

Arthur Cools

# The Anarchy of Literature

## 1 Introduction

Let us start with this question: Does it make sense to search for a concept of literature in Levinas's philosophy? As Jean-Luc Nancy has observed, compared with some contemporary philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Ricoeur, and despite some essays of literary criticism on Blanchot, Celan, Jabès, Proust, and a few others, the explicit relation of Levinas's philosophy to the literary is quite limited (Nancy 2013, 9). Indeed, Levinas does not – and has no intention to – contribute to a philosophy of literature; he does not examine the nature of the literary work and is not interested in defining it, and he does not raise the question of what literature is or employ any concept of literature in his philosophical argumentations and clarifications.

Yet references to literature are hardly absent in Levinas's writings. He acknowledges the existence of *les belles lettres* and recognizes the importance of national literatures (Levinas 1994, xi). Moreover, in some of his analyses, especially in his descriptions of the presence of being, he refers explicitly to the tragedies of Shakespeare and Racine, to the modernist poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and to the fictional writings of Dostoyevsky and Blanchot, amongst others. Critically, he integrates notions originating from the field of literary theory into the expression of his central argument, claiming an ethics as first philosophy. Examples include his use of the notion “intrigue” in the expression of “an intrigue of responsibility” (Levinas 1991, 6) and “the plot [*intrigue*] of Ethics” (Levinas 1991, 150), which must be articulated as “the break-up of a fate that reigns in essence” (Levinas 1991, 8), and the use of the notion of “denouement” to qualify “subjectivity” (Levinas 1991, 10). Finally, since the publication of the first three volumes of the *Œuvres*, and especially of the third volume, *Eros, littérature et philosophie inédits* (2013), there has been a growing consciousness amongst Levinas scholars about the importance of Levinas's view on metaphor for his own philosophy and of the literary dimension of Levinas's writing experiments, which include poems, narratives, and drafts of novels.

These various manifestations of literary expression in Levinas's writings have generated a more focused attention to the different stylistic, poetic, and semantic dimensions of his texts, as becomes manifest in the contributions to

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this volume. They may even provoke a radical change in the approach to his work in general, in that the so-called philosophical work appears to be part of a writing process still – and each time again and in a different way – in search of “the intrigue” of an otherwise than being. However, they do not offer the answer to the opening question, for they do not deliver as such a concept of literature. Why is it, then, important to ask this question?

Between Levinas’s ethics as first philosophy and the work of literature there is a structural and indissoluble coherence: the appearance of the emergence of meaning into being. The central issue of Levinas’s investigations concerns the question of how meaning comes into being, and the answer to this question is provided by his account of ethics, by the significance of the face-to-face relationship to the neighbor. That same question is at stake in the work of literature, which can only come into being by expressing, manifesting, reflecting, scrutinizing, and generating meanings of human relationships. The *raison d’être* of the literary work is nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of cultural, ethical, social, political, and metaphysical meanings at a certain moment and at a certain place in human history.

If one takes this structural coherence as a starting point, it may not come as a surprise that Levinas did not raise the question “What is literature?”. For this is a secondary question as regards the primary question concerning the emergence of meaning in being. Moreover, if one takes this structural coherence as a starting point, the attempt to delineate the literary in Levinas’s reflections or to articulate Levinas’s reflections on literature may seem to be unfounded. For the literary is already at work in Levinas’s ethical inquiry. From the perspective of the question concerning the emergence of meaning into being, the manifestation of the ethical significance appears to be already literary and the manifestation of the meaning of the literary work appears to be already ethical.

It follows from this perspective that it makes sense to search for a concept of literature in Levinas’s philosophy, albeit not in terms of an already established, pre-given concept but rather insofar as it originates from Levinas’s approach to the appearance of meaning. It may be the case that this approach upsets our pre-understanding of literature, whose Latin origin, as Derrida pointed out (Derrida 1996, 17–20), coincides with the moment of its institutionalization, inviting to a radical transformation.

In my contribution I will thematize some aspects of this transformation and I will do so by means of what I call the deformalization of narrative. I derive this expression from Stefano Micali’s article “The Deformalization of Time” (2016). In the first part, I will explain how the deformalization of time changes the conditions of narration and I will show how this is present in

Levinas's writings. In the second part, I will present Levinas's concept of illeity as the most radical outcome of the deformatization of narrative and I will discuss its implications for the art of narration, before returning, in the final part, to the opening question concerning the concept of literature in Levinas's philosophy, which is based, as I will argue, upon an anarchical and insoluble ambivalence.

