁷ Nancy in his preface to the third volume argues that Levinas's engagement with literature as author and critic reveals that he understood literature as "the place, perhaps the most appropriate one, for a presentation of the intrigue of the other of relation, approach and contact." The novel allows for the presentation of what is unanalyzable "the irritation of the fact of the other," which can verge on obscenity.³⁸

I would add that rather than upending our sense of the place of literature in Levinas's corpus, these writings in fact support his subordination of it to religion. They confirm the view he would come to associate later with Blanchot's novels: that literature exposes the underside of being but it cannot "break open the definitiveness of eternity." As Levinas put it in 1966, "Two beings locked in a room struggle with a fatality that brings them too close together or sets them too far apart to find a door. No novel, no poem—from the *Illiad* to *Remembrance of Things Past*—has done anything other than this."³⁹ Levinas's own attempts literalize this dynamic, often describing the impact of the other on his characters as erotic irritation, a kind of claustrophobia, which makes transcendence all the more necessary. It may be this fact that makes literature

indeed essential to Levinas's project, as a representation of that which must be overcome through the ethical relation.

CRITICISM

In terms of sheer volume, Levinas's reading notes, what he refers to as a critical project, make up the bulk of the notebooks. Here, too, it is easy to connect what Levinas was writing during the war years with his later published works. Sometimes citations from the notebooks appear literally word for word in a later context. In the later works these sources are cited primarily as artful means of expressing the phenomena that Levinas is describing. Baudelaire expresses an ennui from which the heroic subject cannot escape, Dostoyevsky the experience of a radical guilt that precedes me. Macbeth's cry evinces the futility of suicide.⁴⁰ In the notebooks, however, they appear otherwise, as partners in a dialogue, as sources even for his philosophy.

The second notebook, which dates from the time of the captivity, opens with the closing line from the symbolist poet Henri de Régnier's poem "L'ennui," which itself might seem to express the theme of Levinas's 1935 essay "De l'évasion": the weightiness of being. It describes a kind of longing for an oblivion that will not come, and it closes with the image of black water that resists one's every stroke, "a weighty river that is not Lethe."⁴¹ Levinas continues with notes on Racine's *Phèdre* and finds a confirmation of his developing view that death is not an escape. "The crime of Phèdre makes visible the fact that she cannot hide. She has assumed the ineffaceable manner of existence. And tragedy is there. It is stronger than death."⁴² He continues on with Edgar Allen Poe, Ludovico Arioste's *Roland furieux*, and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Interspersed with quotations and meditations on these texts is the development of a concept of a kind of redemption through the experience of being singled out or called by God, an inflection of the very experience of ennui, of the density of being by a religious resignification: "the happiness of suffering in suffering itself, in its election."⁴³ Thinking with Jankélévitch's *L'alternative* (1938), Levinas reflects that such a redemption requires another. Without the other, the acceptance of suffering is "almost vanity, snobbery."⁴⁴ He then develops this theme along both religious and literary lines, but in such a way that certain literary sources serve as a means to developing religious concepts.

Along with texts from the Hebrew Bible, it is through these literary texts of Catholic thinkers, such as Paul Claudel, Joseph De Maistre, and Léon Bloy, that Levinas begins to formulate his notion of being Jewish. Ironically, this means that Levinas was reading the same sources as the right-wing thinkers of his era.⁴⁵ Seán Hand has noticed that at the same time that Levinas was reading Bloy, less than 50 miles away so was Ernst Jünger, the notorious nationalist writer, friend, and correspondent of Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. The function of all of these thinkers was to serve as a countermodel against which to theorize the nature of being Jewish. But this also entailed a reappropriation of

the logic of Catholic-Royalist thought, that is to say, a conception of identity built on tradition and heritage.

To this end, even Joseph de Maistre played a role in Levinas's thought. Reading Alfred de Vigny's *Stello*, Levinas encountered his denunciation of de Maistre. He comments,

Despite all [that is revolting] in de Maistre, there is a plane that goes beyond the subjective and objective which implies a theory of the substitution of suffering, which is paradoxically on the subjective plane and on the objective plane where this would be to misconstrue the subjective character of suffering. One arrives at the ideal plane that I am looking for "in the face of God."⁴⁶

Although Maistre's theory of substitution justifies the suffering of others, Levinas used it in his journals to articulate a logic of election that transcends and overcomes the very correlation of guilt and suffering that would seem to be instrumental to Maistre's notion of expiation. Vigny quotes de Maistre: "The nations will continue to buy their salvation forever by the *substitution of expiatory suffering*."⁴⁷ This paradigm is reoriented by Levinas so that this substitution can never be understood as the suffering of another for me, but only mine for another.⁴⁸ In so doing, he later claims in the essay "Useless Suffering," he overcomes the horror of theodicy. "The justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality. Accusing oneself in suffering is undoubtedly the very turning back of the ego to itself. It is perhaps thus; and the for-the-other—the most upright relation to the Other—is the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy."⁴⁹ Thus, in a Christian theodicy at its most gruesome, Levinas found a basis for an ethics that operates through a reversal of the very logic of theodicy.

In commenting on Léon Bloy's letters to his fiancée from 1889 to 1890, Levinas explicitly highlighted what Bloy had done for Christianity, that he had, without constructing a system, provided an account of mystery in concrete lived experience. For Bloy, Levinas writes, "all of man is put in the categories of Catholicism . . . while the rest of us remain on the surface of these categories, the Christian, in revealing the meaning of mystery and transcendence, lives these categories at a deeper level. . . . Same work is there to be done for Judaism."⁵⁰ Bloy's treatment of Catholicism thus provides a model for Levinas in developing a notion of Jewish being.

Aside from Bloy the other most significant literary source in the notebooks is clearly Proust. Proust is the only writer that Levinas names explicitly under his critical projects. He explicitly identifies Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* as a key source for thinking through the dynamics of a social redemption from ennui. Levinas's first mention of Proust is as "the poet of the social—of the very fact that there is for me the other person." Proust reveals the other as other than object, as evanescent, "as a presence made of absence."⁵¹ Proust's vision of sociality seems to entice Levinas in its fixation on the inaccessible. Sociality for Proust takes the place of adventure, of the test, of the other novelistic guises of your standard novels. One could say the same for the Other in *Totality and Infinity* and, given his fixation on the Marcel-Albertine relation, it may have

provided the model for Levinas's conception of the feminine. When Levinas published his reflections on Proust in 1947, he went as far as saying:

Proust's most profound teaching—if indeed poetry teaches—consists in situating the real in a relation with what forever remained other—with the other as absence and mystery. It consists in rediscovering this relation also within the very intimacy of the *I* and in inaugurating a dialectic that breaks definitively with Parmenides.⁵²

The notebooks themselves indicate that Proust did indeed help Levinas formulate this dynamic as a form of transcendence. In his novels, Proust performs a transposition of the ultimate site of mystery into the very being of the other and this is a crucial precedent for Levinas in his own philosophical work to enact such a transposition. Yet after the 1947 essay, Proust virtually disappears from Levinas's corpus, appearing in *Totality and Infinity* only as his description of a lady's sleeve provides an example of the role of the formal in art, of the facade, of a sensual mode of access fundamentality at odds with the face.⁵³ Yet as Danielle Cohen-Levinas has noted, a close reading of the notebooks reveals that Proust was instrumental for Levinas's description in *Totality and Infinity* of the caress as that which transcends the sensible. He may even, as she suggests, have been "one of the pivots" that brought him to develop a philosophy of intersubjectivity as an escape from immanence.⁵⁴

This effacement of such a profound influence is striking. But it coincides with Levinas's postwar engagement in a debate about the spiritual significance of literature, brought on by postwar publications by Jean Wahl, Jean-Paul Sartre, Blanchot, and Heidegger.⁵⁵ As these thinkers debated about the spiritual significance of literature for a civilization rebuilding itself from the ashes, Levinas endorsed religion, particularly as exemplified by his own conception of Judaism, as the right spiritual guide of the moment. Already in the notebooks, Levinas is involved in his own interior debate between religion and literature as the avenues toward transcendence, as is evident in the discussion of metaphor cited earlier. Yet criticism as an important category remained. It remained as the means by which literature can serve as a source for philosophy, which it continued to be for Levinas, a means of exemplifying certain philosophical ideals. Without criticism, he writes in a 1949 essay on the poet Michel Leiris, "All the arts, even the sonorous ones, create silence." In this silence, there is a need and a demand "for critique."⁵⁶ Throughout his career, literary criticism would comprise one facet of his intellectual interests, particularly as he came to engage with Jewish writers and poets such as S. Y. Agnon and Paul Celan. Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky too would continue to appear as means to express certain philosophical dynamics, but as Levinas's project became honed in both its clearest trajectories as a philosophy of Judaism on the one hand and as an ethics of alterity on the other, literature would be consistently subordinated to those aims and indeed biblical and Talmudic materials would take precedence as the acknowledged sources of his thinking.

CONCLUSION

The wartime notebooks thus restore to us the chance to see Levinas the thinker in process. In this vein they answer a number of crucial questions. First, they show us the full range of Levinas's interests and ambitions and his capacity to make almost any source, even those most antithetical to his thinking, into a resource for his own development. They allow us to see how Levinas transitioned from being a phenomenologist, commentator, and translator of Husserl and Heidegger, one who by the mid-thirties was struggling to transcend an ontological framework, into a radically original thinker for whom the very terms of Western philosophy would require rewriting. They show us how the pressure of the war with its nearly unbearable conditions served at the same time as an incubator for his development. Most important, they allow us to see how the tearing away of social conventions after France's defeat revealed to Levinas both society's fragility and the unbearable weight of existence exposed in its absence. This desolation was something that Levinas could not un-see afterward. Nor should we. The "splendors of life," these books remind us, can, at any moment, be "swept away like tinsel."⁵⁷ We need thus an ethics that does not depend upon social convention. This is what Levinas set out to uncover among the ashes of civilization, to reveal to us the nature of an inner morality that is nonetheless so often belied by the universe.

NOTES

1. The publication of these papers was delayed until 2009 by litigation over the estate's literary executorship between Levinas's two children. Emmanuel Levinas, *Carnets de captivité suivi de Écrits sur la captivité et Notes philosophiques diverses* (Paris: Grasset, 2009).
2. Emmanuel Levinas, "L'expérience juive du prisonnier," in *Carnets de captivité suivi de Écrits sur la captivité et Notes philosophiques diverses* (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 209.
3. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 70.
4. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 83.
5. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 87.
6. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 115.
7. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 98.
8. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 107.
9. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 115.
10. Published in English as "Nameless," in Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 119–123.
11. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 112, 160.
12. Levinas, *Eros, littérature, et philosophie inédits* (Paris: Grasset, 2013), 43.
13. Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 123.
14. Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1978), 15.
15. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 19.
16. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 172.

17. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 242.
18. Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 337.
19. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 183. The editors of the *Carnets* also make this connection.
20. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 22.
21. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 22.
22. In his essay, “‘L’election de la souffrance’ La captivité de l’Israelite comme ‘schéma émotionnel,’” in *Levinas et l’expérience de la captivité* (Paris: Collège de Bernadins, 2011), Dan Arbib, referring to the aforementioned note in the *Carnets*, argues that “if Dasein is the principle for the question of being, the Jew is the principle for Ethics” (40). Although Arbib is certainly right to see “being Jewish” as the paradigm from which Levinas will develop his conception of the ethical subject, it is important to see that Levinas’s early writings on being Jewish offer not a description of an ethics but an alternative ontological description.
23. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 128.
24. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 129.
25. Levinas, “Being Jewish,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 40 (2007): 205–210.
26. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 78, 83.
27. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 86.
28. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 86.
29. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 57.
30. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 105.
31. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 52.
32. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 231.
33. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 232.
34. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 112.
35. Levinas, *Eros, littérature, et philosophie inédits*, 44.
36. Seán Hand, “Salvation through Literature,” *Levinas Studies* 8 (2014): 56.
37. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 16.
38. Levinas, *Eros*, 28.
39. SB 39; PN 147.
40. In the seventh notebook, Levinas quotes Baudelaire’s poem “Spleen”: “L’ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité, prend les proportions de l’immortalité.” This passage is referenced in the final line of *Totality and Infinity*. Thanks to Martin Kavka for pointing this out to me. For mention of Macbeth, see Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 174; Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992), 155; translated by A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 146; Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990), 14; translated by A. Lingis, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 3. See also the discussion of Macbeth in Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 72–73.
41. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 61.
42. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 63.
43. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 64.
44. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 68.
45. Some of this may have had to do with access. The International Committee of the Red Cross distributed packages of books to POW camps. Some lagers even had libraries, but

- all books were censored. Anything that might seem to disparage Germany was banned as were works by emigrés, Communist and Jewish authors. Gilbert, *POW: Allied Prisoners in Europe 1941–1945*, 186–187. See also Y. Durand, *La vie quotidienne des Prisonniers de guerre dans les stalags, les oflags et les Kommando, 1939–1945* (Paris: Hachette, 1987), 186–187, cited by Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalié in the preface to *Carnets de captivité*, 24.
46. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 77.
 47. Alfred de Vigny, *Stello* (Paris: Calman Lévy, 1882), 174. Translated into English by Irving Massey (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1963), 132. For more on Maistre's influence in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French thought, see Françoise Meltzer's chapter "Beliefs" in *Seeing Double: Baudelaire's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11–74. Bataille can be understood to have developed his interest on sacrifice from Maistre analogously, by reversing the dynamic such that sacrifice is rethought as erotic self-loss. See Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 152–191.
 48. Levinas explicitly relates his notion of substitution to the Christian paradigm in "Un Dieu homme?" published in 1968. "How can I deal philosophically with a notion that belongs to the intimate sphere of hundreds of millions of believers—the mystery of mysteries of their theology—that for nearly twenty centuries has united people whose fate I share along with most of their ideas, with the exception of the very belief in questions here this evening?" writes Levinas in the essay's opening paragraph (*Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* [Paris: Grasset, 1991], 64; translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 53). It concludes, "Messianism is that apogee in Being—a reversal of being 'persevering in this being'—which begins in me" (*Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, 71; *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 60).
 49. Levinas, *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, 109; *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 99.
 50. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 151.
 51. Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 72.
 52. Levinas, *Proper Names*, 104–105.
 53. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 192.
 54. Danielle Cohen-Levinas, "L'instant littéraire et la condition d'otage: Levinas, Proust et la signification corporelle du temps," in *Levinas et L'expérience de la captivité* (Lethielleux, 2011), 65–66.
 55. See Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets: Levinas, Derrida, and the Literary Afterlife of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 54–67.
 56. Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 147.
 57. Levinas, *Proper Names*, 123.

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CHAPTER 2

LEVINAS AND THE HOLOCAUST

ROBERT EAGLESTONE

EMMANUEL Levinas writes that “for me . . . the Holocaust is an event of still inexhaustible meaning.”¹ And he argues that the cries of the victims of the Holocaust “are inextinguishable: they echo and re-echo across eternity. What we must do is listen to the thought that they contain.”² The aim of this chapter is to show how Levinas’s work is oriented toward listening to this thought.

Yet, in Levinas’s work, this listening sounds different from the work of post-Holocaust thinkers and theologians: unlike Emil Fackenheim’s declaration of a 614th commandment or Arthur Cohen’s interpretation of *tremendum*, Levinas does not propose some post-Holocaust principle or law.³ Indeed, Fackenheim argues that Levinas’s thought, formed by Husserl, Heidegger, and the prewar period, is not “focused” on the events of the Holocaust.⁴ Levinas has more in common with philosophers like Hans Jonas, Vladimir Jankélévitch, and, although he displayed some animosity toward her, Hannah Arendt; however, unlike them, he does not appear to make what we now call the Holocaust a theme of his work. Jankélévitch, the subject of an essay in *Outside the Subject*, is little known outside France; he wrote that “we will think hard about the agony of the deportees without sepulchres and of the little children who did not come back. Because this agony will last until the end of the world.”⁵ And Arendt provides a useful way into Levinas’s thought in this context. In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she argued that totalitarianism, and centrally the camps and the events of the Nazi period, were not simply a chance event; instead, something in the “subterranean stream of western history” that “has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition.”⁶

Levinas’s work can be seen as both an analysis of and a response to this “subterranean stream” that is both part of and at odds with Western thought. That is to say, Levinas is aware that the conceptual tools used after 1945 to understand the meaning of the Holocaust are themselves, in part, responsible for what led to the Holocaust, but that, for him, there are no other tools at hand. (Levinas has been criticized for his remark

that “humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance”).⁷ The task of responding to the “cries of the victims of the Holocaust” demands, then, the closest scrutiny of these tools. After giving a brief biographical overview of Levinas’s own experiences, this chapter will show how his work, in its aims, approach, and performance, in its themes, phrases, and even words, is a response to the Holocaust.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO 1945

As part of his naturalization as a French citizen, Levinas did national service in the 46th Infantry Regiment between 1931 and 1933, and he was an army reservist in the corps of military interpreters, with an acting rank of sergeant. Called up in August 1940, a year he called “a black hole in history,” he was attached to the HQ of the 10th Army, located on the Somme. With the collapse of France, Levinas became a POW on June 18, 1940, and was first held in a series of *Frontstalags* (camps for POWs and others) in occupied France: Marne à Rennes, Laval, and Vesoul. Then, in June 1942, as the German losses in the East made these camps less viable, he was moved to Stalag XIB, near Fallingbommel in Lower Saxony. This complex of camps—a number of work camps surrounded the central camps—were run by the army, guarded by the *Landesschützen-Bataillon* (men too old to fight). It is suggested that POWs, even Jewish POWs, were protected by the Geneva Convention: this is not entirely the case (as the mass murder by starvation of Russian POWs shows). In fact, the protection of Western Allied POWs, and even the fact that, in the genocidal German state, French Jewish POWs were not threatened by immediate murder, stemmed more from the fear of reprisal killings of German POWs by the Allies or, toward the end of the war, the perpetrators’ concern about postwar justice. However, Jewish military prisoners were kept separate: Levinas later wrote that the captors “who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile . . . stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes. . . . We were beings entrapped in their species; despite all their vocabulary, beings without language.”⁸ In 2009, Levinas’s recently rediscovered prison notebooks were published, which shed further light on his imprisonment.⁹ This camp network was liberated on April 16, 1945, by the British army.

Raïssa Levinas and their daughter Simone survived the war in hiding: Raïssa first in an apartment that belonged to Maurice Blanchot, then with friends, the Poiriers, in Orléans. Simone was hidden by nuns from the St Vincent de Paul order; in 1943, Raïssa joined her, and they assumed false names.

The rest of the Levinas family, including his parents and brothers Boris and Aminadab, were murdered in Kovno. Raïssa’s mother, in hiding in France, was denounced and then sent from the camp at Drancy to be murdered in the East, in 1943.

After the War ended, he returned to France and was reunited with his wife and his daughter.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FROM 1945

However, as historians and others are becoming aware, the Holocaust has a “post” history.¹⁰ The Holocaust was a complex, pan-continental genocidal event, covered up both during its worst times and afterward, which occurred in tandem with the most destructive war in human history. Personal, communal, historical, political, and philosophical understanding took time to develop: historians discuss this development as the growth of “Holocaust consciousness.”

In the immediate postwar period, for example, the events themselves were hardly understood, and the genocide of the Jews hard to distinguish from other Nazi atrocities. Many survivors were silent on what had happened to them, or shamed or frightened into silence. Indeed, Levinas discussed the events only occasionally or obliquely: as one interviewer puts it, he didn’t like to “dwell on biographical details.”¹¹ This characteristic, very common in survivors and former POWs, occurs in both the public and private sphere. To frame this within a brief history: it is suggested that through the late 1940s and 50s, the events we now call the Holocaust were not part of the public discourse: even the discourse of war crimes at and following Nuremburg did not mark out what we think of as the Holocaust. In France, the experience of collaboration, Vichy, the role of the French Communist Party, and other aspects of the French history made this even more complex.¹² The genocide was discussed within Jewish communities, but, as it were, less publically; for example, Levinas’s moving mediation, “To Love the Torah More Than God,” a rare occasion in which he addresses the Holocaust directly, was first given as a talk on a Jewish-interest radio program, “Ecoute Israël.”¹³ The date of this talk, April 29, 1955, is roughly the tenth anniversary of VE day, yet the talk concerns a story of near despair, set in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and draws attention not to celebrations of liberation but the memory of loss. (Elie Wiesel wrote that he “would hear speeches and read articles hailing the Allies’ triumph over Hitler’s Germany. For us, Jews, there was a slight nuance. Yes, Hitler lost the war, but we didn’t win it. We mourned too many dead to speak of victory.”)¹⁴

The late 1950s and early 60s marked a change in public discourse about the Holocaust. Internationally, there was the “Anne Frank phenomenon” and, more important, the Eichmann trial in 1961. In France, the process of coming to terms with Vichy and specifically the resistance to the Algerian War too marked a change: Pierre Vidal-Naquet, for example, writes that

I personally entered the fight against the Algerian war and specifically against torture . . . with a constant point of reference: the obsessive memory of our national injustices . . . and of the Nazi crimes of torture and extermination. That reference to Nazism remained in effect throughout the war. For instance, the day after the Paris pogrom of October 17 (I still regard that term as appropriate), a certain number of intellectuals, at the behest of *Les Temps Modernes*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s journal, signed a manifesto . . . “We refuse to make any distinction between the Algerians piled up

at the Palais de Sports while waiting to be 'dispatched' and the Jews stored at Drancy before their deportation."¹⁵

Both causes and symptoms of this were the reissue and critical praise heaped on Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce Humaine* [The Human Condition] in 1957 and the success of André Schwarz-Bart's *Le Dernier des Justes* [The Last of the Just], which was published in 1959 and won the Prize Goncourt that year. The Six Day War in 1967 further broke down the barriers against discussing the Holocaust. Alain Finkielkraut—a disciple of Levinas—argues that the events of 1968 further opened up discussion of the Holocaust in France: "We are all German Jews" they chanted in May 1968 as Daniel Cohn-Bendit was denied permission to return to France.¹⁶ Levinas's work reflects this with publications in the late 1960s in pieces for the French-Jewish or Catholic-influenced media. Indeed, during the 1960s, he discusses the genocide of the Jews more often; for example, in his "Space is not one dimensional" (1968) and in an essay on Claudel, "Poetry and the Impossible" (1969).¹⁷ By the 1980s, with the huge growth of Holocaust memory, including landmarks like Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), the Holocaust can be thought to have fully entered public discourse, to the point where, by the 2000s, "the recovered memory of Europe's dead Jews has become the very definition and guarantee of the continent's restored humanity."¹⁸ Within the context of this broad sweep, Levinas's explicit discussions of the genocide very much reflect the development of Holocaust memory since the war. It would be possible to trace this, too, in the changing terms he uses, shifting from "Hitlerism" to using the word "Horrors" to the phrase "Nazi persecution" to naming "Hitlerian massacres" (1969) to "Auschwitz" to writing "the Final Solution, the Holocaust, the Shoah" (1987).¹⁹

But there is, too, a more philosophical explanation for Levinas's oblique approach. Part of Levinas's style is to keep shifting his terms for philosophical ideas to prevent "thematisation" (as Derrida notes, he often "appears to proceed, indeed to leap, from one synonym to the next").²⁰ It seems possible that he declined to comment on the Holocaust directly and at length precisely because, if the meaning of the Holocaust is inexhaustible for Levinas, then to name it, to focus on it as a theme, implies that it could be finished with, exhausted: that thought could grasp it and then move on. (In parallel, the criticism made of many Holocaust memorials is that, once erected and, in one's view, social duty is done, the Holocaust can be shelved and forgotten.) Thus, for example, his characteristic use of multiple terms, as previously: "the Final Solution, the Holocaust, the Shoah" is intended to stem the desire in philosophical language to offer one set term, to reduce something to one piece of algebra in a philosophical equation.

But most important, Levinas does not need to mention the Holocaust too often explicitly because it is there all the time in his work. He recognizes this in a very obscure sentence near the end of *Otherwise Than Being* when he writes that there is "no need to refer to an event in which the non-site, by becoming a site, would have exceptionally entered human history."²¹ Levinas wrote, in his autobiographical essay "Signature,"

that his life including his intellectual biography “is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror,” a remark he repeats in 1986 in the interrogative (in despair at it? As a genuine question, like so many in his philosophical writing?) as “Will my life have been spent between the incessant presentiment of Hitlerism and the Hitlerism that refuses any forgetting?”²² Indeed, anecdotal evidence (if any were needed) suggests that the Holocaust was always at the forefront of his mind.²³ Much attention has been focused on his use of two epigraphs at the beginning of *Otherwise Than Being*. One dedicates the text to the victims of the Holocaust and “millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism.” The other, in Hebrew, names his family members murdered in Lithuania. Attention has been given to his use of an epigram from Paul Celan and, indeed, Levinas discusses Celan with approbation. While recognizing the force of the genealogies that trace Levinas’s thought through “a continuous critical dialogue with Heidegger” or through Rosenzweig, or through Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Talmud, and pointing out that these are “not incompatible,” Richard J. Bernstein argues that “the primary thrust of Levinas’s thought is to be understood as his response to the horror of evil that erupted in the twentieth century.”²⁴ Oona Ajzenstat argues that the “Holocaust defines the space” in which Levinas philosophizes.²⁵ While these all shed light on Levinas’s thought, it seems that they do not get to the sense in which the Holocaust, to use Blanchot’s phrase, “traverses . . . the whole of Levinas’s philosophy.”²⁶ The genocide of the European Jews is present in the method and aim of his philosophy, but more, as shown later in this chapter, in the structure, in the choice of themes, and even in each *word*.

