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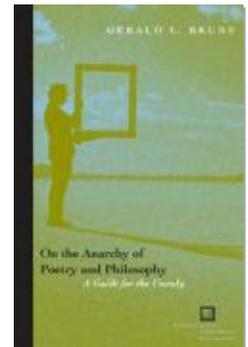
Published by Fordham University Press

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On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly.

Fordham University Press, 2007.

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The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's Writings

Being's essence designates nothing that could be a nameable content, a thing, event, or action; it names this mobility of the immobile, this multiplication of the identical, this diastasis of the punctual, this lapse. This modification without alteration or displacement, being's essence or time, does not await, in addition, an illumination that would allow for an "act of consciousness." This modification is precisely the visibility of the same to the same, which is sometimes called openness. The work of being, essence, time, the lapse of time, is exposition, truth, philosophy. Being's essence is a dissipating of opacity, not only because this "drawing out" of being would have to have been first understood so that truth could be told about things, events and acts that *are*; but because this drawing out is the *original dissipation* of opaqueness.

— Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being,
or Beyond Essence*

Emmanuel Levinas's writings are rich in comments and reflections on art, poetry, and the relations between poetry and ethical theory.¹ Of particular importance is the question of language, because there appears to be a kind of symmetry between language as an ethical relation and the language of poetry, both of which expose us to regions of subjectivity or existence on the hither (anarchic) side of cognition and being. The ethical and the poetic are evidently species of saying (*le Dire*) in contrast to the propositional character of the said

(*le Dit*), yet neither one is translatable into the other, and in fact they are in some sense at odds with one another. Unfortunately, Levinas never engaged these matters in any sustained or systematic way, and certainly never without confusion. His friend Maurice Blanchot observed in an early essay that “Levinas mistrusts poems and poetic activity.”² But it is also clear that Levinas could not get such things out of his mind, for he frequently found in poetry and art conceptual resources for his thinking, which perhaps helps to explain why the ethical in his work is never far removed from the aesthetic. But aesthetic in what sense? My purpose here will be to construct as coherent an account as I can of the place and importance that poetry and art have in Levinas’s thinking. This account will have three goals. The first will be to sort out, so far as possible, Levinas’s often contradictory statements about art. The second will be to clarify the difference between two conceptions of the aesthetic at work in Levinas’s writings, which I will call an “aesthetics of materiality” and an “aesthetics of the visible.” The argument here will be that, although Levinas found it difficult to distinguish these two conceptions, or did not want to choose between them, his account of the materiality of the work of art is an important contribution to modernist aesthetics for the way it articulates the ontological significance of modern art and its break with the aesthetics of form and beauty that comes down to us from classical tradition and from Kant. Modernist art is no longer an art of the visible (which is why it is difficult for many people to see it as art). I think we will be able to say that in Levinas both materiality and the beautiful are reinterpreted in terms of the proximity of things, taking proximity to be something like an alternative to visibility. The third aim of this inquiry will be to come to some understanding of the relationship between poetry and the ethical as analogous forms of transcendence in the special sense that Levinas gives to this term. The argument here will be that, if “Being’s essence is a dissipating of opacity” (AE.53/OTB.30), poetry is a “darkening of being” (H.140/PPP.9), a thickening, temporalization or desynchronizing of essence that occurs alongside the ethical, if not in advance of it, as “an unheard-of modality of the otherwise than being” (NP.55–56/PN.46).

Poetics Ancient and Modern. In order to make my account precise and meaningful, however, it will be helpful to have a rough sense of where Levinas appears within poetry’s conceptual history, starting perhaps with the early years of modernity when German and British

romantics pressed the question of what sort of thing poetry might be if it is not (as both ancient and medieval traditions of poetics had taught) a form of mediation in the service of other fields of discourse—namely, the versifying of meanings derived from various contexts of learning, or the rehearsal of traditional themes of religious and erotic experience.⁵ Arguably the great achievement of modernity was not only the development of scientific reason but also the invention of a concept of art that, whatever its philosophical difficulties, provided a space for speculation in which such a thing as poetry could become (and remain) a question for itself. For what is distinctive about romantic poetics is that it is no longer concerned simply with the art of composing verses but becomes an inquiry into the nature of poetry and the conditions that make it possible. So Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), for example, calls modern poetry a “*Transzendentalpoesie*” that combines the traditional “self-mirroring” of the lyrical poet with “the transcendental raw materials and preliminaries of a theory of poetic creativity [*Dichtungsvermögens*]”: “In all its descriptions, this poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry.”⁴ As if modern poetry were now to become the experience of poetry as such, quite apart from the significance or utility it might still have for the church, the court, and the schools.

This is not to say that the classical tradition did not have a profound understanding of the nature (and difficulty) of poetry. For example, the ancients typically regarded poetry as an instance of the dark saying, the *ainigma*, a word that sometimes gets translated as “riddle,” but unlike a riddle the enigma’s darkness is not something that can be illuminated, or eliminated, by reason or interpretation. It is not a puzzle whose solution justifies its formulation but is opaque in the nature of the case, and to that extent it defines the limits of the discursive regions that we inhabit. Poetry is anarchic in the original sense of the word. In the *Republic* Plato formalized this link between poetry and anarchy (and, in the bargain, instituted the discipline of philosophy) when he charged that poetry is not something that can give itself a reason but is exemplary of all that is incoherent with the just and rational order of things, that is, the order of the *λόγος*, where ideally everything manifests (from within itself) the reason why it is so and not otherwise. Following Plato—or, in the event, Aristotle, who found a place for poetry in his organon, or rule of discourse, by reconceptualizing it both as a species of cognition (*mimesis*) and as a kind of consecutive reasoning (plot)—the justification

of poetry became the traditional task of allegory, which is a philosophical way of reading nonphilosophical texts by construing them so as to make them coherent with prevailing true beliefs. Henceforward poetry could only justify itself by celebrating or supplementing conceptual worlds already in place. But taken by itself, the poetic text remains exotic in the etymological sense—dense, refractory to the light, not a part of but *a limit of the world and its reasons*—which is perhaps why the classical tradition in poetics has always been concerned to the point of obsession with rules for keeping poetry under rational control.