## 2 Narrative without Synthesis?

In Levinas's philosophy, narrative and narration lose their evidence. The notion of deformatization is meant to approach this loss. As the notion suggests, it implies as a minimal condition to put into question the primacy of the narrative form over content. The primacy of form in the context of a theory of narrative has been formulated time and again in the history of philosophy. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes the formal features of the poetic arts and defines their main general feature as a representation of men in action. More recently, but still in the wake of Aristotle's legacy, Ricoeur, in his theory of narrative, uses the notion of "emplotment" (*mise en intrigue*), which names the formal unity and the synthetic coherence, characteristic of the act of narration (Ricoeur 1983, 66).

It is well known that Levinas criticizes, in light of Husserl's phenomenology, the dominance of the category of representation in the account of the constitution of meaning. Likewise, it is commonly recognized that action is not a basic assumption in Levinas's ethics, which refers to a radical passivity in the human condition. I mention this in order to show how far it would be to go from Aristotle to Levinas if one does not first examine the conditions that provoke the deformatization of time and narrative in Levinas's writings. In what follows I will therefore take Ricoeur's account of narrative as a reference not only because he is contemporary to Levinas and refers to his publications, but also because he explicitly thematizes and analyses the role of time in the construction of narrative.

In *Time and Narrative*, it is Ricoeur's explicit intention to connect what he calls the configuration of narrative to the temporality of lived experience and to re-examine in this regard Aristotle's concept of *mythos*, which he translates as "*mise en intrigue*," in order to draw attention to the specific, verbal, synthesizing productivity of the act of narrating which creates coherence and "concordance" in the floating, dispersing experience of time (cf. Ricoeur 1983, 66–67). In this regard, Ricoeur has in fact already opened the possibility of a deformatization of narrative, since he does not take the formal features of narrative as given once and for all; instead, he thematizes the historical condition of

narrative forms, including the possibility of an examination of the history of narrative forms in relation to a changing experience of time and world. Moreover, Ricoeur's theory of narrative is supported by a critical in-depth examination of the different categories in which the western philosophical tradition has thought the experience of time and he carefully clarifies the insufficiency of these categories with regard to what he calls the aporia of time consciousness (cf. in particular the first part of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*: "L'aporétique de la temporalité" (Ricoeur 1985, 17–178)). In this way, his examination reveals a radical rupture and even more an unbridgeable gap between time and narrative. This gap has two main consequences for a theory of narrative: on one hand, narration is needed in the experience of daily life and is a necessary condition in order to create coherence in the disparate, to impose a structure on the chaotic and to comprehend the ungraspable; on the other hand, narratives are challenged and undermined by the very singularity of the experience of daily life.

Because of the intrinsic connection it establishes between narrative and time, Ricoeur's theory of narrative enables us to introduce the theme of deformatization. However, Ricoeur never mentions this notion as such, nor does he elaborate the questions and implications that it entails for his own theory of narrative. This is perhaps because, as he confirms on several occasions, he continues to regard, in the wake of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the "*mise en intrigue*" – the productive power of synthesis – to be the main feature of narrative and defines from the start "the world of action" (Ricoeur 1983, 108) to be the basic, ontological reference in which narrative composition is rooted and from which it emerges.

It is thus critical to examine why and how Levinas introduces and develops the issue of deformatization in his philosophy. He mentions the notion explicitly in order to describe his own approach to time. Micali (2015, 69) notes that Levinas gives a clear definition of what he understands by the deformatization of time in the context of his relation to the philosophy of Rosenzweig:

In Rosenzweig's work, the abstract aspects of time – past, present, future – are deformatized; it is no longer a question of time, an empty form in which there are three formal dimensions. The past is Creation. It is as if Rosenzweig was saying: to think the past concretely, you have to think Creation. Or, the future is Redemption, the present is Revelation. What I retain is definitely not that second or third identification, but that very precious idea that certain formal notions are not fully intelligible except in a concrete event, which seems even more irrational than they are, but in which they are truly thought. (This quotation is from an interview with Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" (1982), published in *Entre Nous* (1991), and quoted here from the English translation.)

(Levinas 1998, 118)

Levinas returns to the notion of deformatization at the end of his article “Diachrony and Representation” (1985), first presented as a lecture at a conference in honor of Ricoeur, where he situates the notion into a broader context and clarifies his own approach in these terms: “But I have sought time as deformatization of the most formal form there is – the unity of the *I think*. Deformatization is that with which Bergson, Rosenzweig, and Heidegger, each in his own way, have opened the problematic of modern thought, by setting out from a concreteness ‘older’ than the pure form of time” (Levinas 1998, 176).