AIMS

To write briefly of Levinas’s complex and profound work, one might focus on two questions. *Totality and Infinity* aims to discover whether or not we are duped by morality. Morality might simply be “empty” of any deeper meaning, and so easily a trick with which to oppress the weak and vulnerable: as Hannah Arendt wrote after the War, morality “suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word,” not transcendent but a “set of mores, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people.”²⁷ Facing this concern directly, Levinas’s work intends “to show a relation with the other not only cutting across the logic of contradiction . . . but also across dialectical logic . . . The welcoming of the face is peaceable from the first, for it answers the unquenchable Desire for Infinity. War itself is but a possibility and nowise a condition for it.”²⁸ This peace is the passivity that underlies activity and passivity, this peace—the welcoming of the face—underlies both the possibility of contingent war and the possibility of contingent peace. This peace is not simply a state of “not being at war,”

but “must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism.”²⁹ Yet, as ever with Levinas, war “which is Auschwitz” is never far away from his thoughts; even here in an invocation of (messianic) peace, contingent war is not far away. This is a framing of how there might, or might not, be ethics after Auschwitz.

Later, at the start of *Otherwise Than Being*, he asks another, but related, question: if “transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the event of being . . . passes over to what is other than being. But what is Being’s other?”³⁰ The answer leads to—and through—“signification, the-one-for-the-other, the relationship with alterity” analyzed as “proximity, proximity as responsibility for the other, and responsibility for the other as substitution.”³¹ (Again we find him repeating different terms for the same phenomena to avoid “thematization.”) The aim is to find “for man another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression.”³² Levinas’s point is that previous ontologies (centrally, for him, Heidegger’s account in *Being and Time*) sought out being in relation to oneself: being is “always-being-my-own-being.”³³ In contrast, he seeks to uncover what it might be to begin with the other, rather than the self. For Levinas, even to ask “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is to realize, at some deeper level, that one always has been. One part of this is what Levinas calls the “true problem for us Westerners”: “not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence which, without blanching in non-resistance to evil, could avoid the institution of violence called out of this very struggle. Does not war perpetuate that which it is called to make disappear?”³⁴ That is, are we able to learn to “war against war,” but in such a way that the “just war waged against war” should “tremble or shudder at every instant because of this very justice”?³⁵ That is to say that in contrast to war, there are two sorts of peace. One is a mere temporary cessation of war (peace, then, as a kind of war, a recuperation, and time to rearm); the other is a deeper peace, which, for Levinas, underlies both war and peace-as-mere-cessation. It is bringing this to light—not attempting to “restore any ruined concept”³⁶—that Levinas is undertaking; and it is this which is a response to the Holocaust, the ultimate experience of war.

War, here and elsewhere when he uses the term, is not only war in Hobbes’s sense, nor a reflection of World War II or Cold War struggles, but also the Holocaust. In one of his Talmudic readings Levinas writes of the “ultimate source” of war, “which is Auschwitz.”³⁷ Indeed, in a typical move, he locates “Auschwitz” as the “paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in its diabolical horror.”³⁸ This is a typical move because Levinas is a deeply metonymical thinker. One term regularly stands for a whole array of things: “the face” for the whole singularity of a “human being” and the ethical demand of the other; “the third” for the whole panoply of politics and society, from which social law arises; antisemitism, for those of “all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man” as the epigraph to *Otherwise Than Being* has it. Auschwitz stands for all war, and war stands for the strand in Western thought that leads to domination and power over others.

STRUCTURE

But it might be possible to go further, if only as a suggestion, with Levinas's first major work, *Totality and Infinity*. One does not have to agree fully with Nietzsche when he writes that "every great philosophy has been . . . the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir," to argue that the book can be seen as having a narrative that is (but is not only) a philosophical tale.³⁹ The preface of *Totality and Infinity* is about the relationship between morality, war and peace, and beyond that "messianic" peace. The first section, entitled "The Same and the Other" concerns their relation and shows how they "at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and absolve themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated."⁴⁰ The second section is about what the individual needs, corporeally, to survive, and the metaphysical ramifications of this: "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep etc,"⁴¹ Levinas writes. It is in this section that Levinas discusses the metaphysics of housing and shelter. The third section, often taken to be the central one, is about the recognition of the face, of the "relation with the Other" that "alone introduces a dimension of transcendence."⁴² Here reason and speech reemerge, through a discussion of murder: both rely on the relation with the Other. Finally, in the last section, Levinas analyzes the metaphysical significance of paternity and fecundity, erotic love, the family, and the book ends in a paean to peace. Thus, it is a journey through separation, isolation from society and "the human," a rediscovery and reevaluation of these, and finally an evocation of the "marvel of the family" and peace. This peace must not be simply the "end of combats, the cease for want of combats, by the defeat of some and the victory of others, that is with cemeteries or future universal empires"⁴³; rather, it "must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other."⁴⁴

THEMES: RHETORIC, HATRED, WAR

The Holocaust emerges as the subtext in other thematic analyses. For example, language is central to *Totality and Infinity*: "language . . . announces the ethical inviolability of the Other"⁴⁵ and the "essence of discourse is ethical."⁴⁶ Yet Levinas is very aware of what he names rhetoric, especially as "pedagogy, demagoguery, psychagoguery."⁴⁷ "Absent from no discourse . . . [it] approaches [the] neighbour with ruse."⁴⁸ It is a trickery: "pre-eminently a violence, that is, injustice."⁴⁹ Clearly—in this discussion of "propaganda, flattery and diplomacy"⁵⁰—the war is at the back of his mind. Indeed, it is justice that overcomes rhetoric.

In relation to hatred, too, the Holocaust appears in Levinas's work. Primo Levi, among others, writes of the phenomenon of "useless violence," the suffering inflicted on the victims above and beyond any possible sadism or (corrupted) reason: in the "Third

Reich, the best choice, the choice imposed from above, was the one that entailed the greatest amount of affliction, the greatest amount of waste, of physical and moral suffering.”⁵¹ For some, this paradox—why the Nazis expended such hate and suffering on those they wished to destroy anyway—lies at the heart of the Holocaust. Some offer instrumentalist answers (which tend to suggest “it made the Jews easier to kill if they had been dehumanized”); others, such as the historian Alon Confino, find its meaning in the phantasmatic desires of the Nazis.⁵² Levinas adds another answer in a brief analysis of hatred and suffering. He writes that the

supreme ordeal of freedom is not death but suffering. This is known very well in hatred, which seeks to grasp the ungraspable, to humiliate . . . through the suffering of the Other. Hatred does not always desire the death of the Other, or at least it desires the death of the Other only in inflicting this death as a supreme suffering. The one who hates seeks to be the cause of a suffering to which the despised being must be witness. To inflict suffering is not to reduce the Other to the rank of object, but on the contrary to maintain him superbly in his subjectivity. In suffering the subject must know his reification, but in order to do so he must precisely remain a subject. Hatred wills both things. Whence the insatiable character of hatred; it is satisfied precisely when it is not satisfied, since the Other satisfies it only by becoming an object, but can never become object enough, since at the same time as his fall, his lucidity and witness are demanded. In this lies the logical absurdity of hatred.⁵³

This passage might be correlated with a dense and allusive two pages in *Totality and Infinity*, which argues that the “Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.”⁵⁴ Someone who struggles against murder is a “quasi-nothing” easily “obliterated because the sword or bullet has touched the ventricles or auricles of his heart”⁵⁵; the victim will clearly lose. But there is a resistance here in the “very transcendence of his being”⁵⁶ . . . an “infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’ . . . the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance.”⁵⁷ In Jonathan Littell’s masterpiece, *The Kindly Ones*, this is not only brilliantly summarized but its relation to the Holocaust is made explicit. The fictional version of an SS doctor, Eduard Wirths (whose nonfiction counterpart is a major figure in Robert Lifton’s classic *The Nazi Doctors*), tells the protagonist that

I came to the conclusion that the SS guard doesn’t become violent or sadistic because he thinks the inmate is not a human being; on the contrary, his rage increases and turns into sadism when he sees that the inmate, far from being a subhuman as he was taught, is actually at bottom a man, like him, after all, and it’s the resistance, you see, that the guard finds unbearable, the silent persistence of the other, and so the guard beats him to make their shared humanity disappear. Of course, that doesn’t work: the more the guard strikes, the more he’s forced to see that the inmate refuses to recognise himself as a non-human. In the end, no other solution remains for him than to kill him, which is an acknowledgment of complete failure.⁵⁸

WORDS: “GOOD SOUP,” BREAD

In a crucial part of the argument of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas draws a distinction between himself and Heidegger over the use of things: for Heidegger, things—hammers, pens, food even—are mere equipment for Dasein. For Levinas, the

bare fact of life is never bare . . . Life is love of life, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun . . . When reduced to a pure and naked existence, like the existence of the shades Ulysses visits in Hades, life dissolves into a shadow.⁵⁹

We are not first “here” and then involved with food, warming ourselves, tools, and so on; rather, eating and warming are what life consists of. “Bare life” is not hungry or cold; cold and hunger are what make up “bare life.” This is not an ontical manifestation of Heideggerian care (*Sorge*): Levinas writes “love of life does not resemble the care for being, reducible to the comprehension of Being, or ontology” not least because the “love of life is neither a representation of life nor a reflection on life” but the “gnosis of the sensible,” the immediate experience.⁶⁰ This experience is what Levinas calls “Vivre de . . .,” “living from . . .” or “living on.” We live, Levinas says, on “good soup.”⁶¹ The inverted commas are significant: “good soup” is the camp staple and its “goodness” is important. Discussions of camp soup occur in nearly every testimony about camp life. Here is Antelme on good and bad soup:

“It’s great today” Rene says, looking at it with terrible longing. The others do not say anything, Neither do I. After a few spoonfuls I stop for a minute. I peer at it; the level’s gone down. I’ve spooned up the most watery part . . . The thick part now . . . First I scrape up the mashed beans stuck to the sides; the bowl is almost empty . . . Then I attack what’s left; the spoon scrapes the bottom, I can feel it. Now the bottom appears; it’s all that’s left to see. There is no more soup.

And:

The guy from the Aisne began scraping the bottom of his bowl, trying to make the thick part come up. He put one spoonful in his mouth, then another and another; he scraped the bottom without getting anything. Then as though at the end of his patience, and with the same enraged, emphatic slowness, he said, “Shit. It’s water.”⁶²

The importance of “good soup” is one example of how the Holocaust shapes and suffuses Levinas’s thought.