In the late nineteenth century the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé renewed this enigmatic tradition for modernity with his famous remark, “My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas, but with *words*.” Whereas the romantics had conceptualized poetry as a mode of experience or subjectivity, Mallarmé was the first to conceptualize poetry in terms of the materiality of written language (*l’écriture*), so that the basic unit of the poem is no longer the classic alexandrine that had defined French poetry for centuries; rather, the constituents of the poem are the letters of the alphabet—and also the white space of the printed page, the fold in its middle, and the typographical arrangements that the letters inscribe.⁵ So poetry is not a form of mediation that brings something other than itself into view (not allegory or symbol). On the contrary, Mallarmé distinguished poetry from informative, descriptive, and symbolic uses of language by claiming for the materiality of poetic language the power to obliterate the world of objects and events: “When I say, ‘a flower!’ then from that forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the usual calyces arises . . . : the flower which is absent from all bouquets” (OC.356). Writing on Mallarmé in 1942 Maurice Blanchot glossed this famous line by explaining that in its propositional form language “destroys the world to make it re-born in a state of meaning, of signified values; but, under its creative form, it fixes only on the negative aspect of its task and becomes the pure power of questioning and transfiguration. That is possible insofar as, taking on a tangible quality, it becomes a thing, a body, an incarnate power. The real presence and material affirmation of language gives it the ability to suspend and dismiss the world.”⁶ What this means is that poetic language is not just an inert mass, not merely a blank or opaque aesthetic “veil of words”; rather it is a discursive event that interrupts the logical or dialectical movement of signification and thereby opens up a dimension of exteriority or worldless-

ness—a world without things, or perhaps one should say, things free of the world.

The Ontological Significance of the Materiality of Art. Emmanuel Levinas's earliest writings on art and poetry should be read against the background of the resurgence of interest in Mallarmé that began with the publication of Henri Mondor's *Vie de Mallarmé* in 1941 and Blanchot's critical appropriation of Mallarmé's poetics during this same period, which served to sharpen differences among an array of positions in the controversies about the social significance of art that erupted in Paris following the Liberation.⁷ As I have already noted, in a series of essays published in 1947 in *Les temps modernes*, Jean-Paul Sartre elucidated his theory of writing as a form of social action by opposing it to poetry conceived explicitly in Mallarméan terms as the work of "men who refuse to utilize language."⁸ The poet, Sartre says, "is outside language," on "the reverse side of words," which he treats as mere things to be assembled the way Picasso constructs a collage (QL.20/WL.30–31). Meanwhile the prose writer is situated "inside of language," which he manipulates as an instrument for grasping the world (QL.19–20/WL.30–31). In prose, words become actions, but poetry for Sartre is the "autodestruction" of language, whose economy is no longer retracted to the exchange of meanings and the production of rhetorical effects but is now an opaque, thing-like thing (QL.20–22/WL.35–37).⁹

In 1947 Levinas published *De l'existence à l'existant*, a series of studies of what might be called, after Georges Bataille, "limit-experiences," that is, experiences (fatigue, insomnia, the experience of art) that are irreducible to categories of cognition and whose analyses serve as a way of exploring subjectivity beyond the limits of conventional phenomenology. In the section entitled "Existence sans existant," Levinas takes recourse to Mallarméan aesthetics as a way of introducing the concept of the *il y a*—if "concept" is the word, since the term is meant to suggest the possibility of existence without existents, a pure exteriority of being without appearance, and thus a phenomenology without phenomena. As Levinas figures it, the work of art (by which Levinas, in this context, means the *modernist* artwork) opens up this possibility of existence without being because it makes everyday things present by "extracting [them] from the perspective of the world," where the world is that which comes into being as a correlate of intentionality, cognition, or conceptual determination (DEE.84/EE.52). The idea is that in art our relation to things is no

longer one of knowing and making visible. Art does not represent things, it *materializes* them; or, as Levinas would prefer, it presents things in their *materiality* and not as representations. It is clear that Levinas is thinking of the *work* of the work of art as something very different from the work of intentional consciousness, and this is a difference that enables him to formulate in a new way the fundamental question of modernist aesthetics: *What becomes of things in art?* It is not enough (or even accurate) to say that modern art repudiates mimesis, representation, or realism in order to purify itself of everything that is not art—the so-called doctrine of aesthetic differentiation that figures art as a pure work of the spirit.¹⁰ Levinas speaks rather of “the quest of modern painting and poetry to banish . . . that soul to which the visible forms were subjected, and to remove from represented objects their servile function as expressions” (DEE.89/EE.55). This *banishment of the soul* means, whatever else it means, that the modern work of art cannot be thought of as just another ideal object that consciousness constructs for itself—a nonmimetic or purely formal object, one determined by traditional canons of beauty; on the contrary, the work is now defined precisely as a limit of consciousness: “Its intention is to present reality as it is in itself, after the world has come to an end” (DEE.89/EE.56), as if on the hither side (*en deça*) of the world that consciousness represents to itself. On this analysis modern art can no longer be conceived as an art of the visible. “Paradoxically as it may seem,” Levinas says, “painting is a struggle with sight. Sight seeks to draw out of the light beings integrated into a whole. To look is to be able to describe curves, to sketch out wholes in which the elements can be integrated, horizons in which the particular comes to appear by abdicating its particularity. In contemporary painting things no longer count as elements in a universal order. . . . The particular stands out in the nakedness of its being” (DEE.90/EE.56). This emancipation of singularity from the reduction to an order of things is the essence of cubism, whose break-up of lines of sight materializes things in a radical way:

From a space without horizons, things break away and are cast toward us like chunks that have weight in themselves, blocks, cubes, planes, triangles, without transitions between them. They are naked elements, simple and absolute, swellings or abscesses of being. In this falling of things down on us objects attest their power as material objects, even reach a paroxysm of materiality. Despite the rationality and luminosity of these

forms when taken in themselves, a painting makes them exist in themselves [*le tableau accomplit l'en-soi même de leur existence*], brings about an absolute existence in the very fact that there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnameable and can only appear in poetry. (DEE.91/EE.56–57)

The idea is that in cubism the spectator can no longer objectify what he or she sees; the work is no longer visible in the way the world is. For Levinas this means that the materiality of the work of art can no longer be contrasted with form or spirit; it is pure exteriority, uncorrelated with any interior, and therefore it constitutes a kind of transcendence (note that it “can only appear in poetry”). “For here materiality is thickness, coarseness, massiveness, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare, and ugly” (DEE.91–92/EE.57). For Levinas, the materiality of the work of art is just this implacable “materiality of being,” where “matter is the very fact of the *il y a*” (DEE.92/EE.57). What Levinas wants to know is (and this is evidently the source of his interest in the work of art): What is “the ontological significance of materiality itself”? (IH.137–38/CPP.8).

The Experience of Art. Part of this significance emerges when one asks what happens to subjectivity in the encounter with the work of art. What is it to be involved—or, as Levinas prefers, what is it to *participate*—in the moment when the work of art frees things from the conceptual grasp of the subject and returns them to the brute materiality of existence? The point to mark here is that for Levinas the experience of poetry or art is continuous with the experience of the *il y a*, which *De l'existence à l'existant* describes as an experience of a world emptied of its objects. One has to imagine inhabiting a space that is no longer a lifeworld, as though “after the world has come to an end.” (In *Totalité et infini* Levinas writes: “When reduced to pure and naked existence, like the existence of the shades Ulysses visits in Hades, life dissolves into a shadow” [TeI.115/TI.112].) Levinas figures this experience of exteriority in terms of insomnia and the interminability of the night, as well as in terms of certain kinds of mystical or magical events in which subjectivity loses itself in an impersonal alterity, but he also compares it to certain kinds of realistic or naturalistic fiction in which “*beings* and things that collapse into their ‘ma-

teriality' are terrifyingly present in their density, weight and shape" (DEE.97/EE.59–60). Things present in their materiality (like things in the night) are invisible, ungraspable—and horrible, where horror is not just a psychic tremor but a kind of ontological ecstasy, a movement that "turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua entity, inside out" (DEE.100/EE.61), thus exposing it to "the impersonal, non-substantive event of the night and the *il y a*" (DEE.104/EE.63). This same ontological ecstasy characterizes the experience of the work of art, which on Levinas's analysis can never be an *aesthetic object*—never just something over and against which we can maintain the disinterested repose of the connoisseur; rather, disturbance and restlessness are the consequences of art. The experience of the modernist work in particular is no longer intelligible from the standpoint of an aesthetics of beauty, with its premium on the integration of discordant elements into a whole. Modernism, with its premium on the fragmentary, is an art of derangement; it does not produce harmony and repose but dissonance and anxiety (think of the noise of the dada drummer).¹¹ This is part of what it means to say that modern art is no longer an art of the visible. Indeed, Levinas's analysis opens up what one might call the "nonaesthetic" dimension of the work of art; or, put differently, Levinasian aesthetics is an aesthetics of darkness rather than of light, of materiality as against spirit (or, more accurately, an aesthetics of materiality that is prior to the alternatives of matter and spirit).

Darkness is the thesis of "Réalité et son ombre" (1948), which begins by stipulating that the work of art is, contra the Aristotelian tradition, outside all categories of cognition and representation, outside the light and the visible: "It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. To put it in theological terms . . . : art does not belong to the order of revelation" (IH.126/PPP.3). To be sure, a work of art is made of images, but an image is *not* (as in traditional aesthetics, or in Sartre's theory) a form of mediation; on the contrary, it constitutes a limit and, indeed, a *critique* of experience and therefore of subjectivity as such. Levinas writes: "An image does not engender a *conception*, as do scientific cognition and truth. . . . An image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative: a fundamental passivity" (IH.127–28/PPP.3).¹² An image works like a rhythm, which "represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it. . . . It is so not even despite itself, for in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from

oneself to anonymity. This is the captivation or incantation of poetry and music. It is a mode of being to which applies neither the form of consciousness, since the I is there stripped of its prerogative to assume, its power, nor the form of unconsciousness, since the whole situation and all its articulations are in a dark light, *present*" (IH.128/CPP.4). This conversion to anonymity means simply that art turns the sovereign ego out of its house in a deposition that anticipates the trauma or obsession of the ethical relation.¹³ In the experience of the image, Levinas says, the subject is no longer a "being in the world" — especially since "what is today called 'being-in-the-world' is an existence with concepts" (IH.130/CPP.5), with all that this entails in the metaphor of grasping things and laying them open to view (IH.127/CPP.3). The image implies a reversal of power that turns the subject into a being "among things," wandering "among things as a thing, as part of the spectacle. It is exterior to itself, but with an exterior which is not that of a body, since the pain of the I-actor is felt by the I-spectator, although not through compassion. Here we have really an exteriority of the inward" (IH.129/CPP.4).¹⁴ Here (as in Blanchot's poetics) the subject is no longer an "I" but a "he" — or, as the French more accurately has it, an *il*: he/it, neither one nor the other (neutral, anonymous). The interior of the subject has been evacuated; the subject is no longer correlative with a world but is, so to speak, outside of it — perhaps one should say, exposed to it.¹⁵

At any rate the experience of the image is not an intentional experience: the image is not an image *of* something, as if it were an extension of consciousness, a light unto the world. Phenomenology is mistaken, Levinas says, when it insists on the "transparency" of images, as if images were signs or symbols, that is, logical expressions of subjectivity — products of "imagination," for example, supposing there to be such a thing (IH.132/CPP.5). But images do not come into being according to a logic of mental operations, say by way of comparisons with an original. On the contrary, *every original is already its own image*:

Being is not only itself, it escapes itself. Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own carica-

ture, its picturesqueness. The picturesque is always to some extent a caricature. Here is a familiar everyday thing, perfectly adapted to the hand which is accustomed to it, but its qualities, color, form, and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the “old garments” of a soul which had withdrawn from that thing, like a “still life.” And yet all this is the person and is the thing. There is then a duality in this person, this thing, a duality in being. It is what it is and is a stranger to itself, and there is a relationship between these two moments. We will say the thing is itself and is its image. And that this relationship between the thing and its image is resemblance. (IH.133/ CPP.6)

An image is, so to speak, not a piece of consciousness but a piece of the *il y a*: it is a materialization of being, the way a cadaver is the image of the deceased, a remainder or material excess of being, “the remains.”¹⁶ Levinas writes: “A being is that which is, that which reveals itself in its truth, and, at the same time, it resembles itself, is its own image. The original gives itself as though it were at a distance from itself, as though it were withdrawing from itself, as though something in a being delayed behind being” (IH.134/ CPP.6–7). An image is not a reproduction of a thing but (as in Mallarmé) a withdrawal of it from the world: consciousness is stopped in its tracks by an image and cannot get round behind it to an originating intention that would transform it into a meaning (a symbol or stand-in). Thus a painting is not, *pace* phenomenology, a looking-glass onto another world: “The painting does not lead us beyond the given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it. It is a symbol in reverse” (IH.135/ CPP.7). A “symbol in reverse” means: the gaze of the spectator stops at the surface of the painting and is, so to speak, held there, on the hither side of being, suddenly passive, no longer seeing but gripped by what it sees in an ecstasy of fascination. The image no longer belongs to the order of the visible. “It belongs to an ontological dimension that does not extend between us and a reality to be captured, a dimension where commerce with reality is a rhythm” (IH.131/ CPP.5).

The Work of Art as a Modality of Transcendence. What is the significance of this dimension—this “irréalité” or materiality of being (IH.137–38/ CPP.8)? This question leads in several directions. The work of art is not a mode of revelation but a mode of transcendence,

or, as Levinas says (borrowing from Jean Wahl), *transdescendence* (IH.136/ CPP.8): in art reality is beside itself, on the hither side of itself, materialized, no longer an object for us but a thing in itself, a pure exteriority. Basically, art is ecstasy. In the third section of “*Realité et son ombre*” Levinas figures this ecstasy or exteriority temporally as an interruption of being: the *entre-temps*, the meanwhile in which the present is no longer a traversal or evanescence but an interval that separates the past from the future, as in the interminability of the statue, or in the fate of the tragic hero for whom the catastrophe has always already occurred: “Art brings about just this duration in the interval, in that sphere which a being is able to traverse, but in which its shadow is immobilized. The eternal duration of the interval in which a statue is immobilized differs radically from the eternity of the concept; it is the meanwhile, never finished, still enduring—something inhuman and monstrous” (IH.143/ CPP.11). To experience art is to enter into this “inhuman or monstrous” *entre-temps*, which is not a “now” but an event that interrupts what is happening in the way insomnia keeps the night from passing in sleep, or the way the messianic vigil defers the end of history, or (as in Blanchot’s poetics) the way dying is the impossibility of death: “Death qua nothingness is the death of the other, death for the survivor. The time of *dying* itself cannot give itself the other shore. What is unique and poignant in this instant is due to the fact that it cannot pass. In *dying*, the horizon of the future is given, but the future as a promise of a new present is refused; one is in the interval, forever an interval” (IH.143/ CPP.11). It is this interval that explains why, as Levinas says in another context, “incompletion, not completion, [is] paradoxically the fundamental category of modern art” (HS.218/ OS.147).

But if art is a passage onto the “inhuman and monstrous,” what sort of value, if any, can it have, whatever its ontological significance? Levinas begins his conclusion to “*Realité et son ombre*” (“*Pour une critique philosophique*”) by saying that the temporality of the work of art “does not have the quality of the living instant which is open to the salvation of becoming. . . . The value of this instant is thus made of its misfortune. This sad value is indeed the beautiful of modern art, opposed to the happy beauty of classical art” (IH.145/ CPP.12). Here Levinas is less than clear, but possibly what he means is that it was the good fortune of the classical work to have a place in the human order of things, which it served to illustrate or even complete as a mode of edification. The classical work was part of the economy of redemption. It was at all events a humanist art,

whereas the modern work is anarchic—that is, without reason or the mediation of any principle or ideality, informed by the *il y a* and structured according to “the inhuman and monstrous” *entre-temps*. So it is no wonder that the work of art is without any place in the world, which is why modernity sets a special realm aside for it: the museum world of the beautiful or, at any rate, the enigmatic, the eccentric, the strange.

Is this separation a condition of art, or a misreading of it? We may not find a straightforward answer to this question in Levinas’s texts, but here are three considerations.

1. It is far from obvious what “the beautiful of modern art” could consist in, or whether any concept of the beautiful could be reconciled with the materiality of art, if one takes seriously the previously noted description of the cubist painting in *De l’existence à l’existant*: “For here materiality is thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare, and ugly.” Levinas had emphasized that this materiality is outside classical distinctions of letter and spirit or matter and form; it is the materiality of being, outside the visible, whence the experience of art becomes one of dis-possession and restlessness, not disinterestedness and repose. Regarding the experience of the modern work of art, recall Kant’s account of the experience of the sublime: “In presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels *agitated*, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in *restful* contemplation. This agitation . . . can be compared with a vibration, i.e., with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object.” Moreover, the experience of the sublime (like the experience of the *il y a*) entails a crisis of subjectivity. The sublime object, Kant says, is “an abyss in which the imagination fears to lose itself.”¹⁷ If one follows categories supplied by Kant’s third critique, one has to say that Levinasian aesthetics assigns the work of art to the order of the sublime, not to the beautiful.