Deformatization is, for Levinas, in his approach to time a way of going beyond the abstract evidence of the three dimensions of past, present, and future, and of putting into question the formal categories in which the western tradition of philosophy has thought time as a unity, a flux, or a synthetic apperception. But he adds something important: the emancipation of time with regard to the formal categories of time requires a particular attention to the concreteness of the event “older” than the form of time. This means that there are no universal forms of time applicable to all events. Some events may not fit within the temporality of being-towards-death or may arrive in such a way that they interrupt the formal relation between present, past, and future. And it means, moreover, that formal notions cannot become fully intelligible except in light of the concrete event. This implies not only that the way in which one experiences, for instance, the future in the experience of waiting is radically different from the future lived in the experience of hope, but also that the category of future cannot be abstracted from the lived experiences in which the concrete temporal and embodied senses of the future emerge.

In relating deformatization of time to the concreteness of the event, Levinas contests the primacy and evidence of notions such as presence, representation, and synthesis in the understanding of experience. It implies a particular attention for the sensible qualities of experience, the irreducible indeterminable character of sensations, prior to any conceptual grip. In this regard, Levinas’s use of the notion of deformatization leads us directly to the other notion of diachrony and its significance in his philosophy, which may have at least two meanings. It may be used in order to reveal the mismatch between conceptual discourse and experience and to disconnect discursive forms from the disruptive experience of the singular event. As Levinas states in “Phenomenon and Enigma” (1957): “The impossibility of manifesting itself in an experience can be due not to the finite or sensible essence of this experience, but to the structure of all thought, which is correlation.” (Levinas 1987, 62) Discourse, because of the coherence it establishes, loses here its primacy and evidence with regards to the event that is perceivable in the sensible.

Yet Levinas also uses diachrony in a more stringent way in the analysis of a concrete event, in order to draw attention to a temporal dimension in the experience of the singular event that blocks, disrupts, or interrupts the ordinary, synchronic, or synthetic time experience. The analysis of the immemorial past, a past that has never been present and cannot be in correlation with a present – the so-called “trace of illeity” (Levinas 1987, 106) – has become dominant in Levinas’s philosophy and is for many scholars the privileged way to discuss the significance of the concept of diachrony in his work. But Levinas gives other examples of experiences where the synthetic time experience is in default and where a detailed analysis of a different time structure is required, for instance in his analysis of insomnia in *Time and the Other*. As Micali comments about this analysis, “The phenomenon of differentiation, which, according to Husserl, permits the emergence of the elementary unities in the dimension of passive synthesis, does not function in insomnia in the usual way. The supposed unity of apperception dissolves; an indeterminate ‘magma’ appears to and dominates the person who is lost in this wakefulness without any aim or project.” (Micali 2015, 73) Other examples, apart from insomnia, include Levinas’s analyses of the caress, the phenomenon of desire, the encounter of the other, the possibility of pardon, the erotic experience, and fecundity in *Totality and Infinity*, and of the temporalities of substitution and traumatism in *Otherwise than Being*.

Levinas’s elaborations of the deformatization of time entail important consequences for the art of narration. It may be clear by now why the traditional concepts of narrative forms are losing evidence: concepts such as representation, plot (*intrigue*) – even in the way Ricoeur understands it, as *emplotment* (*mise en intrigue*) – destiny, denouement, world, action, character, narrator, drama, tragedy, epos, etc. privilege the idea of a unity of the manifold, a synthesis of the disparate, a chronology of formal time dimensions, or a coherence of being and acting in narrative that are not given as such in light of the concrete experience of the event. Because of the representations and correlations they establish through discourse, narrative forms produce meanings that are insufficient or even misleading as concerns the significance of the singular event – such as murder, violence, trauma, sexuality, maternity, guilt, mourning, depression, love, repentance, loyalty, responsibility, happiness, and the like – that is experienced in the human condition. In this regard, the deformatization of narrative results from the attention given to the concreteness of the event prior to the act of narration. It requires precisely to put into question the primacy of narrative forms, to break open the coherence that they intend, and to reconsider the art of narration in light of the concrete experience that does not fit in the narrated time.