Bread, too, plays a role in his work: Robert Bernasconi mentions Levinas’s “hyperbole, as when in *Otherwise Than Being*, on at least nine occasions, he uses as his image of giving the taking of bread from out of one’s mouth to give to another.”⁶³ But, of course,

in the camps, this is not hyperbole, but a stunning ethical act: literally, not hyperbolically, “giving to the other the bread from one’s mouth is being able to give up one’s soul for another,” to “give oneself in giving it.”⁶⁴ The narrator of Imre Kertész’s *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* tells of how “total surprise screamed unabashed from my face” when one inmate, the “Professor,” returns his stolen ration to him, a portion that would have “doubled the ‘Professor’s’ chance of survival.”⁶⁵ As these and other accounts make clear, to give up a ration is exactly, literally and not hyperbolically, to give yourself. Levinas writes of how “hunger and fear can prevail over every human resistance and every freedom.”⁶⁶ He goes on, in a way that is similar to other survivors, but in a more philosophical idiom:

There is no doubting that this human misery, this dominion the things and the wicked exercise over man, this animality. But to be a man is to know that this is so . . . But to know or to be conscious is to have time to avoid and forestall the instant of inhumanity. It is this perpetual postponing of the hour of treason—infinitesimal difference between man and non-man—that implies the disinterestedness of goodness . . . the dimension of metaphysics.⁶⁷

Here, surely, is the echo of the many testimonies from survivors about the ways in which the Nazis degraded them in the camps. What philosopher other than Levinas would discuss subjectivity in terms of the “‘famished stomach that has no ears,’ capable of killing of for a crust of bread”⁶⁸: Primo Levi writes that the “Lager is hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger.”⁶⁹

In recurring phrases, too, the Holocaust echoes. Famously, in *Totality and Infinity* and elsewhere, Levinas contrasts Greek thought to a thought of the “outside” by using Ulysses as a metaphor: to “the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure.”⁷⁰ Yet, even this metaphor, above and beyond the opposition of the Greek and the Jew, has a trace of the Holocaust: one of the very earliest Holocaust deniers was the Frenchman Paul Rassinier, who, from the late 1940s, argued that the tales of atrocities and of the gas chambers were exaggerations, tales told by returning “Ulysses” figures. His 1961 book, summarizing the argument that he made through the 1950s with which Levinas was surely familiar, was called *Le Mensonge d’Ulysse* [The Lie of Ulysses]. Here, preserved as a trace or even a nuance in Levinas’s metaphor, is the fact that most of the Jewish deportees simply did not return.⁷¹

But where does this leave Levinas’s thought? Does Levinas, like Fackenheim, for example, have a principle that he develops from the Holocaust, or a concept, like Arthur Cohen’s interpretation of *tremendum*?⁷² Some suggest that Levinas argues that “Jews must remain Jews . . . Humans must remain Humans,” or that “response is patience. Endurance. Enduring Time. Duration. The time of patience.”⁷³ For Tamra Wright, concerned explicitly with Jewish philosophy, his response is that after the Holocaust a commitment to Judaism is centrally ethical, even without God. Josh Cohen, in a carefully

and painfully chosen phrase, after Levi from the end of *If This Is a Man*, argues that for Levinas the “measureless task of religion after Auschwitz” is “perpetual awakening” to “one degree more.”⁷⁴ For Clifton Spargo, it is “vigilant memory.”⁷⁵

However, Levinas himself rarely gives answers or reaches conclusions, and this is in no small part a symptomatic enactment of the “point” of his philosophy. Sometimes this refusal seems bizarre: he concludes his 1987 account of Heidegger and the possible evil of *Being and Time* with the banality that evil offers “food for thought.”⁷⁶ But overall, he believes that “philosophical research . . . does not answer questions like an interview, oracle or wisdom.”⁷⁷ Indeed, his work is full of questions, which aim to perform the interruption in consciousness that Levinas feels philosophy should be: something that invokes the other and is “never a wisdom, for the interlocutor whom it has just encompassed has already escaped it.”⁷⁸ Part of the reason for this is that Levinas is a philosopher of two sides, constantly in internal dialogue, enacting both the Platonic idea of thought, that inner conversation of two voices, but also a more Hebraic listening to the voice of the outside other. Indeed, Levinas is a philosopher of “doubleness” or uncertainty, and, ironically, resolutely one: philosophy “is called upon to conceive ambivalence, to conceive it in several times.”⁷⁹ This “doubleness,” this ambivalence, which is characteristic of Levinas’s work, both stems from and is a response to the Holocaust. But this doubleness is not a weakness; rather, it is intrinsic to the work of his enlarged conception of philosophy itself. That is, Levinas’s response to the Holocaust is enacted in and by his philosophy, precisely this listening to the contradictory, painful, traumatized, “inextinguishable . . . thought” that voices of the victims contain.⁸⁰ In a sense, while he writes of a need to “refute” evil,⁸¹ his work does not refute it in a traditional philosophical sense except through the presupposition of “peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other.”⁸² In this, Levinas is utterly opposed—but not only in reasoned argument—to what Raul Hilberg calls the “most sophisticated” rationalisation for genocide. Hilberg cites Oswald Spengler:

“war is the primeval policy of all living things, and to this extent that in the deepest sense combat and life are identical, for when the will to fight is extinguished, so is life itself.” Himmler remembered this theory when he addressed the mobile killing personnel at Minsk. He told them to look at nature. Wherever they would look, they would find combat. They would find it among plants and among animals. Whoever tired of the fight went under. From this philosophy Hitler drew strength in moments of mediation. Once, at the dinner table, when he thought about the destruction of the Jews, he remarked with stark simplicity: “One must not have mercy with people who are determined to perish.”⁸³

Levinas seems clearly right, this “diabolic criminality . . . absolute evil . . . cannot be called ‘thought.’”⁸⁴ And his response to this claim or observation is not to return to thought, to a “pure philosophy” or, crucially to a theodicy, nor to restore a “ruined concept,”⁸⁵ as in Heidegger’s attempt to restore Being. Instead, it is to bring into philosophy

that which it has excluded and, in so doing, perhaps Levinas found, or at least found a way to describe, “another kinship,” another way to speak about being human, to understand and act on ethics after the Holocaust.

NOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michel B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 161. This chapter draws extensively from my discussion in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
2. Emmanuel Levinas, “Loving the Torah More Than God,” in Zvi Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 79–88.
3. See Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
4. Emil Fackenheim, Raphael Jospe, eds., *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 44.
5. Jankélévitch, “Should We Pardon Them?” *Critical Inquiry*, 572.
6. Arendt, *Origins*, ix.
7. See Levinas in Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18. He makes several similar remarks; see Jill Robbins, ed., *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 138, 149. See, for further comment, Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002); Robert Eaglestone, “Levinas, the Human, the Postcolonial,” in *Radicalizing Levinas*, eds. Peter Atterton and Matt Calarco (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 57–68.
8. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Name of a Dog, of Natural Rights,” in *Difficult Freedom*, 152–153.
9. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Oeuvers 1: Carnets de captivité, suivi de Ecrits sur la captivité et Notes philosophiques diverses*, eds. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalié (Paris: Grasset/IMEC, 2009). See, for a good account, Seán Hand, “Salvation through Literature: Levinas’s *Carnets de captivité*,” *Levinas Studies* 8 (2013): 45–66.
10. David Cesarani, for example, ends his history in 1949: *The Final Solution: the Fate of the Jews 1933–1949* (London: Macmillan, 2016).
11. Salomon Malka, *Lire Levinas* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1984), 103.
12. See, on French memory and the Holocaust, *inter alia*, *Auschwitz and After: Race, Culture and “the Jewish Question” in France*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1995); Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999). On Levinas’s life, see Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994).
13. For the publishing history of this short story, see Paul Badde’s essay in Zvi Kolitz, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 27–77.
14. Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 96.
15. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 127–128. See also Michael Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria: Multidirectional Memory and the Counterpublic Witness,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2006): 158–184. Part of Rothberg’s point about “multidirectional memory” is that responses to one event (Algeria, say) open up vectors that create a way to access other memories and histories.

16. Emmanuel Levinas referred to this in March 1969 in "Judaism and Revolution" in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 113.
17. See Howard Caygill, "Levinas's Political Judgement: The *Esprit* articles 1934–1983," *Radical Philosophy* 104 (2000): 6–15; Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 126.
18. Tony Judt, *Postwar* (London: William Heinemann, 2005), 804.
19. See, for examples, "Poetry and the Impossible," in *Difficult Freedom*, 132; Emmanuel Levinas, "Damages due to Fire" from 1975, in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 182; Emmanuel Levinas, "As if Consenting to Horror," trans. Paula Wissing, *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989), 487.
20. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 22.
21. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 184.
22. Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature" in *Difficult Freedom: Essay on Judaism*, 291. *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 39. "Presentiment" is the correct word: Levinas wrote an article on the evils of "Hitlerism" in 1934, an article he later refuted on the grounds that "Hitlerism" had no right to be considered as a "philosophy."
23. For example, he vowed never to set foot in Germany after the war, and he did not, even when given the Karl Jaspers Prize in Heidelberg: his son accepted it in his place. See *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxviii. William Richardson relates Levinas's conversation with him after his thesis defence: in response to his claim that 1943 was a "prolific year" for Heidegger, Levinas unsmilingly remarks that in "1943, my parents were in one concentration camp and I was in another. It was a very prolific year indeed." Richard Williamson, "The Irresponsible Subject," in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. by Adriaan T. Peperzak (London: Routledge, 1995), 125.
24. Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 166–167.
25. Oona Aizenstat, *Driven Back to the Text* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 306.
26. Maurice Blanchot, "Our Clandestine Companion," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 50.
27. Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 50. Winston Churchill makes the same comparison between morality and table manners.
28. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 150.
29. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 306.
30. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 3.
31. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 184.
32. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 177.
33. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. Dennis Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 42.
34. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 177.
35. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 185.
36. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 185.
37. Levinas, "Damages due to Fire," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 182.
38. Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 162.

39. Fredrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1973), 37.
40. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 102.
41. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110.
42. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 193.
43. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 306.
44. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 306.
45. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.
46. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 216.
47. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 70.
48. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 170.
49. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 70.
50. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 70.
51. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1988), 96.
52. See Alon Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
53. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 239.
54. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198.
55. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
56. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
57. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
58. Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (London: Chatto and Windus, 2009), 624.
59. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 112.
60. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 145.
61. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110.
62. Robert Anteleme, *The Human Condition*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Marlboro, VT: The Marlboro Press, 1992), 62, 93.
63. Robert Bernasconi, "The Ethics of Suspicion," *Research in Phenomenology* 20 (1990): 4. They are in *Otherwise Than Being* 56, 64, 67, 72, 74, 77, 79, 138, 142. This repetition shows how important this moment is.
64. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 79, 72.
65. Imre Kertész, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 33.
66. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35.
67. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35.
68. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 118.
69. Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1979), 80.
70. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, 348.
71. On Rassinier, see Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (London: Penguin, 1994).

72. See Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
73. Richard Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 279; Tina Chanter, *Time, Death and the Feminine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 222.
74. Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz* (London: Continuum, 2003), 105.
75. R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust and the Unjust Death* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
76. Emmanuel Levinas, "As If Consenting to Horror," trans. Paula Wissing, *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 488.
77. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 29.
78. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 295.
79. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 162.
80. Levinas, "To Love the Talmud More Than God in Kolitz," *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*, 81.
81. Levinas, "As If Consenting to Horror," 488.
82. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
83. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 293.
84. Levinas, "As If Consenting to Horror," 487.
85. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 185.

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CHAPTER 3

LEVINAS, BLANCHOT, AND ART

KEVIN HART

ON December 27, 1995, Jacques Derrida, speaking at Levinas's funeral at the cemetery in Pantin, northeastern Paris, recalled "the exemplary friendship of thought, the *friendship* between Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas," going so far as to call it "a benediction of our time."¹ The two friends both inherit richly from phenomenology, which they inflect in distinct ways, and they engage one another on crucial points: the nature of art, the moral height of the other person, and being Jewish. In the 1940s Levinas seeks to unsettle Martin Heidegger's prizing of being over beings with what he calls the experience of the *il y a* ("there is"), which is the felt weight of absence, neither being nor non-being, from which a human being must emerge in order to be ethical. At the same time Blanchot begins to name something related yet importantly different, *le Dehors* ("the Outside"), which will also distance him from Heidegger while allowing him to note a convergence of art and a utopian communism that could be glimpsed in *les événements* [the events] of May 1968. Levinas proposes a fresh understanding of ethics, based upon the priority of the other person, which Blanchot will admire yet seek to strip from it all reference to God and rethink it in political terms. Blanchot attends to literature and prizes Hölderlin, Mallarmé, Rilke, and Kafka, among others, seeing them as drawing from a notion of the sacred that can be divorced from belief in God or the gods, while Levinas, himself entranced by Blanchot's novels and *récits*, will encourage his friend to suspend his fascination with literary space and make a fuller acknowledgment of the demands of justice.