2. Nevertheless, despite the logic of his analysis, Levinas himself seems to prefer the Sartrean ideology of *Les temps modernes* (in which, after all, “*Realité et son ombre*” first appeared), namely, as Levinas puts it, that “art, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion” (IH.145/CPP.12). Recall the analysis of rhythm in which the subject undergoes a “reversal of power into participation” (IH.129/CPP.4): although earlier the deposition of the sovereign ego had the structure

of critique (emphasizing the “reversal of power”), here it is simply “*la jouissance esthétique*,” or the private escape of subjectivity from cognition and action in the world (an assertion rather than deposition of sovereignty). “Art,” says Levinas, “brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as a lightness and grace. It frees. To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. . . . There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague” (IH.146/PPP.12). Such a view clearly appeals to Levinas’s iconoclasm, but does it square with his thought?

3. The idea that art “brings into the world the obscurity of fate” summarizes neatly the thesis of the materiality of art (namely that “the artwork [is] an event of darkening of being . . . ; in the general economy of being, art is the falling movement on the hither side of time, into fate” [IH.140/PPP.9–10]). But an argument is missing that would explain how one gets from the “event of darkening” to “lightness and grace.” One way to fill the hole would be to isolate the following question: “Is it presumptuous to denounce the hypertrophy of art in our times when, for almost everyone, it is identified with spiritual life?” (IH.146/PPP.12). The question (with its implication of the monstrosity of modern art—“hypertrophy” denotes excessive growth or deformity: a nice anaesthetic concept) suggests that what is really at issue here is not the ontology of the modernist work but the limits of its reception within traditional aesthetics.

Modernism, after all, especially in the various movements of the avant-garde, is a repudiation of the museum, the library, and the concert hall; its rhetoric is that of the outrageous performance that calls into question the distinction between art and non-art, not to say the whole idea of the beautiful. The legacy of Duchamp is nothing if not a critique of the aesthetics of pleasure (what Brecht called “culinary art”).¹⁸ Levinas gives little indication of what might constitute a “philosophical criticism”—“that would demand a broadening of the intentionally limited perspective of this study” (IH.148/PPP.13)—but it is clear from what he says that it could not be a spiritualizing criticism that isolates the work of art in a private realm of satisfaction and escape. On the contrary, if anything, Levinas’s aesthetics of materiality helps to explain why so much of modern art, poetry, and

music has been and continues to be condemned as unintelligible, degenerate, and obscene (and even displayed as such, as in the famous Exhibition of Decadent Art held in Munich in 1937). Thus Levinas says of philosophical criticism that it “integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world. . . . It does not attack the artistic event as such, that obscuring of being in images, that stopping of being in the meanwhile” (IH.146/CP.12). The “artistic event as such” would be, following Levinas’s analysis, the materialization of things, which is to say “the darkening of being” or retrieval of things from the panoramic world of representation. In this event the task of criticism would evidently be to acknowledge the inhumanness of art, its material link to the *il y a*. This is, as it happens, the import of Maurice Blanchot’s writings on poetry and art, which Levinas understood perhaps better than anyone else. Here (as Levinas suggests in the final paragraph of his essay) the experience of art does not result in “artistic idolatry” that makes of art “the supreme value of civilization” (IH.146, 148/CP.12, 13). It means experiencing the limits of the human, which for Levinas means the limits of the ethical.

A Poetics of Proximity. In the experience of the work of art, Levinas says, we enter into “a mode of being to which applies neither the form of consciousness, since the I is there stripped of its prerogative to assume, its power, nor the form of unconsciousness, since the whole situation and all its articulations are, in a dark light, *present [toute le situation et toutes ses articulations, dans une obscure clarté, sont présenté]*” (IH.128/CP.4). In “*Realité et son ombre*” Levinas takes recourse to rhythm and participation to elucidate this mode of being. But how to understand this “dark light”? What is it for things to be present in a dark light?

This question is part of the larger problem of how I can enter into a relation with a thing without destroying it, that is, without absorbing it into myself as an object of my consciousness or as part of my grip on existing. The figure of light is a way of formulating the problem, and the figure of “dark light” is a way of resolving it. In *Le temps et l’autre* (1947) Levinas writes: “Light [*Lumière*] is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me. The illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us. It does not have a fundamental strangeness” (TA.47/TO.64). Art as “an event of the darkening of being” (IH.140/CP.9) would thus be

a way of setting things free of the light in which they exist for me. It would be a way of restoring to things their fundamental strangeness.

Heidegger was perhaps the first philosopher to think of art in this way, that is, not in terms of an aesthetics of the beautiful but in terms of an ontology of freedom. In Paris after the Liberation people were catching up with Heidegger's writings, including "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerke," with its conception of the work of art as an event that "holds open the Open of the world."¹⁹ The *work* of the work of art is the uncovering of ontological difference: "In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting [Hofstadter translates one word, *Lichtung*, with two: "clearing" is his interpolation]. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center [*Mitte*] is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know" (G.39–40/PLT.53). In this "lighting" we find ourselves in the midst of things: "Only this clearing [*Lichtung*] grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are. Thanks to this clearing [*Lichtung*], beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees" (G.40/PLT.53). So *Lichtung* is an ontological metaphor, a figure of Being. Yet this event of disclosure is not to be understood in terms of representation and cognition; the lighting is also *unheimlich*. For "each being we encounter and which encounters us keeps to this curious opposition of presence in that it always withholds itself at the same time in a concealedness. The clearing [*Lichtung*] in which beings stand is in itself at the same time concealment" (G.40/PLT.53). The world in which we find ourselves is not transparent; the world is, as Heidegger says, limned by the earth. Things are present, but not for us—not as objects open to view: "the open place in the midst of beings, the clearing, is never a rigid stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings runs its course" (G.41/PLT.54). Rather, beings are present *as things*, that is, in their thingly character, which Heidegger had characterized in the opening section of his essay in terms of the resistance of things to the violence of conceptual thinking: "The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly. [Is this a defect in the thing?] Or can it be that this self-refusal of the mere thing, this self-contained independence, belongs precisely to the nature of the thing? Must not this strange and uncommunicative feature of the thing become intimately familiar to thought that tries to think the thing? If so, then we should not force our way to its thingly

character" (G.17/PLT.31–32). In contrast to conceptual thinking, the work of the work of art is nonviolent, or rather it disposes us toward things in a nonviolent way (G.54/PLT.66), disclosing them in their strangeness or in their earthliness (G.57/PLT.69). Significantly, Heidegger reserves the term poetry (*Dichtung*) for this disclosure: "It is due to art's poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual" (G.60/PLT.72).