In fact, this transformation of narrative occurred, as Merleau-Ponty describes it in his essay “Metaphysics and the Novel,” in a broader historical context in the wake of a phenomenological and existential philosophy: “Everything changes when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its ‘conditions of possibility,’ but rather of formulating an experience of the world which precedes all thought *about* the world. [. . .] From now on the tasks of literature and philosophy can no longer be separated.” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 27–28) It is Merleau-Ponty who points here at the importance of expressing an experience of the world *that precedes* all thought about the world in order to qualify the transformation of narrative inspired by the phenomenological philosophy. Levinas certainly acknowledged and welcomed these developments in the field of literary narratives in his time, as becomes manifest for instance in the narrative technics of Sartre’s *La Nausée*. However, it seems that for Levinas the deformalization of narrative has a more radical outcome. The story as narrative cannot avoid creating a unity and a coherence that is not given in the experience prior to any thought about the world. In his article “Language and Proximity,” Levinas mentions this coherence of meaning created by narrative, in order to distinguish it from a language that originates from proximity: “Events which are staggered out according to time and reach consciousness in a series of acts and states also ordered according to time acquire, across this multiplicity, a unity of meaning in narration.” (Levinas 1987, 109) Even in the existentialist novel, which Merleau-Ponty terms the metaphysical novel, the story enfolds a world and meaning appears as part of the world already given and manifested within the experience of a singular event. The attention given to the concreteness of the event, as implied in the way Levinas understands deformalization, breaks through these narrative coherences between world, experience, and meaning, and leads to the suspension or even breakdown of all meanings, already given, as related to the world, in order to allow the experience of the event manifest itself prior to the world.

In his book *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*, Andrew Gibson underscores the radical dimension of problematizing and undermining the classic conceptions of narrative such as unity, representation, and wholeness in Levinas’s philosophy. In-line with this argument he considers Levinas to provoke “the dissolution of the novel”: “It seems to me, then, that, for Levinas, ‘dissolution’ is not to be conceived of as a static condition or a final end. It is an active principle and a form of intellectual work, to which there is no conclusion. Thus, [. . .], ‘dissolution’ appears as a median term between a given form and its annihilation.” (Gibson 1999, 88)

Although, as I will show in the next two parts, this presentation is one-sided and unable to account for the complex ambivalence of narrative in Levinas's philosophy, it remains the case that the deformatization of time and narrative includes the possibility of the dissolution of the narrative in a dynamic way. Yet, this dynamic way is itself singular in Levinas's writings (not applicable to a category such as the "postmodern" novel). The dissolution is not a disappearance or an annihilation; rather, it is a reduction and destabilization or an interruption of the evidence of given forms. For that reason, it would be interesting to reconsider the literary references and experiments in Levinas's writings in light of his approach to the deformatization of time and narrative.

In his article "The Debacle or the Real under Reduction: The Scene of Alençon" (published in translation in this volume), François-David Sebbah thematizes and examines, in terms that recall the operations implied in deformatization, the reduction at work in what Levinas calls, in his *Carnets de captivité*, "my scene of Alençon." (Levinas 2009, 136) This scene figures in what is considered to be Levinas's unfinished and unpublished "novel," *Sad Opulence* or *Eros* (accessible since 2013 in the third volume of the *inédits*), a work that may not actually have been intended as a novel. The notion of "scene" is more adequate here because it already includes the transformation of narrative as it results from the reduction to a single event which reveals the breakdown of all given meanings of a common world. The scene describes the moment of the defeat, the very event of the suspension of a world having lost its familiarity, where human beings suddenly appear to be no longer following their own trajectory in any meaningful context and practice of daily life, but instead find themselves on the move, as a crowd of refugees, indistinct and encumbered by their baggage, without trajectory, in a derisory and senseless turbulence of movements. The scene is precisely in this sense a scene in that it does not relate the event to the world of yesterday or to a *lendemain* of the defeat, another world that already announces itself as a promise or a combat; likewise, it does not take the event as a starting point from which to narrate the action of a character that restores him as an individual and transforms him into a hero. On the contrary, it is a scene in that it searches for the singular meaning of the event by means of a reduction of narrative meanings that is expressed through one single, recurrent image: the drapes (representative of the power of institutions that guarantee the meaningful world) that are ablaze and that fall (their representative function and the power of institutions have collapsed).

Through reduction, the scene transforms the narrative into something spectacular – a visibility without context; however, it does not stop the reduction there but rather pushes it further in order to express the singular,