The two friends met as undergraduates at the Université de Strasbourg in 1925 or 1926, by which time Levinas had been there two or three years. In those days Blanchot was a monarchist, a position certainly not shared by Levinas, yet they conversed about phenomenology and about literature, and vowed to use the familiar *tu* form only with one another.² After graduating, Blanchot attended the Sorbonne, where he wrote a thesis on Greek skepticism for the Diplôme d'Études Supérieures, and thereafter penned a literary column for *Journal des débats* and political articles for

far right-wing papers. In the day, he wrote journalism; in the evening, narrative fiction. Levinas went to study at Freiburg im Breisgau, learning first from Husserl and then, with great enthusiasm, from Heidegger: he introduced Blanchot to *Sein und Zeit* (1927) shortly after it was published. Reading it, Blanchot said over fifty years later, “provoked a true intellectual shock,” one that could not be forgotten or attenuated.³ Levinas was to disassociate himself from Heidegger’s thought after *Sein und Zeit* once the philosopher joined the NSDAP, while Blanchot, even after his conversion to left-wing politics, which seems to have taken place at the end of the war, although it became public only in the late 1950s, would continue to read him and other German philosophers, chiefly Hegel and Nietzsche. When Levinas was a prisoner of war, Blanchot protected his wife and daughter first by hiding them in his apartment in Paris and then by concealing them in a Vincentian convent near Orléans. After the war, the two friends wrote to one another constantly until Levinas’s death, although they saw one another only rarely.⁴

In 1980 Blanchot recalls that, from the moment they met, their friendship always included a third companion, philosophy, which for them was “life itself, youth itself, in its unbound passion, yet reasonable nonetheless, renewing itself continually and suddenly by the brilliance of entirely new, enigmatic thoughts or by still-unknown names that would shine forth prodigiously much later.”⁵ And in 1986 Levinas remembers first meeting his friend: “For me he stood for the very epitome of French excellence; not so much on account of his ideas, but on account of a certain possibility of saying things which is very difficult to imitate, appearing like a force from on high.”⁶ Reflecting on the decades of their friendship, he noted, “I feel honored when, in his writings, our thoughts are alike. We think alike on many matters [*nous pensons en accord*].”⁷ Their ideas may converge in certain areas, but the friends do not always think the same thing: the “friendship of thought” that Derrida evokes is one that had room for difference and criticism as well as mutual admiration.

Levinas greatly esteemed Blanchot’s first novel, *Thomas l’obscur* (1941), and his war-time notebooks sketch outlines of one or more novels that would surely have been indebted to the intense, brooding unreality of his friend’s inaugural narrative work. Three titles are entertained: *Triste opulence*, *Eros*, and *La Dame de chez Welper*. One adumbration proposes the theme of the impossibility of dying, which is strongly marked in Blanchot’s novel.⁸ There are indications that suggest that Levinas has Blanchot in mind. Laying out his “literary procedures,” Levinas notes the significance in the writing he wishes to pursue of a short final image in a text that would come “like a swift gust of the fantastic,” and that would serve as a spy hole through which one can peek.⁹ In 1947 he would observe in “Le temps et l’autre” that at times it has seemed to him “that the whole of philosophy is only a meditation on Shakespeare,” and Russian novels, especially Dostoevsky’s, also provided him with opportunities for philosophical reflection in general.¹⁰ In the same year, in *De l’existence à l’existant* (1947), he notes that *Thomas l’obscur* begins by describing the *il y a*, the felt conviction that being can never be annihilated.¹¹ Perhaps so, or perhaps it is *le Dehors*: the line between them is wavy and incomplete, at best.¹²

At any rate, if we follow Levinas from the beginning, it can come as a surprise to read “La réalité et son ombre” (1948), not so much because it offers an account of literature at odds with Sartre’s emphases in *L’Imaginaire* (1940) and “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?,” which first appeared over five numbers of *Les Temps Modernes*, from February to June 1947, but largely because it seems so sharply at variance with his recent affirmation of literature. “Art,” he writes after the war, is “essentially disengaged, is a dimension of escape in a world of initiative and responsibility” and, worse, “There is something nasty, selfish, and cowardly in artistic pleasure.”¹³ These words from a man who was planning while in captivity to write several novels! (Yet Levinas always had an ambiguous response to art. Before the war, in *De l’évasion*, he elaborates a contemporary literary motif while distinguishing his interests from “the dream of the poet who sought to evade ‘lower realities.’”¹⁴) Blanchot himself responds obliquely to Sartre’s essay in “La littérature et le droit à la mort” (1947–1948), which was to appear in *La Part du feu* (1949), but Levinas does not comment on that collection.¹⁵ He waits until the appearance of Blanchot’s *L’Espace littéraire* (1955) to which he consecrates a largely complimentary essay. That volume includes as an appendix a short reflection originally published in 1951, “Les Deux versions de l’imaginaire,” in which we find an alternative view of art based on the same assumption as Levinas’s case. We can see one thing that divides the two friends by following their responses to art after the war.

“La réalité et son ombre” rejects the commonplace that art speaks the ineffable and is therefore disengaged from the world by transcending it. On the contrary, it is disengaged in quite another way, by passing beneath the world, as it were. Throughout, Levinas relies on a distinction drawn by Jean Wahl in his *Existence humaine et transcendance* (1944). There is a “transascendance,” a perpetual ascent without settling into a higher state of immanence, which Levinas associates with the face of the other person in his *Totalité et infini* (1961); and there is “transdescendance,” in which one is put in contact with what Wahl calls the “unknown God” in the depths of being.¹⁶ Wahl thinks of D. H. Lawrence as exemplifying the latter—presumably he has *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) in mind—while Levinas extends the claim to all art. This passage beneath the world occurs, we are told, because art prizes images over concepts. If Levinas inherits a suspicion of the image from Judaism, he does not disclose that heritage here.¹⁷ Instead, the image is characterized by belonging to a space anterior to phenomena and by the passivity it requires of artist and audience alike. The poet listens to a muse, and the reader is fascinated by what is offered to him or her. (Like Heidegger, Levinas seems to be thinking of art as essentially poetic, in the sense of *Dichtung*.) We are caught up in music, in rhythm, and without ever quite consenting to participate in their flow we nonetheless do.

“Concept” has roots in ancient philosophy (Porphyry) and medieval philosophy (Ockham, in particular), but Levinas most likely inherits the notion from seventeenth-century philosophy, chiefly from Leibniz for whom it means a representation of something (and for whom it overcomes ancient epistemological confusions not resolved by Descartes’s theory of truth).¹⁸ Levinas embraces this sense, drawing strongly from the word’s Latin etymology (from *concupere*, to grasp or contain) and thereby putting

out of play Locke's and Hume's view that concepts enable us to have ideas or mental images. "The concept is the object *grasped*," he says¹⁹: unlike one's relation with an image, a real relationship is established between νόησις and αἴσθησις, intellect and sensation. (No attention is given to mental objects.) He seems to embrace the tradition, severely criticized by Wittgenstein, that concepts are coordinate with objects rather than the tradition that regards them as habits: we use a concept correctly when we recognize something, respond to it in the right way, or form an appropriate mental image. There are reasons, then, to doubt the reliability of a sharp distinction between "concept" and "image" as Levinas deploys it. For him, concept is prior to image, as object is to shadow, for the image "neutralizes [a] real relationship."²⁰ This neutralization is not the process that Husserl examines, which he calls *Neutralitätsmodifikation* [neutrality modification]. Perceptual acts, he thinks, presume a belief in the existence of what they claim to see: they have thetic moments that can be neutralized by a change of belief, such as when one doubts that one has really seen something. Such neutralization remains within the sphere of concepts; the subject is active in using them to make judgments. Yet the image neutralizes in a quite different way, Levinas thinks, by grasping one's attention and rendering one ineffective in everyday life.

The fundamental claim is put less than plainly: an image alters "the very being of the object, an alteration such that its essential forms appear as an accoutrement that it abandons in withdrawing."²¹ In other words, an image detaches the essence of an object from its existence, and then presents this existence as inessential. Such is a "tableau," as in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* when Swann arrives at the house of the Marquis de Sante-Euverte and sees the assembled social world as a collection of pictures.²² Note that this tableau is not a psychological event, for Levinas, but an ontological one. Being has withdrawn, leaving only an image. This division can occur, Levinas thinks, only if there is a "split in being,"²³ in which case an image does not alter anything but is merely a possibility of what can happen if something manifests itself. A being gives itself as phenomenon to the philosopher's converted gaze, as Husserl taught, but also it gives itself as image to the artist's gaze, and so being "resembles itself."²⁴ The distinction between the two modalities of the gaze repeats Husserl's division between *Wahrnehmung* (perception) and *Bildbewusstsein* (image consciousness).²⁵ An artist follows the second possibility and, in doing so, Levinas says, gives a skewed picture of human reality. "Every image is already caricature," we are told.²⁶ Caricatures exaggerate for comic or grotesque effect, but the situation Levinas has in mind arises because an artist can capture only an instant or a facet of life and present it as eternal, indeed, as he later says, as a substitute for God.²⁷ An artwork is "life without life"²⁸; it is, he says, distinct from philosophy, which, using concepts, always opens things up to discussion. The element of distortion occurs not by way of exaggeration but by taking one temporal moment of a whole and allowing it to bespeak the whole.

Synecdoche—that seductive figure. Yet might one not look at an artwork and say that it is less "life without life" than a lens that allows us to see the εἶδος [essence] of a lived experience?

If we read Levinas attentively, we see that for him there are three ways of trying to limit the effects of this basic division in being. First, one can take the path preferred by classical artists and maximize harmony in all that is presented; we see the Charioteer of Delphi as he makes (we suppose) his victory lap in the hippodrome, and in seeing him we clearly perceive the particular mode of happiness that comes with triumph. Yet, for Levinas, the Charioteer would be a prisoner in a moment of time; art has obscured his being, which is irreducibly temporal, and turned him into an idol. He is not worshipped in a religious rite but is as though worshipped in an aesthetic rite by those who stand before him in the Delphi Archeological Museum. Second, one can take the path elected by modern artists and show an awareness of the “deepening insufficiency of artistic idolatry.”²⁹ The artwork will display its reliance on the artist’s craft, leave signs of its imperfection to be interpreted by its votaries who will take it as invitations to criticism: not just of determining aesthetic value but of venturing philosophical investigation, for the terms in which art is presented by Levinas are at heart ontological. This is a path that Levinas commends to some extent; he remains in the wake of Jena Romanticism, especially in Friedrich Schlegel’s desire to incorporate philosophy into the modern work of art.³⁰ Yet, although he does not say so exactly, he leaves room for a third way of limiting the effect of dividing being: for we can refuse the artist’s gaze and instead cultivate the philosopher’s gaze. Then we would have the truth of being, and we would have not taken “the devil’s portion”³¹ and accepted the nontruth of the image, which comes about by bracketing the temporal reality of a phenomenon.

The artist does not create anything, Levinas insists; rather, he or she “moves around in a universe that precedes . . . the world of creation, a universe that the artist has already surpassed [*déjà dépassé*] by his thought and everyday acts.”³² First, it should be noted that Levinas stresses creation, whereas something less grand, invention, would suffice, since no artist begins from scratch: sensory engagement with the world is always needed when making art. (Levinas may well have in mind Gabriel Marcel’s maxim that there is no sense “in using the word ‘being’ except where creation, in some form of other, is in view.”³³) Even without this adjustment, the claim is quite startling in at least two ways. In the first place, it seems to rest on the assumption that an image is preworldly, unable to become a phenomenon. Yet visual images, along with literary images, are part of our experience, and Husserl, for one, devotes a great deal of time to them, distinguishing three moments of the image. There is the physical material used to make it; there is the image-object, which appears when we look at the physical thing; and finally there is the subject of the image. The image object is not experienced as actual, although the first and third moments are. Even so, we might reflect that not all phenomena must be actual or present. In the second place, to agree with Levinas would lead to counterintuitive consequences. For example, one would have to affirm that Mallarmé’s brewing a cup of coffee for his wife or grading a schoolchild’s homework at Tournon is of more moral value than composing his “L’Après-midi d’un faune” and, presumably, the insights into human sexuality and lassitude, not to mention the joys that reading that poem have given to many thousands of readers.

Levinas draws a severe distinction between moral and aesthetic values, and we may well doubt that it can be justified. A poem by Mallarmé, or by any capable poet, does not merely yield aesthetic pleasure, the value of which is, in any case, not to be decried; it also enables a vigilant reader to see and judge the world better. For Levinas, though, moral action is always to be valued more highly than artistic achievement because it takes place in the temporal world of phenomena, not in the atemporal preworld of images; and the philosopher is to be prized over and above the artist because he or she deals with concepts that grasp reality, whereas the artist tries vainly to seize shadows. The essay's title does not allude to the forceful rejection of poetry in *The Republic*, Books II, III and X, for nothing. Its aim is to restate plainly Plato's distrust of art in phenomenological terms, or, more narrowly, in terms that differ from Sartre's in his *L'Imaginaire* and *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Art does not testify to our ontological freedom, and we cannot restrict ourselves to literature that is socially engaged, since all art is at heart disengaged from reality, prior to it. Human reality, at least, begins to come into focus only by way of ethics, understood as one's relation in time to the other person.