Levinas's objections to Heidegger's phenomenology of disclosure are well known: the world that is opened in Heidegger's analysis has no people in it. Dasein listens for the peal of stillness across a postnuclear landscape. But Levinas becomes implicated in Heidegger's analysis as soon as he asks how any relationship with alterity is possible without reducing alterity to something of mine. He puts this question in an early essay on Blanchot, "Le regarde du poète" (1956): "How can the Other (which Jankélévitch calls the '*absolutely other*' and Blanchot 'eternal streaming of the outside') appear, that is, be for someone, without already losing its alterity and exteriority by way of offering itself to view" (SMB.13–14/PN.130). This question is at the heart of Blanchot's poetics, which is concerned precisely with the alterity of *things*. Already in "Littérature et la droit à la mort" (1947–48) Blanchot had asked about the consequences of intelligibility, given that signification is, as in Hegel, a dialectic of negation that annihilates things in their singularity and replaces them with concepts (PF.313/WF.323–24). The work of the spirit that builds up the world is, paradoxically, "the speech of death" (EI.49/IC.35). Poetry for Blanchot is a refusal of this speech. By withdrawing into its materiality, poetic language is no longer a form of mediation. Instead it interrupts the dialectical movement in which things are conceptually determined. "The language of literature," Blanchot says, "is a search for [the] moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble *taking the side of things*, not man but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it" (PF.316/WF.327). "Literature," Blanchot says, "is a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silent existence" (PF.310/WF.330). Poets are what they are, he says, because "they are interested in the reality of language, because they are not interested in the world but in what things and beings would be if there were no world" (PF.321/WF.333)—existence without a world: the *il y a*. But whereas Levinas considers the *il y a* from the standpoint of the subject's experience of it (ecstasy,

horror), Blanchot considers it from the standpoint of things in their freedom from subjectivity.

Levinas searches Blanchot's poetics for "an invitation to leave the Heideggerian world" (SMB.20/PN.135). In "Le regard du poète," invoking the figure of the dark light, he writes: "In Blanchot, *the work uncovers, in an uncovering that is not truth, a darkness*" (SMB.21–22/PN.136):

The literary space to which Blanchot . . . leads us has nothing in common with the Heideggerian world that art renders inhabitable. Art, according to Blanchot, far from elucidating the world, exposes the desolate, lightless substratum underlying it, and restores to our sojourn its exotic essence—and, to the wonders of our architecture their function of makeshift desert shelters. Blanchot and Heidegger agree that art does not lead (contrary to classical aesthetics) to a world behind the world, an ideal world behind the real one. Art is light. Light from on high in Heidegger, making the world, founding place. In Blanchot it is a black light, a night coming from below—a light that undoes the world, leading it back to its origin, to the over and over again, the murmur, ceaseless lapping of waves, a "deep past, never long enough ago." (SMB.23/PN.137)

The contrast that Levinas draws between Heidegger and Blanchot is too broad and misses the strangeness in Heidegger's aesthetics.²⁰ However, it is true that the Heideggerian world is an opening in which space is a circle or volume to be inhabited, if not altogether familiarly (Heidegger's world is always uncanny), whereas for Blanchot the space of literature is a surface across which one moves endlessly in what Levinas aptly calls "the exteriority of absolute exile" (SMB.17/PN.133). Space here is not open to the light. It is the "Outside," which Levinas approaches guardedly in his conclusion to *L'autrement qu'être*: "the openness of space signifies the outside where nothing covers anything, non-protection, the reverse of a retreat, homelessness [*sans-domicile*], non-world, non-habitation, layout without security" (AE.275–76/OTB.17–18). But Blanchot does not regard exile as a negative condition, a mere deprivation of place; it is rather a region (let us call it a traversal of ontology and ethics) in which subjectivity no longer presides over things from a standpoint or perspective of the whole, certainly not from the perspective of ownership or conceptual possession.²¹ Exile is a relation of intimacy

(which Blanchot does not hesitate to call responsibility) with what is nevertheless outside my grasp.²²

In his second essay on Blanchot, “La servant et son maitre” (1966), Levinas writes that “Blanchot’s properly literary work brings us primarily a new feeling [*sensation*]: a new ‘experience,’ or, more precisely, a new prickling sensation of the skin, brushed against by things [*un ‘frisson nouveau’, ou, plus exactement, une nouvelle démangeaison de l’épiderme, effleuré par les choses*]” (SMB.34/PN.143). This captures something of what Blanchot, in “Le grand refus” (1959), calls a relation with an “immediate singularity” that cannot be touched—that which refuses “all direct relation, all mystical fusion, and all sensible contact”—but to which the subjectivity of the poet or writer is nevertheless exposed as to “the presence of the non-accessible, presence excluding or exceeding [*débordant*] any present.” This amounts to saying that “the immediate, infinitely exceeding any present possibility by its very presence, is the infinite presence of what remains radically absent, a presence in its presence always infinitely other [*autre*], presence of the other in its alterity” (EI.53–53/IC.37–38). The “other” here is neither the Levinasian *Autrui* nor Heidegger’s Being but the Outside or foreign, which (philosophy be damned) Blanchot would prefer to think of as neither ethical nor ontological. Neither does Blanchot think of it as the *il y a*; it is simply the singular and irreducible as such. In “Comment découvrir l’obscur” (1959) he calls it simply “the impossible” (EI.68/IC.48).²³ Poetry, he says, is a “response” to this impossibility—“a relation with the obscure and the unknown that would be a relation neither of force [*puissance*], nor of comprehension, nor even of revelation” (EI.68/IC.48).