uncertain, non-evident meaning behind this appearance.<sup>1</sup> Something similar is at stake in the way Levinas introduces literary references into his philosophical argumentation. In fact, as many scholars have observed, Levinas's use of literary references is idiosyncratic. His quotations, whether from the Talmud, a drama of Shakespeare, a novel of Dostoyevsky, or a poem of Baudelaire, are time and again included in philosophical examination without any transition, sometimes without even being identified as quotations. For example: "The true life is absent.' But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi." (Levinas 1979, 33) These are the opening sentences of his analysis of desire in the first part of *Totality and Infinity*: the first is a quote from Rimbaud (who is not identified); the second inverts the meaning of the quote of Rimbaud, who originally continued by saying that we are *not* in the world; the third confirms Levinas's commitment to metaphysics. Moreover, Levinas often uses a literary quote via reducing it to a single appearance of meaning – a "scene," as I prefer to say – without any consideration for the narrative context and complexity of the original text. A well-known example is a quote from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everyone, and I more than the others." This reference recurs in various texts of Levinas (cf. Levinas 1991, 146; cf. Levinas 1998, 105), but without consideration of either the character who expresses this sentence or the narrative context in which it is expressed. Other examples are his quotation from *The Song of Songs* at the core of his argumentation on subjectivity as exposition of the self to the other, a quotation reduced to one word: "sick [from love]" (Levinas 1991, 142), and the reference to Isaiah 6:8 in the same context, also reduced to a single expression, "Here I am (*me voici*)" (Levinas 1991, 146). Derrida wondered why Levinas does not specify the contexts of these quotations (for instance the female voice in the *Song of Songs* (Derrida 1987, 167–169)).

Levinas, indeed, is not interested in characters or in the plot-structure of narratives. When he refers to *MacBeth* in *Existence and Existents*, it is not the main character and his dispositions to act that attract Levinas's attention, but rather the experience of the spectacular presence of existence at the margins of world: "In *MacBeth*, the apparition of Banquo's ghost is also a decisive

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<sup>1</sup> So, when Levinas defines "the face" as that which breaks at any times through the form that presents it, he is, in a certain way, simply formulating the principle of the method of deformatization and applying it to the encounter of the other person: the event of the encounter is first reduced to the scene of the face, that appears in a spectacular way ("a plastic form," "without context"), and second the reduction is pushed further so as to articulate the singular, non-evident meaning behind this appearance.

experience of the ‘no exit’ from existence, its phantom return through the fissures through which one has driven it. ‘The times have been, that when the Brains were out, the man would dye, and there an end; But now they rise again . . . and push us from our stools. This is more strange than such a murder is.’ ‘And it is over with’ is impossible.” (Levinas 1989, 33–34) Similarly, when he comments on Blanchot’s *La Folie du jour*, he does not enter into analysis of the complex structure of the narrator’s time experience; rather, he highlights one “little scene in which, in front of the courtyard door, a man steps back to let a baby carriage through, is the event of an advent – that is, the moment when something abnormal ensues: one person withdraws before the other, one is for the other. Whence the narrator’s lightheartedness, which seems to lift him above being.” (Levinas 1996, 165–166)

### 3 Illeity without Narration?

From this examination of the deformatization of time and narrative, it follows that for Levinas narration is secondary with regard to experience. There is no ontological continuity between the latter and the former. Experience itself is not originally or necessarily correlated to the world or to the beings in the world. What manifests itself in experience lacks the formal and synthetic coherence characteristic of the narrative, hence Levinas’s emphasis, in the introduction of *Otherwise than Being*, on the “unsayable” (*l’indicible*) and the “enigmatic” that exceeds propositional language: “When stated in propositions, the unsayable (or the an-archival) espouses the forms of formal logic; [. . .].” (Levinas 1991, 7) The articulation of what manifests itself in experience does not necessarily involve narrative or discursive categories. This is precisely what Levinas’s analysis of sensibility intends to demonstrate: “The immediacy of the sensible which is not reducible to thegnoseological role assumed by sensation is the exposure to wounding and to enjoyment, an exposure to wounding in enjoyment, which enables the wound to reach the subjectivity of the subject complacent in itself and positing itself for itself. This immediacy is first of all the ease of enjoyment, more immediate than drinking, the sinking into the depth of the element, into its incomparable freshness, [. . .].” (Levinas 1991, 104). The immediacy of the sensible is what at any time escapes the thematization of experience and does not stop manifesting itself without regard for its thematization. The immediacy of the sensible is in this regard the permanent source of contestation undermining the evidence of already given categories that are used to describe experience.