When Blanchot responds to Levinas, he does so without naming him, and certainly without the critical scrutiny that an Anglo-American philosopher would bring to bear on "La réalité et son ombre." Such a person might continue to question the manner in which Levinas distinguishes concept and image. (Could one not argue that images can grasp things more surely than a concept, that when T. S. Eliot writes, "The burnt-out ends of smoky days" he presents "Evening in London" [a century ago] more clearly, vividly, and memorably than any concept or group of them ever could?³⁴ And are not some writers—Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson, for example—cognitively demanding in their use of imagery?) Is it the case, as Levinas assures us it is, that "Listening to music is in a sense restraining oneself from dancing or marching?"³⁵ (Surely one does not always or perhaps often need to hold oneself back: when listening to Bach's cantatas, Allegri's *Miserere*, or Webern's symphonies, for instance, one does not have the slightest inclination to dance or march. Besides, what's so very wrong with waltzing to Tchaikovsky?) Is it true that the author and the reader are simply passive when the imagination is in play? (Assuredly, a poet must sometimes work hard to find an appropriate image in a poem, one that fits with the meter and rhyme, and the reader must contemplate its various senses and functions in the poem.)

One can easily imagine further questions. Does an image render one ineffective in daily life? (Is not one's gaze held only momentarily, certainly not for long enough to distract one from performing one's moral duties?) Besides, is poetry always committed to verbal music in the sense that transdescendence seems to require? (Careful distinctions need to be drawn between the insistent rhythms of, say, Swinburne's chorus "Before the beginning of years" from his "Atlanta in Calydon" and the gentler rhythms of Wallace Stevens's "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction.") More generally, there is an important difference between enjoyment, as when one says that one has enjoyed a splendid dinner or a good walk, and the joy that comes from hearing Pachelbel's Canon in D Major or from reading Hopkins's "Hurrahing in Harvest," an elation that refreshes one's spirit and allows one to engage life with more concentration and vitality. Even Levinas's distinction

between philosophy and art might be challenged, along lines already broached, namely that poetry thinks. (One might point to Stanley Cavell for whom “any concept, used in such a way as to require . . . transformation [of human existence], might count as philosophical,” and see in artworks that actually change one’s life not merely images but also concepts.³⁶) And does Levinas have a sure and single aim when he condemns art? Might one not feel “nasty, selfish, and cowardly” in pursuing philosophical inquiry when one could be feeding the homeless, attending to the sick, or working for social justice?

“Les Deux versions de l’imaginaire” is not oriented by the question of what knowledge art offers; indeed, it does not explicitly address itself to art at all. Rather, it begins by asking “what is the image?” a question that was posed right at the start of *L’Espace littéraire* and that the whole book has been approaching from various angles.³⁷ Note that the question is not “what is *an* image?”: the analysis in play is not concerned with what modernist writers such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot call “images” or even with what Levinas calls “an image.” After initial remarks about images, the discussion is oriented to the relationship of language and absence. Blanchot rejects the classical understanding of the relation of thing and image in which one is first given a thing and then an image of it is supplied afterward. Instead, the distance between thing and image “is in the heart of the thing.”³⁸ The assumption is the same as the one Levinas makes; it is impossible for a phenomenon to manifest itself without the possibility of an image being made of it. Thereafter, though, Blanchot swerves away from his friend’s path of thinking.

Blanchot observes, quite correctly, that an image can be an “ideal expression of the object, its presence liberated from existence”³⁹; and, having made that point, chooses a corpse as an example. A corpse is not the person we knew while he or she was alive; that person is not here, in the room where a body lies, and truly is not anywhere. Indeed, as we gaze upon a corpse, we sense our relations with the dear departed withdrawing, and we become aware of an elusive relationship between here and nowhere. The dead body seems to insist on its place while, at the same time, silently testifying that place has dissolved for the one who once lived. Without a *Da* there can be no *Dasein*, we might say, and no *mitdasein*, either. Not that *Sein* [being] is thereby left in a pure state, for we have only its complete absence. It is at this moment, Blanchot claims, that the corpse begins to resemble himself or herself. The situation is well known: an embalmed person can be made to look better than when he or she was alive, and even without that process having been started, a person who has just died can sometimes—certainly not always!—seem younger than his or her years. Blanchot notes that a dead man resembles *himself*, not the person he was. Now there is no distance at all between phenomenon and image, and the dead one, no longer able to disappear in the rituals of everyday life, appears more vividly than he or she did so in life.

No distinction between image and concept is urged upon us, yet Blanchot, like Levinas, underlines that the image “tends to withdraw the object from understanding.”⁴⁰ Classical art will overlook the division within a thing and figure image only as consequent upon an object, and in this way an image can serve truth by way of representation of a prior presence. Another response is possible, however, one that recognizes that the internal division in being also generates image, “which admits neither beginning

nor end.”⁴¹ Does this second possibility commit us to “aesthetic value” over and above “moral value,” as Levinas thinks it does? Not at all: if we live an event as image, we do not regard it “disinterestedly in the way that the esthetic version of the image and the serene ideal of classical art propose,” for that would be to see an image of the event. Instead, when we live the event as image; we pass from one region (“the real,” as conventionally understood) to another where the Outside approaches us. We apprehend the passing of being into image and vice versa, which Blanchot calls “the sovereign power behind all things,”⁴² and we notice this approach especially in states of idleness, fatigue, and suffering, times when the arrow of time seems simply to spin.

This passage from the real to the Outside is a mode of reduction, although far from what Husserl had in mind when converting oneself from the natural attitude to the theoretical attitude or the phenomenological attitude.⁴³ In undergoing this slide we do not grasp a higher meaning but “the *other* of all meaning,”⁴⁴ what Blanchot calls in a *récit* from 1953, “the ultimate insignificance of lightness” [*l’ultime insignifiance de la légèreté*].⁴⁵ To live an image leads us to how things are, which for Blanchot is best (if inadequately) captured by the word “nihilism,” though not by any philosophical version of it currently available, and he will have great difficulties in specifying just what it does capture. To the extent that art enables us to live an image, then, it takes us further along the path to authentic life than philosophy can ever do. We encounter what we might call the truth of nontruth.

We can begin to understand the meaning of this odd formulation when we read “Le Regard du poète” (1956). In that review essay Levinas notes that *L’Espace littéraire* is “situated beyond all critique and all exegesis”; it is an ontological investigation into the very nature of literature, one conducted in a phenomenological key but one that “does not tend toward philosophy.”⁴⁶ Of course, Blanchot is not a university teacher of philosophy—he never gives lectures or writes treatises—and we need to be aware of his situation in order to probe his texts at the appropriate level. Yet he has an extensive philosophical culture. He follows Heidegger, Levinas recognizes, in placing a heavy emphasis on being, yet he differs from him in denying that writing leads “to the truth of being” but rather to “the errancy of being—to being as a place of going astray”⁴⁷; and presumably this is what Levinas has in mind when he distinguishes *L’Espace littéraire* from philosophy. Levinas points to us Blanchot’s observation that the artist’s mission is “to call us obstinately back to error; to turn us toward that space where everything we propose, everything we have acquired, everything we are, all that opens upon the earth and in the sky, returns to insignificance, and where what approaches is the nonserious and the nontrue, as if perhaps [*comme si peut-être*] thence sprang the source of all authenticity.”⁴⁸ Blanchot’s phenomenology consists in manifesting something other than the truth of being, Levinas realizes; indeed, it uncovers precisely what is other than it—the Outside—which is the world of image that fascinates us and that precedes the ordinary world of initiative and action.

Levinas then gives his major reservation about his friend’s book: “If the authenticity Blanchot speaks of is to mean anything other than a consciousness of the lack of seriousness of edification, anything other than derision—the authenticity of art must herald

an order of justice.”⁴⁹ One might say that Levinas does not give Blanchot’s prudential “as if perhaps” sufficient weight: since the Outside is not a phenomenon, it can never be lodged in the present and, if truth and being are convertible, it can never be evoked by way of truth. And one might also observe that the nonseriousness of the Outside does not translate into a lack of seriousness, let alone an attitude of derision; instead, it is merely a way of indicating “the ultimate insignificance of lightness.” Nonetheless, Levinas’s point is clear: the poet’s gaze attends to image, and misses not so much the human being as phenomenon as something that intrudes before a person’s being is rendered thematic, namely the demand for justice. Heidegger gazes at being, bypassing human beings; Blanchot gazes at the incessant flow of being into image and listens to its murmur in literary works; and Levinas seeks the relationship between the other person and myself before my gaze even settles on his or her face.

Toward the start of *L’Entretien infini* (1969) one finds Blanchot engaging with Levinas’s *Totalité et infini* (1961) in three dialogues between two unnamed voices who perhaps embody different positions that Blanchot entertains. “Speech affirms the abyss that there is between ‘myself’ and ‘autrui,’” one of them says in “Tenir Parole,” acknowledging also that there is an “un-equality or inequality” between the two.⁵⁰ (The scene goes back to the discussion of self-consciousness in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807], made much of by Alexandre Kojève in his lectures in the 1930s.) The other voice responds to the question of this difference of level: “Emmanuel Lévinas would say that it is of an ethical order, but I find in this word only secondary meanings.”⁵¹ Ethics would derive from something else, then. Equally important is that this second voice does not accept Levinas’s claim that the other person is always higher than the self: instead, *autrui* is at once higher and lower than I am, speaking to me “as the Stranger and the Unknown.”⁵²

Another person approaches me, Blanchot thinks, “as the very weight of the Outside.”⁵³ Communication is possible, needless to say, but the other person’s speech also testifies to his or her distance from me: not a passage that can be crossed, so that I assimilate the other person to myself, but a nonfinite distance that I can never traverse. The point is phenomenological. When I encounter another person, Husserl argues, I brush against a limit of my transcendental ego’s ability to master the world about me.⁵⁴ Yet Blanchot takes the point further in another dialogue, “Le rapport du troisième genre (homme sans horizon).” Each person is to be approached without having been reduced to the terms of the one with whom he or she is speaking, and the phenomenological warrant for this protocol is the “strangeness” between any two people,⁵⁵ an awareness of the Outside, which Blanchot takes to be properly basic. In trying to understand the interruption that this strangeness enacts in human speech, both parties in the dialogue agree that the One can no longer serve as a horizon as it has done since Parmenides, whom Blanchot (like Derrida) takes to be the father of philosophy as such, and this applies equally to the other appearing within my horizon and to me manifesting myself within his or her horizon.⁵⁶ We are either leaving philosophy or seeking to place it on another footing.

Two main claims are in play here with many others nesting in them. The first is that the third relation escapes the exercise of power that either I can exert on another person

or that he or she can apply to me. And the second is that this power turns inevitably on the priority of the One. Of course, one might well ask about the nature of this One, if it really can be discharged or suspended, and if so whether there are any difficulties that would be consequent on the act. "The One" or "unity" has been part of the vocabulary of metaphysics since Plato, if not earlier, but by the time it was listed in book Delta of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, it has also belonged to the basic vocabulary of Western intelligibility. Can we depart from it and still make sense to one another and ourselves? If no appeal is made to the One, regardless of whether it is organic or inorganic, must there not be an invocation of some sort of assemblage or gathering so that identification, even if it is merely tacit, can be maintained? For surely we can talk of identity even if we have good reasons not to endorse self-identity. Also, even if we distance ourselves from unity considered as a metaphysical concept and affirm difference in one or another sense as properly basic, are there not modes of unity that appear as soon as we figure oneself or another as a legal or political subject? If we answer this last question in the affirmative, then it is difficult to see how power has been jettisoned.