Poetry in this sense is a relation of proximity, and Levinas appears to pick up on this in “Langage et proximité” (1967), where he distinguishes between two dimensions of language. The first is kerygmatic, which has to do with the power of language to synchronize things in a structure of identity—the “as-structure” of hermeneutics, the logical structure of the proposition, the temporal structure of narrative that proclaims the individual as the same over the course of multiple and heterogeneous transformations. The second, however, concerns the movement of subjectivity outside of itself that Levinas has always regarded as an “original language” on the hither side of discourse (where Blanchot locates poetry). In “L’ontologie est-elle fondamentale?” (1951) Levinas had called it “prayer.” In “Langage et proximité” it is called “contact”: “there is in speech a relationship with a singularity located outside the theme of speech, a singularity that is

not thematized by the speech but is approached” (DHH.224/ CPP.115). Heretofore Levinas had always jealously guarded this “singularity” as a *personal* other, *Autrui*, the face whose “defenseless eyes” constitute “the original language” (BPW.12); whereas, in explicit argument with Levinas, Blanchot had always insisted “that *autrui* is a name that is essentially neutral” (EI.102/IC.72): neither human nor nonhuman but *inhuman* (absolutely without horizon). In *Totalité et infini* things are never singular. They can be enjoyed in sensibility, but sensibility is still an aesthetic (and even economic) concept:²⁴

Things have a form, are seen *in* the light—silhouettes or profiles; the face signifies *itself*. As silhouette and profile a thing owes its nature to a perspective, remains relative to a point of view; a thing’s situation thus constitutes its being. Strictly speaking it has no identity; convertible into another thing, it can become money. Things have no face; convertible, ‘realizable,’ they have a price. . . . The aesthetic orientation man gives to the whole of his world represents a return to enjoyment and to the elemental on a higher plane. The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the Idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image. (TeI.149/TI.140)

However, in “Langage et proximité” the sensibility of things takes on an ethical significance within the relation of proximity: “The immediacy of the sensible is an event of proximity and not of knowledge” (DHH.225/ CPP.116). This means that the sensible no longer belongs to the order of the visible. As Levinas says, “Sensibility must be interpreted first of all as touch” (DHH.227/ CPP.118).

Indeed, perception itself is reconceived as “immediacy, contact, and language”: “Perception is a proximity with being which intentional analysis does not account for. The sensible is superficial only in its role being cognition. In the ethical relationship with the real, that is, in the relationship of proximity which the sensible establishes, the essential is committed. Life is there. Sight is, to be sure, an openness and a consciousness, and all sensibility, opening as a consciousness, is called vision; but even in its subordination to cognition, sight maintains contact and proximity. The visible caresses the eye. One sees and one hears like one touches” (DHH.228/ CPP.118). And whereas since *Le temps et l’autre* the caress had been exclusively

human, now “the caress of the sensible” spreads out from the human to the world of things, where it is named “poetry”:

The proximity of things is poetry; in themselves the things are revealed before being approached. In stroking an animal already the hide hardens in the skin. But over the hands that have touched things, places trampled by beings, the things they have held, the images of those things, the fragments of those things, the contexts in which those fragments enter, the inflexions of the voice and the words that are articulated in them, the ever sensible signs of language, the letters traced, the vestiges, the relics—over all things, beginning with the human face and skin, tenderness spreads. Cognition turns into proximity, into the purely sensible. Matter, which is invested as a tool, and a tool in the world, is also, via the human, the matter that obsesses me with its proximity. The poetry of the world is inseparable from proximity par excellence, or the proximity of the neighbor par excellence. (DHH.228/ CPP.118–19)

Does it make sense to speak of poetry in this way? It depends on whether one can see the coherence of poetry and the caress as modes of transcendence. In *Le temps et l'autre* the caress is said to be “a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This ‘not knowing,’ this fundamental disorder, is essential” (TA.83/TO.89). Compare “Le moi et la totalité,” where a “poetic world” is one in which “one thinks without knowing what one thinks” (MT.362/ CPP.35), and a “poetic thought” is a “thought which thinks without knowing what it thinks, or thinks as one dreams” (MT.368/ CPP.40). The peculiarity is that “not knowing” in the case of the caress carries a positive valence, whereas, in the context of “Le moi et la totalité,” the poetic thought that “thinks without knowing what it thinks” is something negative, as if Levinas were simply reciting a line from Plato’s *Ion*. But in fact poetry and the ethical occupy the same priority vis-à-vis cognition (both are anarchic). Thus by the time of “Langage et proximité” poetry and the caress are taken up together in a relation of one-for-the-other, no longer part of “the world of light” but char-

acters in “the intrigue of proximity and communication” (AE.82/OTB.48).