However, despite the ontological break between experience and narration, Levinas seems to take for granted that narration is dependent on experience, not only in the sense of “arising from” or “having its origin in” but also in the sense of “being the expression of.” The act of narration responds to the concreteness of a prior event that is not in itself already narrative, or that is not in itself already part of a meaningful world, but that is witnessed by the act of narration. It seems thus inevitable that the act of narration is first confronted with a “not knowing what to say,” with “a not being able to express.” However, this way of presenting the narrative’s dependency on experience risks suggesting that an adequate articulation of what is original in experience remains ever possible and merely awaiting for the corresponding narrative form. This interpretation is mistaken for two reasons. It assumes the continuity between experience and narration, thereby reducing the (ungraspable strangeness of the) former to the meaning expressed by the latter. Levinas’s approach clearly has another direction: considering an ontological gap between experience and narrative, he argues that the meaning of narrative forms is dependent on a significance that exceeds that meaning. Moreover, this way of presenting the relation between experience and narrative risks understanding the prior event of the experience as the origin of narrative forms, thus confusing two distinct questions, namely, that concerning the possibility of narration and that concerning the narration’s dependency on experience. In fact, Levinas articulates the relation between experience and narration in two steps. The act of narration is possible only within the context of a commonality: in other words, the reference to the third – the presence of a community – is already required in order to address, to compose, and to interpret a narrative. However, as expression of experience, narration responds to a concreteness that is prior to this commonality. This concreteness is not an origin from which to deduce discursive and narrative forms. It is, as noted earlier, not in itself already part of a meaningful world; rather, it disturbs and undermines the evidence of the already given meanings in the common world. In this sense, it is not originary but “anarchical,” as Levinas would say. Yet the act of narration responds to it, responds to this non-origin.<sup>2</sup>

The narrative’s relation to experience is thus complex. It requires a two-staged analysis: an examination of the narrative’s relation to the cultural context as a whole – an examination which may be able to shed light on the origin of narrative forms; and an examination of the narrative’s response to the

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<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth articulation of the problem of origin in Levinas in relation to the anarchical see Bierhanzl, “Chapter III. L’origine du langage” (2014, 59–80).

anarchical concreteness of experience – an examination of the singularity of the narrative’s expression which destabilizes the apparent meanings of its formal qualities. In what follows, I will further focus on the narrative’s dependency of the anarchical concreteness of experience, as Levinas articulates it. For Levinas has his own way of thematizing this dependency, namely, by introducing the idiosyncratic concept of “illeity”: “Illeity is the origin of the alterity of being,” he states in “Meaning and Sense” (Levinas 1987, 106). Illeity is the name of the alterity that is not a worldly being, that does not belong to being, and that does not appear: it transcends the order of being and appearing. Illeity is thus not an experience; there is no experience of the illeity. For that reason, Levinas uses the notion of “trace” in a direct connection with the concept of illeity: “Only a being that transcends the world, an absolute being, can leave a trace.” (Levinas 1987, 105) The trace signifies the transcendence beyond being: “the signifyingness of a trace consists in signifying without making appear, [. . .] it establishes a relation with illeity” (Levinas 1987, 104) in that it disturbs the order of the world. It is not to be confused with a sign that presents another world behind the actual world. The trace does not refer to the presence of a past event that still is accessible from the present (as in memory and history). It refers to a past that has never been present, an immemorial past, and that in passing has disturbed the order of presence in an irreversible way. “A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past.” (Levinas 1987, 105)

It is clear that Levinas, introducing the notion of illeity, still wishes to say something about the anarchical concreteness of/before experience to which narration responds. And the notion of trace is certainly helpful to approach that which escapes synchronization in experience and disturbs the evident order of meanings, as have various authors, from Nietzsche and Freud to Deleuze and Derrida. However, the concept of illeity adds something new, in that it seems to delineate the ungraspable, destabilizing otherness of the anarchical in experience. Illeity is the substantive form of the French pronoun “il,” which can be used for the singular masculine “he” or the neutral “it.” It appears that Levinas explicitly limits its meaning to the former, as when he writes “[t]he illeity of the third person” (Levinas 1987, 104), although it is unclear how it is possible to define the alterity beyond being as “personal” and as “male.” The “il” of the illeity is not the “it” of a thing (cf. Levinas 1987, 106); nor is it the “you” (the second-person singular) whom the I addresses in the encounter of the other person; nor is it the “there” of the “there is” (the *il y a*), the vague, undefinable, and unescapable presence of existence. It would have been possible to approach and to express the anarchic, non-original, inescapable, and unsayable alterity in each of these relations, as does, for (brief) example, Blanchot

in *Thomas l'Obscur*, for the “there is” (cf. Levinas 1989, 36); Ionesco, for the “you” in the encounter with the other person; and Artaud, for the “it.” The “il” of the illeity seems to relate to the anarchical – to the concreteness of the event “older” than the world – in yet another way.

It is interesting to note that the reduction given with the deformatization of narrative, as mentioned at the end of the first section, reaches here, in the concept of illeity, its most extreme possibility. The formal indicator “il” is the minimal condition without which it would no longer be possible to state any meaning, not even the meaning of the difference between alterity and selfhood. From the abstraction of this formal indicator, almost all narrative means are erased. In other words, with regard to the concept of illeity, a narrative can only fail, be mistaken, fall short of presenting its relevance or betray it, for it belongs to the essence of narratives to represent an experience, an estrangement, an event, a character, a world . . .