Blanchot does not countenance these questions in his dialogue, which reduces the persuasiveness of his case. Rather, he moves quickly to his main points. One voice says that the Self-Other duality we have been imagining "signifies a double dissymmetry, a double discontinuity."⁵⁷ Gone now is Levinas's asymmetry, in which the other person speaks to me as God does, and gone also is the ground for any appeal to God (as the One or as the Most High). The same voice then makes an auxiliary point, observing that the question we associate with Levinas ("Who is *autrui*?") must be replaced by another question, perhaps closer to Martin Buber ("What of the human 'community'?"), which will be elaborated by way of the third relation and conceived in terms of a communism "still always beyond communism."⁵⁸ Ethics yields to the political. The third dialogue, "L'Interruption (comme sur une surface de Riemann)," seeks to explore the neutral relation, this "modality (without a mode),"⁵⁹ the allusion being to Augustine's *modus sine modo*, by which he characterizes how we are to love God.⁶⁰ We should love God in a way without a way, at the extreme limit of our affection, a view taken up by Bernard of Clairvaux, Aquinas, Eckhart, and others. We love God at the limit of how we love created beings. By contrast, the strangeness we associate with *le Dehors* is transdescendant; and it is this strangeness that Blanchot takes to be primary and that when thought by way of community yields "an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being."⁶¹

In 1974 Levinas publishes his second main work, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, in which certain positions elaborated in *Totalité et infini* are radicalized. Here one is told that the self is a hostage of the other person, that the pronoun "I" means no more than (and no less than) "here I am," and that one must arrest the slide of "Saying" into the "Said" by unsaying the Said and, in doing so, to maintain a rapport of sincerity with the other person.⁶² Blanchot responds, with characteristic obliqueness, in "Discours sur la patience (en marge des livres d'Emmanuel Levinas)" (1975), which is later revised and incorporated into his final major work, *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980). "Discours sur la patience" is fragmentary writing, much as Blanchot had affirmed in *L'Entretien infini*. It

gravitates around the notion of “disaster,” which had been in Blanchot’s vocabulary since World War II, but which now assumes far wider significance.⁶³ In 1981 Levinas reflects on the word, assimilating it to the *il y a*. “In his last book, Blanchot called this ‘disaster,’ which signifies neither death nor an accident, but as a piece of being which would be detached from its fixity of being, from its reference to a star, from all cosmological existence, a *dis-aster*.” And he adds, significantly, “It seems that for him it is impossible to escape from this maddening, obsessive situation.”⁶⁴

Certainly “*désastre*” signifies for Blanchot a wandering away from any fixed center, a situation that occurs in the neutral relation (the rapport with the Outside), rather than in a context of dialectics or fusion. It comes as no surprise to hear that Blanchot also regards it as thought as such: we think properly only when encountering the Outside.⁶⁵ In addition, “*désastre*” evokes the Shoah, which is a theme of *L’Écriture du désastre*, and even the realization that there is no God. Levinas comes to figure ethics as an escape from the interminable pressure of the *il y a*, yet things are different for Blanchot: a just politics comes only with the neutral relation.⁶⁶ Besides, the Outside does not dominate the whole of life. A duality of naming the possible and responding to the impossible runs throughout his writing.⁶⁷ As we are told in *L’Écriture du désastre*, “there must always be at least two languages or two requirements: one dialectical, the other not; one where negativity is the task, the other where the neutral remains apart, cut off both from being and non-being.”⁶⁸ Finally, the Outside is affirmed, not regarded in a negative light; if we find it approaching us in fatigue and suffering, we also are told that it confers a sense of calm and lightness.

“Discours sur la patience” annotates Levinas’s thoughts about the self and the other person; it is as though his books had especially wide margins that could accommodate paragraphs of commentary. There is no doubt of Blanchot’s admiration of his friend’s thought, perhaps especially in its more extreme formulations. Yet Levinas’s ideas do not remain intact in the commentary; for one thing, God is stripped from the scene in which another person approaches me. A firmer adjustment is found when Blanchot disagrees with Levinas on language. To be sure, he approves the observation that “Language is already skepticism” and touches on his friend’s doubts about the lack of seriousness entertained by *L’Espace littérature*: “The disaster would be that portion of skeptical gaiety, never at anyone’s disposal, that makes seriousness (the seriousness of death, for example) pass beyond all seriousness, just as it lightens the theoretical by not letting us trust it.”⁶⁹ In the end, it seems for Blanchot, the disaster, the approach of the Outside, does not concern me, for there is no substantial “I” (and therefore no loss of it in death) for it to concern. Yet the two friends disagree over language. Consider Levinas reflecting on how far he differs from the long philosophical tradition in which he has been trained, and perhaps especially its Husserlian moment. “In starting with sensibility interpreted not as a knowing but as proximity, in seeking in language contact and sensibility, behind the circulation of information it becomes, we have endeavored to describe subjectivity as irreducible to consciousness and thematization.”⁷⁰ Language, here, is not tied to epistemology but rather to vulnerability: it is the self’s exposure to the other person in Saying [*Dire*] before speech begins its inevitable slide into the Said [*Dit*]. And subjectivity is no longer consciousness (Descartes) or transcendental consciousness (Husserl) but the

situation of being for the other person. “The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone.”⁷¹ The reference is, of course, to Isaiah 6:8, and to the prophet’s readiness to be sent to do the work of the Lord.

When Blanchot reflects on his friend’s claim, he fastens on the characterization of language as contact:

When Levinas defines language as contact, he defines it as immediacy, and this has grave consequences. For immediacy is absolute presence — which undermines and overturns everything. Immediacy is the infinite, neither close nor distant, and no longer the desired or demanded, but violent abduction—the ravishment of mystical fusion. Immediacy not only rules out all mediation; it is the infiniteness of a presence such that it can no longer be spoken of, for the relation itself, be it ethical or ontological, has burned up all at once in a night bereft of darkness. In this night there are no longer any terms, there is no longer a relation, no longer a beyond—in this night God himself has annulled himself.⁷²

Levinas would respond by indicating that proximity does not depend on a gaze, and certainly there should be no question of the other person becoming a phenomenon. He or she remains an enigma. The contact takes place outside any correlation of noesis and noema, and therefore it does not presume that a phenomenological reduction has taken place. Indeed, Levinas is clear that he rejects this mode of reduction and affirms, rather, a leading back from the Said to the Saying.⁷³ For Levinas, my relation with another person is established in a past without a present: I am responsible for him or her before any actual meeting takes place. There is no “mystical fusion” presumed by Levinas—the very idea would be distasteful to him—only a call to deal justly with the person whose enigma impinges upon me, whether that be from twenty inches away or from the other side of the world. The two friends nourish each other’s writing, although they do not always commend themselves as the best readers of one another’s work.

Levinas sought to keep his writings about Judaism distinct from his phenomenological work, even going so far as to publish the confessional and the philosophical, by his own lights, with different presses. Yet no reader of *Totalité et infini* or *Autrement qu'être* or many of his essays could ever credit that Levinas’s phenomenology is unmarked by Judaism. Blanchot’s case is very different: it appears that he became attuned to Judaism mainly through the influence of his friend, although writings by Buber and André Neher were also important to him. In 1957 he writes “La Parole prophétique,” in which Neher’s study of the figure of the Jewish prophet is given a half-twist so that “prophetic speech” is discourse about the Outside rather than the one true God.⁷⁴ Increasingly, “Judaism,” for Blanchot, is consonant with his emphasis on exodus and exile, with separation and strangeness, and with dialogue; it has nothing to do with the worship of the one God. “Être juif” (1962) is a prime example, though not the only one; it marks the whole of *L’Entretien infini* (1969) into which it is folded, and its concerns continue in Blanchot’s later collections, right up to *L’Écriture du désastre* (1980) and beyond.

In "Judaism and Revolution," delivered in March 1969, Levinas interrupts his commentary on the Tractate *Baba Metsia* to quote from a letter that Blanchot (whom he does not name) wrote to him after the French radical Left had embraced the Palestinian cause as a struggle against imperialism. Blanchot wrote: "it is as though Israel were put in peril by ignorance—yes, an innocent ignorance perhaps, but from now on gravely responsible and deprived of innocence—put in danger by those who want to exterminate the Jew because he is a Jew and by those who are completely ignorant of what it is to be Jewish. Antisemitism will now have as allies those who are as if deprived of antisemitism."⁷⁵ So Blanchot's Judaism, at once philosophical yet oriented toward what he takes to be the *other* of Western philosophy, does not distance him from a clear political endorsement of Israel's right to exist as a state. Later, in 1985, Blanchot will return to Judaism, and especially to Levinas's role in representing it to him. In the midst of a reflection on the Jews as a people set apart, he asks himself,

How, for instance, to think the closeness of the Eternal in the Bible, what is sometimes called his fellowship, without ruining what is no less essential: the absolute distance, the withdrawal from all presence, the voice of absence that resounds in the distance of historical understanding? How can the Infinite, which is not pure and simple transcendence or definitively superlative supereminence, but a "growing surplus of Infinity" [*un surplus croissant d'Infini*], be exposed to the constraint of finitude without breaching finitude itself, which a dangerously fusional experience that will exclude or dissolve the holy value of separation?⁷⁶

The quotation is from Levinas who in "Dieu et la philosophie" (1975) writes, "Ce surplus croissant de l'Infini que nous avons osé appeler *gloire*" ("This growing surplus of the Infinite, which we have dared to call *glory*").⁷⁷ It suffices to mark a turn in Blanchot's essay. He says, "An extraordinary thinker (I mean this in the literal sense, without laudatory connotations) will be necessary, in this time of ours, to reacquaint us with the fact that the meaning of the beyond, of transcendence, may be gathered up in an *ethics* that would not simply be some forgotten or neglected discipline, but one that imposes upon us a philosophical reversal, an upheaval affecting all our theoretical and practical assumptions."⁷⁸

We are left in no doubt that this thinker is Levinas, and it is worth noting that here Blanchot makes no caveat about "ethics" conveying only secondary meanings. The essay concludes with a modest *post scriptum*: "In this text, while naming no commentator by name, I am nevertheless indebted to many. And, to one, I am indebted for almost everything, both in my life and in my thinking."⁷⁹ Even later, in 1993, Blanchot ends a reflection on friendship with an even more impassioned affirmation of his old friend. "This is my greeting to Emmanuel Levinas, the only friend—oh distant friend—I address myself intimately and who addresses me likewise; this happened, not because we were young, but by a deliberate decision, a covenant [*un pacte*] I hope never to break."⁸⁰ Largely invisible, conducted mostly by way of reading and writing, the friendship between Blanchot and Levinas was nonetheless of the first importance for much twentieth-century French thought. It nourished two immense bodies of creative and critical writing that in turn nourish us.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, "Adieu," *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 8.
2. See Maurice Blanchot, "For Friendship," trans. Leslie Hill, *The Oxford Literary Review*, 22 (2001): 35.
3. Maurice Blanchot, "Thinking the Apocalypse," *Political Writings, 1953–1991*, trans. and intro. Zakir Paul, foreword Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 123.
4. See Michaël Levinas, "The Final Meeting between Emmanuel Lévinas and Maurice Blanchot," trans. Sarah Hammerschlag, *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2010): 649–651. The "final meeting" is claimed to be in June 1961. Jacques Derrida, however, told me of driving Blanchot to Levinas's house in 1968.
5. Maurice Blanchot, "Our Clandestine Companion," *Political Writings*, 144.
6. Jill Robbins, ed., "Interview with François Poiré," *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 30.
7. Robbins, "Interview with François Poiré," 29.
8. See Levinas, *Oeuvres, 1: Carnets de captivité et autre inédits*, ed. Rodolphe Calin et al. (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 98, and Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur: Première version*, intro. Pierre Madaule (1941; Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 72–88.
9. Levinas, *Carnets*, 194. Cf. Levinas's remarks on Blanchot in "Notes philosophiques diverses," *Carnets*, 406.
10. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 72.
11. See Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 63n, and Blanchot, *Thomas l'obscur*, 29–35.
12. The history of the two related notions is tangled. For example, Levinas writes *De l'évasion* (Montpellier, France: Fata Morgana, 1982) at about the same time that Blanchot composed "Le dernier mot" (1935) in which the expression *il y a* may be found. See Blanchot, "The Last Word," *Vicious Circles: Two Fictions and "After the Fact,"* trans. Paul Auster (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1985), 45.
13. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," *Unforeseen History*, trans. Nidra Poller, foreword Don Ihde, intro. Richard A. Cohen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 89, 90.
14. See Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 53.
15. See Blanchot, "Le règne animal de l'esprit," *Critique* 18 (novembre 1947): 387–405, and "La littérature et le droit à la mort," *Critique* 20 (janvier 1948): 30–47.
16. Jean Wahl, *Existence humaine et transcendance* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1944), 37. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 35n2.
17. For Levinas's views of images in Judaism, see his "The Prohibition against Representation and 'The Rights of Man,'" *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1999), 121–130.
18. See Gottfried Leibniz, "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1969), 291–295, esp. 291.
19. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 78.

20. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 78.
21. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 83.
22. See Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 4 vols, I, ed. Pierre Clarac et André Ferré (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 323.
23. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 85.
24. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 83.
25. See Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer, 2005), ch. 2.
26. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 86.
27. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Aphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 199n21.
28. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 86.
29. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 91.
30. See, with respect to this issue, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).
31. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 90.
32. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 83.
33. See Gabriel Marcel, "Foreword," Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), xiii. The view of course had long been held by Marcel, though this is a particularly crisp expression of it.
34. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber, 1963), 13.
35. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 79.
36. Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 231.
37. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. and intro. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 254, 34n3.
38. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 255.
39. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 256.
40. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 260.
41. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 261.
42. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 261.
43. See Kevin Hart, "Une réduction infinie," *Cahiers de l'Herne*, Blanchot issue, ed. Dominique Rabaté and Eric Hoppenot (2014), 323–328.
44. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 263.
45. Blanchot, *The One Who Was Standing Apart from Me*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1993), 43.
46. Levinas, "The Poet's Vision," *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 127.
47. Levinas, "The Poet's Vision," 134.
48. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 247n8.
49. Levinas, "The Poet's Vision," 137.
50. Blanchot, "Keeping to Words," *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 63.
51. Blanchot, "Keeping to Words," 63.
52. Blanchot, "Keeping to Words," 63. For the height of the other person, see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 291.

53. Blanchot, "Keeping to Words," 64.
54. See Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, ed. Iso Kern (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), III, 631, and *Erste Philosophie*, ed. Rudolf Boehm (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), II, 495.
55. Blanchot, "Keeping to Words," 68.
56. See Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, trans. and intro. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 89.
57. Blanchot, "Keeping to Words," 70–71.
58. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, xii.
59. Blanchot, "Keeping to Words," 77.
60. Augustine, Letter 109, *Letters 100–155, The Works of Saint Augustine*, II/2, trans. and notes Roland Teske, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 84.
61. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, xii.
62. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 112, 114, 181.
63. See, for example, Blanchot, "Après le désastre," *Journal des Débats*, July 7, 1940, 1.
64. See Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 50.
65. See Blanchot, "Discours sur la patience," *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 30–32 (1975), 21, and *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 1.
66. See Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, ch. 5.
67. See, for example, Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 48.
68. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 20.
69. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 170; Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 77.
70. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 100.
71. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 114.
72. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 24.
73. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 45.
74. See Blanchot, "La Parole prophétique," *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* 48 (janvier 1957): 283–292, and also see Blanchot's notes on Neher's writings as reproduced by Éric Hoppenot in his *Maurice Blanchot et la tradition juive*, avant-propos Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2015), 188–197, 485–507.
75. Levinas, "Judaism and Revolution," *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. and intro. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 116.
76. Blanchot, "Peace, Peace to the Far and to the Near," trans. Leslie Hill, *Paragraph* 30, no. 3 (2007), 31.
77. Levinas, "Dieu et la philosophie," *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1982), 120, "God and Philosophy," *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 73.
78. Blanchot, "Peace, Peace to the Far and to the Near," 31.
79. Blanchot, "Peace, Peace to the Far and to the Near," 33.
80. Blanchot, "For Friendship," 35.

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CHAPTER 4

LEVINAS AND HUSSERL

BETTINA BERGO

IN the final pages of his *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, the ultimate statement of Levinas's philosophy of responsibility (1974), he offered an intriguing tribute to Edmund Husserl.

Our analyses lay claim [*revendiquent*] to the spirit of Husserlian philosophy, whose letter has been the return, in our age, of the permanent phenomenology restored to its rank of being a method for all philosophy. Our presentation of notions proceeds neither by their logical decomposition, nor by their dialectical description. *It remains faithful to intentional analysis*, insofar as this signifies restoring notions to the horizon of their appearing, a horizon misprized, forgotten or displaced in the ostension of the object . . . in the gaze absorbed by the notion alone.¹

Forty-five years after his 1928 encounter with Husserl in Freiburg, Levinas reiterated his adherence to Husserlian philosophy—notably to the phenomenological reduction insofar as intentional analysis uncovered horizons unremarked in the perception of an object or a notion. Such a claim attests to his debt and justifies our interest in this evolving relationship. But what does it mean to remain faithful to the spirit of a philosophy? And if intentional analysis situates objects, internal or external, within the context of their horizons, then what sort of horizons are “forgotten” and “displaced”? Why should this approach hold such abiding interest for Levinas that he would contextualize his own work as “Husserlian” in spirit? As we know, Husserl’s inaugural motto was “to the things themselves!” whereby he proposed a new empiricism, released from its naive faith in objects and subjects. But this is apparently not Levinas’s concern. Nor was it Husserl’s foundational epistemology—which strove to overcome nineteenth-century psychologism, historicism, and neo-Kantianism, by unfolding the timeless essences of objects and concepts—that motivated Levinas’s adherence. He was explicitly concerned with horizons and apperception, all that which made seeing something possible and which we do not see explicitly when we perceive an object. Why should this represent the ground of Levinas’s own philosophy of alterity?

As we will see, Levinas's strong "revendication" concerns intentional analysis. This is simply the analysis of intentionality, understood as 'aboutness' in its many modes (perceptual, recollective, imaginative, fantasy, etc.). Intentionality in phenomenology approaches consciousness as the living *unity* of what offers itself to (my) intentional focus and the way in which that focus goes forth to things, whether inner or outer. But again, we see in Levinas's remark that he has sought something that would have escaped Husserl, a horizon unnoticed that he will attempt to reconstruct, and which has little to do with object perceptions and their multiple profiles. In 1974, Levinas adds the caveat—against both Husserl and Heidegger—"but the appearing of being [*l'apparaître de l'être*] is not the ultimate legitimation of subjectivity, it is in this that the present work *ventures beyond phenomenology*."² If the appearing of something, any being, cannot "legitimate" a perceiving subject as itself existing *and* seeing what "is," that is, seeing things as they are, then *what* remains of intentional analysis and Husserl's project of a sophisticated empiricism that starts from intentionality? The simple answer would begin: some objects we encounter are unconstitutable *as objects*. Some objects have already affected us at a preintentional "level," say, at an affective one, *before* they can be represented as that at which our gaze aimed. For the phenomenologist, these are certainly perplexing responses. And the venture "beyond phenomenology" sounds like a return to psychology rather than faithfulness to Husserl's foundational epistemology. We have to understand better the ways in which Levinas used Husserlian phenomenology, notably to uncover a horizon in the human encounter out of which his "ethics" arose, failing which Levinas would be writing of something like emotional transference in psychoanalysis—that is, of some unremarked force between two 'subjects' that inflects their relation and results from the past experiences. This is not what Levinas means.

This chapter traces four thematic moments in Levinas's evolving relationship with Husserl. It begins with Levinas's commentaries as a largely faithful adherent, spanning approximately eleven years (1929–1940). The second thematic moment occurs in the mid-1940s when, during his captivity, Levinas begins using Husserlian phenomenology experimentally (*Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, 1947 and 1948). By 1961 (third moment), Levinas's *thèse d'état*, *Totality and Infinity: Essay on Exteriority*, confirms his experimental strategy. Ever close to Husserl's notion of intentionality, he there proposes a *new* form of intentionality in which our conscious focus or aim goes out toward someone who approaches us, only to encounter neither profiles nor objects. The intentional focus now finds itself unable "to constitute" the other as an object it can cognize. Levinas will call this the intentionality of transcendence. He will add, "to think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger [*l'Étranger*] is hence not to think an object. . . . The distance of transcendence is not equivalent to that which separates the mental act from its object in all our representations, since the distance at which the object stands . . . implies the *possession* of the object."³ To the contrary, this unforeseen "intentionality" of transcendence would be unique in its kind. It points to "the difference between objectivity and transcendence [which] will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work."⁴ The fourth moment shows Levinas's experimental use of phenomenology evolving still further between the years 1965 and 1974 when he returns

explicitly to Husserl's "absolute subjectivity," understood as the formal, dynamic structure of consciousness as "time," which integrates all our experiences into its flow. This will be revisited in the final section of this chapter. Let us begin, however, with a brief overview of Husserl's phenomenology.

A SYNOPSIS OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

This chapter is concerned with Levinas's relationship to Husserl. It presents, above all, Levinas's own characterizations of Husserlian phenomenology. There is not enough space to enter into the numerous debates about the scope of intentionality; the nature of the object that gives itself to intentional aiming; the phenomenological ego; and so on. As we will see, Levinas studied Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I* carefully. He wrote his first thesis on intuition in phenomenology, based on those works. In 1928, he translated the fifth *Meditation* of Husserl's programmatic synopsis *The Cartesian Meditations*. He is arguably a trustworthy commentator, albeit one who was influenced by other philosophies, notably, the philosophical psychology of Maurice Pradines on the French side, the *Existenzphilosophie* of Martin Heidegger on the German side, and by 1961, by Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* and by his study of Talmud with Shushani.

Before proceeding to Levinas's early commentaries, then, it is important to revisit some of Husserl's own definitions of phenomenology, but not an exhaustive inventory of them. Already in the *Logical Investigation I* "Prolegomena to Pure Logic," Husserl proposed a definition in light of his critical stance toward philosophers who argued that logic reflected the structure of human thought ("psychologism").⁵ Evaluating the origin and meaning of logical categories, Husserl urged that an objective *origin* for these concepts could only be sought *phenomenologically*. "We are concerned with *insight into the essence* of the concepts . . . looking methodologically to the fixation of unambiguous . . . verbal meanings."⁶ Determining the essence of concepts means discerning what is unchanging in them, thanks to conscious—but not psychological or purely subjective consciousness, which would include personal values, and so on—activity. For Husserl, the immediacy of conscious perception was first of all the adequation or fit between objects and subjects. It was not a psychological construction, nor a neo-Kantian imposition of formally subjective categories on an indeterminate manifold. The search for essences was the methodology of the science he called "eidetics," a science that could apply foundationally to other sciences. Thus, Husserl added, "*pure* phenomenology represents a field of neutral researches, in which several sciences have their roots. It is . . . ancillary to *psychology* conceived as an *empirical science*."⁷ Phenomenology should found psychology, then, by clarifying the *cognitive* context in which psychology forges its concepts. It is "phenomenology . . . [that] lays bare the 'sources' from which the basic

concepts and ideal laws of *pure* logic ‘flow’, and back to which they must once more be traced . . . for an epistemological critique of pure logic.”⁸ The initial sense of Husserl’s phenomenology thus arose in the debates over the origins of logic and mathematics, and which opposed psychologists from Mill to Wilhelm Wundt and mathematical realists like Gottlob Frege.

Phenomenology’s foundational aspirations required that it elaborate the invariance of meaning, including syntactic meaning and that of all objects of experience. This aspiration persisted over the course of Husserl’s career, which also inquired into local questions of psychology, ethics, intersubjectivity, and the history of European science. Nevertheless, as early as his lectures of 1910–1911 on the fundamental problems of phenomenology, Husserl argued that psychology, when construed phenomenologically, might move phenomenology itself beyond eidetics or the “phenomenological doctrine of essences.” As the descriptive approach to experience in its lived immediacy, Husserl there asked “whether an experiencing phenomenology that was not a doctrine of essences was possible.”⁹ In short, the formal definition of phenomenology had also to take account of its extensions into sciences as diverse as psychology and sociology. We know from his notes on intersubjectivity (Hua XIII, XIV, XV) spanning thirty years (1905–1930) that Husserl was profoundly interested in these questions as well.

The publication of the *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, Book I (1913) set phenomenology decisively apart from all psychology as a *mathesis universalis*. While Hume’s empirical psychology had sought to be “a science of facts,” Husserl reiterated that “*pure or transcendental phenomenology* [is] not a science of matters of fact, but . . . a science of essences.”¹⁰ The qualifier “transcendental” expresses the outcome of Husserl’s reflective approach to lived experiences as “transcendentally purified ‘mental processes’ [and the experiences of what presents itself in cognitive processes].”¹¹ At this point, phenomenology, as eidetic science, acknowledges that its objects of inquiry must be timeless, independent of historical variations or psychological considerations. Phenomenology constitutes objects reflectively, scrutinizing the activities of intentionality (or humans’ intentional focus) ‘in its worlds’ or as states of consciousness. In the phenomenological attitude, objects are simultaneously the object intended *and* timeless “irrealities [essences] posited outside any incorporation into the ‘actual world.’”¹² With this claim, Husserl left the terrain of traditional ontology to propose a foundational project that could become a universal ontology. Phenomenological ontology emerged with consciousness approached not as the container or substrate of ideas but as the dynamic psychic operations that opened both world and mind. “[I]n contrast to the natural theoretical attitude, the correlate of which is the world [considered as objective], a new [phenomenological] attitude must in fact be possible which . . . leaves us . . . the whole field of absolute consciousness.”¹³ This definition—and its purified “object,” absolute consciousness—determined the method of a phenomenology that by 1913 was explicitly transcendental and concerned to describe the conditions of possibility of all experience, albeit in a new sense that Husserl argued did not resemble Kant’s idealist syntheses.