The question is whether assimilating poetry to the ethical in this way doesn't just allegorize poetry and therefore reduce it in the usual philosophical style. At the outset of *Totalité et infini* Levinas says that the purpose of his book is to perceive “in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity” (TeI.38/TI.47). This means reconceptualizing discourse away from intentionality and the proposition toward what is finally termed Saying (*le Dire*), in which “the subject approaches a neighbor in expressing itself, in being expelled, in the literal sense of the term, out of any locus, no longer *dwelling*, not stomping any ground. Saying uncovers, beyond nudity, what dissimulation may be under the exposedness of a skin laid bare. It is the very *respiration* of this skin prior to any intention” (AE.83/OTB.48–49). Meanwhile in his writings since the 1940s Blanchot had been elucidating what looks like much the same thing, namely a theory of poetry as “a non-dialectical experience of speech” (EI.90/IC.63) in which the subject (the poet or writer, but also evidently the reader) enters into a relation with what is outside the grasp of subjectivity, and therefore also outside the grasp of language as conceptual determination (hence the need for writing that occurs “outside discourse, outside language”) (EI.vii/IC.xii). But alterity for Levinas is always another human being, whereas Blanchot's argument against Levinas is this: to say that only what is human can be other is already to feature the other within a totality or upon a common ground; it is to assemble with the other a possible (workable) community. Blanchot prefers indeterminate or at least highly abstract terms for alterity, namely the “Outside,” the “Neutral,” the “Unknown” (*l'inconnu*)—not the beggar, the orphan, or the widow, who are, after all, stock characters out of ancient biblical parables. Thus for Blanchot poetry is in excess of ethical alterity; it is a relation of foreignness or strangeness with what is absolutely singular and irreducible (but, for all of that, a relation of proximity or intimacy in which one is in a condition of exposure rather than cognition). As he says in “René Char et la pensée du neutre” (1963), poetry means that “to speak the unknown, to receive it through speech while leaving it unknown, is precisely not to take hold of it, not to comprehend it; it is rather to refuse to identify it even by sight, that ‘objective’ hold that seizes, albeit at a distance. To live with the unknown before one (which also means: to live before the unknown, and before oneself as unknown) is to enter into the responsibility of a speech that speaks without exercising any form of

power” (EI.445/IC.302). Poetry is thus a species of *le Dire sans le Dit*, but the subject in poetry is exposed to something other than *Autrui*—perhaps it is the *il y a*. Whatever it is, Blanchot leaves it, pointedly, unnamed (“Such is the secret lot, the secret decision of every essential speech in us: naming the *possible*, responding to the *impossible*” [EI.68/IC.48]).

Perhaps in the end the relation of poetry and the ethical comes to this: both are forms of Saying (*le Dire*) on the hither side of thematization and are, therefore, *materializations* of language and so, by the same logic, analogous modes of transcendence. But for Blanchot, poetry is the materiality—the literal “Outside”—of language as such, which he epitomizes with the Mallarméan word *l’écriture*, whereas, by contrast, Levinas figures materiality as the corporeality of the subject: *le Dire* is exposure, “the very respiration of the skin.” Levinas thinks of this Saying as “the original language,” which is to say a language that is not yet linguistical, “a language without words [*mots*] or propositions” [DHH.228/PPP.119].) Language here is corporeal expression in which “the face speaks” in “the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble” (TeI.61–62/TL.66).

Owing perhaps to his deep-seated iconoclasm, Levinas restricts the materiality of language as such to the sounds of words, as in “La transcendance des mots: À propos des Biffures” (1949), which begins as if it were to be a review of a volume of Michel Leiris’s autobiography, *Biffures* (1948), but which becomes instead an inquiry into the etymology of *biffures*, meaning “crossings-out” or “erasures,” where what is erased are things in their temporality or irreducibility to spatial and visual contexts. Levinas construes the word *biffures* as a figure of pure spatiality, or of the simultaneity of things held in place—in other words, a figure of totality. As such it can be traced back to “the visual experience to which Western civilization ultimately reduces all mental life. That experience involves ideas; it is light, it seeks the clarity of the self-evident. It ends up with the unveiled, the phenomenon. All is immanent to it” (HS.218–19/OS.147). In contrast to sight, which is a modality of worldmaking, sound is a modality of transcendence: “There is . . . in sound—and in consciousness understood as hearing—a shattering of the always complete world of vision and art. Sound is all repercussion, outburst, scandal. While in vision a form espouses a content and soothes it, sound is like the sensible quality overflowing its limits, the incapacity of form to hold its content—a true rent in the fabric of the world—that by which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension inconvertible into

vision” (HS.219/OS.147–48). For Levinas, moreover, sound is not simply an empirical sensation; it is phenomenological. That is, not just any noise can achieve the transcendence of sound. “To really hear a sound,” he says, “is to hear a word. Pure sound is a word [*Le son pur est verbe*]” (HS.219/OS.149).

It is important to notice that Levinas’s word for “word” here is not *mot* but *verbe*, that is, not the word in its spatial and visual fixity as a sign or noun or word-as-image but the word in its temporality, not only in the grammatical sense of the propositional verb but more important as the event of speaking itself, the spoken word as such, where *verbe* entails the power of the word to affect things—to intervene in the world as well as to function in a sentence—as in Rimbaud’s *alchimie du verbe* (the writer Michel Leiris, Levinas says, “est chimiste plutôt qu’alchimiste du verbe” [HS.216/OS.145]), that is, more analytical than magical; unlike the surrealists he finds causes for his dreams). The *mot* in its transcendence is always more expression than idea, more *parole* than *langue*, more enigma than phenomenon, more *sens* than *signification*, more *Dire* than *Dit*: an open-ended series of Levinasian distinctions is traceable to his iconoclastic theory of the *verbe*. For Levinas, of course, the priority of sound over semantics is meant to indicate the event of sociality: sound means the *presence* of others making themselves felt in advance of what is said. Sound is not the medium of propositional language but of other people. More than this, however, the sound of words is an ethical event, which Levinas does not hesitate to characterize as *critique*, not only because others interrupt me in making themselves felt, setting limits to my autonomy, but because *even when I myself speak*—even in self-expression—I am no longer an “I,” am no longer self-identical, but am now beside myself: “To speak is to interrupt my existence as a subject, a master” (HS.221/OS.149). Of course this is exactly what Blanchot says happens to the subject in the experience of *l’écriture*. Which is why it is most interesting that in Levinas the materiality of language as Blanchot understands it comes into the foreground not as a theme but as an increasingly dominant and controversial dimension of his (Levinas’s) own writing.²⁵ Here, if anywhere, is where poetry and the ethical draw near one another.