Yet, it is also notable that Levinas refers again to a little scene reduced to its minimal form – the form of a name which is the beginning of all names – in order to express the orientation of meaning that the concept of illeity introduces into being. In *Otherwise than Being*, in the midst of a philosophical argumentation about the glory of the Infinite, the concreteness of the event of which the “il” of the illeity is the trace, Levinas states the following: “like the thickets of Paradise in which Adam hid himself upon hearing the voice of the eternal God traversing the garden from the side from which the day comes, offered a hiding-place from the assignation, in which the position of the ego at the beginning, and the very possibility of origin, is shaken.” (Levinas 1991, 144)<sup>3</sup> To be sure, the scene is introduced by “like” (*comme*), indicating the scene’s metaphoric use, its secondary relevance as regards the meaning of the illeity. The scene is already a betrayal, but one that reveals something crucial about the origin of the anarchical. Again, all narrative context and presuppositions – including the creation of world, the naming of the creatures, the life of paradise, the love of Eve, the prohibition of transgressing, the face of the snake, the seduction – are eliminated from this scene, including even the consciousness of one’s own and the other’s nakedness. Reduced in this way, the

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<sup>3</sup> Levinas refers here to Genesis 3:8 but appears to offer his own translation when he adds “from the side from which the day comes.” The Hebrew Bible reads: “the ru’ah of the day” – the wind of spirit of the day. In the French translation of the edition of Rachi, the verse is: “Ils entendirent la voix de l’Eternel-Dieu, parcourant le jardin du côté du jour.” And in the French translation of the Bible of Jerusalem: “Ils entendirent le pas de Yahvé-Dieu qui se promenait dans le jardin à la brise du jour.” I am grateful to Michael Fagenblat for noting this to me and suggesting that Levinas’s translation may be based upon a rabbinic midrash.

scene delivers a single image of Adam's hiding, the meaning of which emerges from the passing of illeity – the traversing of the eternal God – that disturbs the order of the created world. The trace of this passing provokes the sign given to the other in the modality of a hiding that is incapable of undoing in the hiding the response to the passing. It seems thus that Levinas is suggesting that the anarchical – whatever may be the experience it disturbs – relates to this scene, which can be called “primal” both in this sense and in that it expresses “the origin of the alterity of being”.

In this way, Levinas is able to delineate in at least three ways the alterity of the anarchical of/before experience as intended by the concept of illeity. First, “the trace of the illeity,” the illeity as trace, signifies that the anarchical is beyond representation. In other words, it is not sufficient to describe the anarchical in terms of the unconsciousness, the oblivion, the repression or the displacement of the representational (as is the case in a psychoanalytic and/or deconstructionist context). The anarchical does not belong to the order of representation; it cannot be represented and it escapes any attempt to represent it. Second, the illeity as “origin of the alterity” signifies that the anarchical has its origin outside human experience. The anarchical inverts the movement that starts from and has its origin in selfhood. “*Beyond being is a third person* which is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity.” (Levinas 1987, 103) Consequently, the anarchical breaks into the self-relatedness of selfhood before and without the self having any possibility of receiving it or relating to it. Third, the “illeity of the third person,” the illeity as third person beyond being, signifies that the anarchical assigns selfhood: “a relationship which is personal and ethical, is an obligation and does not disclose” (Levinas 1987, 104). Here Levinas relates the third person of the illeity to the face. “The *beyond* from which a face comes in the third person.” (Levinas 1987, 104) The absence that manifests itself in the face, breaking out of its plastic form, is not a senseless emptiness – “a pure hole in the world” (Levinas 1987, 103), as Sartre would say – but signifies the anarchic in the third person beyond being that summons the self to respond to the other.

The concept of illeity thus concerns and transforms in a singular way the possibility of narration. In fact, with this notion, Levinas brings narration into a relation of contiguity with a radical transcendence that exceeds all narrative forms (beyond representation), that precedes the act of narration (having its origin outside selfhood), and that calls for narration as a sign given in response. I will try to articulate a bit more what this implies for Levinas's understanding of narrative. To the extent that it responds to what Levinas calls illeity, narrative has no primary intention to create synthesis – to invent a plot capable of expressing the coherence of different time-layers; it is, rather,

a means of invoking and addressing what exceeds it, as does prayer or poetry, especially love songs and lamentations. Hence, perhaps, the relevance of Levinas's references to the *Song of Songs* and *Lamentations*. Moreover, as address and invocation, narrative already exposes its insufficiency with regard to the addressee. It presents itself as response to a prior call and as a response that recognizes the beyond of the addressee. Levinas articulates this relation of insufficiency in terms of "witnessing." He introduces this notion in relation to the Infinite: "There is witness, a unique structure, an exception of the rule of being, irreducible to representation, only of the Infinite." (Levinas 1991, 146) But while he avers that "[t]he Infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it" and that "[t]he detachment of the Infinite from the thought that seeks to thematize it and the language that tries to hold it in the said is what we have called *illeity*" (Levinas 1991, 147), witnessing can be understood as the narrative's modality of relating to *illeity*. In Levinas's view, witnessing has a singular structure which already has its origin in the alterity of the *illeity*. Witnessing cannot be understood here as the confirmation of a present or past event. It does not presuppose the identification of the one who bears witness. Witnessing implies, on the contrary, a "reversal" (Levinas 1991, 147) of the subject, an "alteration in which identity is brought out" (Levinas 1991, 146). Narrative as witnessing exposes this reversal: it reflects and expresses that it has neither its beginning nor its enclosure in the I of the narrator.

## 4 The Anarchy of Literature

It should be clear by now that the modern novel does not constitute for Levinas the primary narrative model. The expression and exploration of selfhood and otherness, characteristic of the novelistic form, risks by the very act of narration to reduce transcendence and to assess the self – whatever may be the experience of otherness that the novel addresses. However, this does not imply that Levinas rejects literature as such, as some scholars appear to suggest (cf. Robins 1999, 39). In fact, Levinas brings narration back to an origin that precedes the epic genre as a whole: to the testimonies of biblical texts such as *Genesis*, *Lamentations*, the *Song of Songs*, and the *Prophets*. Let us now return to the opening remarks of this contribution and address the question concerning the concept of literature. What happens when Levinas re-uses the literary notions of "intrigue" with regard to the Infinite and "denouement" with regard to subjectivity?

First, he situates his entire philosophy, including its search for the concreteness of the event older than the world, in the dependency of the literary. The literary is required in order to be able to approach and to articulate the emergence of meaning in being, even when this articulation implies the de-formalization of all literary means. In other words, even the significance of the trace of the illeity beyond being is already literary; it cannot be expressed without the literary, as the appearance of the story of Adam's hiding in Paradise has revealed. It follows that in Levinas's philosophy the concept of literature does not coincide with the moment of its institutionalization. It follows even more radically that the literary irreducibly exceeds the concept of literature, preceding the moment of its conceptualization and thematization. As concerns the literary, literature and philosophy are both secondary.

Second, Levinas overwrites the notions of "intrigue" and "denouement," adding a new meaning that undermines and destabilizes their given epic meaning. The power of synthesis, characteristic of this epic meaning, is undermined by a diachronic temporality that becomes manifest by breaking open the representational coherence and enclosure of the narrative. The destabilization is not only a result of the temporal reversal of synchrony in diachrony. It also provokes a semantic inconsistency: the intrigue of fate that appears in being is broken up by another intrigue of the Infinite that precedes it and therefore is not an intrigue in being; the denouement of destiny that appears in being is undone by the denouement of responsibility that precedes it and therefore is not a denouement in being. The apparent meaning of the notions of "intrigue" and "denouement" is shaken by another "prior" meaning that puts into question the manifest sense and use of these notions in being.

The anarchy of literature is thus inescapable and insoluble: this is the paradox that follows from Levinas's approach to the appearance of meaning. It is inescapable, for the literary exceeds the concept of literature, including Levinas's articulation of an otherwise than being that intends to address the sense of transcendence beyond all literary means. It is insoluble, because the meaning that appears has already been preceded by another meaning – a sense of passing of the illeity, the signifyingness of a trace – that disturbs, interrupts, and undermines the order of appearing. In this way, Levinas's account of the appearance of meaning is caught by a double bind: while the articulation of this appearance still depends on the use of literary means, this use cannot be but a betrayal of the sense of transcendence beyond being. Indeed, this paradox is the outcome of the de-formalization of time and narrative in Levinas's writings and also motivates it as a radical methodology. The double bind is not a failure of Levinas's thought; it is intended. It has the positive meaning of revealing, in the anarchical moment of disturbance, the possibility of an ethics

that precedes ontology and resists any attempt of naturalization. As Levinas writes: “Everything depends on the possibility of vibrating with a meaning that is not synchronized with the speech that captures it and cannot be fitted into its order; everything depends on the possibility of a signification that would signify in an irreducible disturbance. If a formal description of such a disturbance could be attempted, it would have us speak of time, a plot and norms that are not reducible to the understanding of being, which is allegedly the alpha and the omega of philosophy.” (Levinas 1987, 63)

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