ETHICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY: LEVINAS AND LITERATURE

By

DAVID JAMES BUCHANAN

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Introduction

‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, by Emmanuel Levinas, serves as the beginning that sustains the questioning of literature and ethics set forth in this paper. As such, Part I provides an outline of truth as first philosophy and an exploration of ethics as first philosophy from which language and literature can be considered in terms of both Western ontology and Levinasian ethics.

Part II extends Levinas’ description of truth as first philosophy to two ontological interpretations of language and literature. A short story by Jorge Luis Borges indicates roughly how fiction serves to redescribe ontological origins. Selected works by Michael Eskin and Paul Ricoeur, respectively, help to further set out the specific ways by which language and literature perpetuate Greek roots. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari reinterpret language and literature in terms of a politics of multiplicity, radically redescribing hermeneutics as the return to a single, immanent plane of consistency.

In contrast, the role of language and literature in signifying ethics as first philosophy hinted at in Part I, is more explicitly set forth in Part III. Additional works by Emmanuel Levinas set forth the ways which enable the questioning of language and literature to move beyond the affirmation of being to the justification of one’s right to be.

Finally, four specific works of literature are discussed in Part IV, with ethics as first philosophy as the beginning that enables us to hear responsibility for the Other and the silence of the Infinite Levinas suggests is implicit in language and literature, as the saying to the Other that precedes the said.

By following the path put forth for this paper we will question the relationship between literature and ontology and how ethics as first philosophy sets out an alternative beginning from which we come to literature and the world.

I. Ethics as First Philosophy

‘Ethics as First Philosophy’ by Emmanuel Levinas serves as the beginning and focus of this paper. It clearly sets out the characteristics of truth as first philosophy particular to Western ontology and Levinas’ radical move away from the dominance of presence, ego and hermeneutics towards an ethical consideration of being signified in the face of the
Other. The following discussion brings out some of the main points of Levinas’ thought and opens the way to an ethical sense of literature.

A. Truth as First Philosophy
For Western ontology the site of meaning is the correlation between knowledge and being. The difference between knowledge and being is overcome in the true, as the search for knowledge that affirms being. Knowing requires a grasping, in the literal sense, a bringing to self, a seizure that nullifies the otherness of beings and things by reducing all to objects. The other of thought becomes being itself, also grasped, as “the characteristic property of thought as knowledge” (Levinas 76). Being is desired property, an object to be seized, or continually sought out, by way of knowledge.

Since knowledge is thought, overcoming the division of rational/real or Same/different occurs immanently as a relation to an individual. Being as the property of thought, beings and things are reduced to the present, determined by the knowing thought of a being. Truth as first philosophy, then, is the reduction of being and the world to presence of mind by way of capture, the way by which an ego grasps otherness through knowledge. The concrete difference to be overcome in the true is that between self and otherness in the world.

The affirmation of being through the pursuit of knowledge presents a ‘given world’ that suggests the possibility of satisfaction (Levinas 77). Every thing seems knowable (attainable), within hands reach. Complete knowledge of the world as the ultimate fulfillment of being is set forth, not just as a possibility, but as the project. Every ego participates freely, equally, and succeeds to some degree in the gathering of knowledge, the knowing of oneself and the world. In this way, humanity is assured that the human being, every human being, is the dominant, immanent center from which the world is to be ordered, in the present, with an eye to the future.

At the original site of meaning, the ego is the ground upon and from which being and the world become meaningful. It is through knowledge of the world that I become who or what I am in the world. My being, my identity, is defined by my accumulation and manipulation of things known, the concrete correlation between my knowledge and being. This correlation is fixed but not static. My identity, being itself, can be increased
through knowledge. In fact, having any identity at all requires that one add knowledge of the world. A being who knows nothing is nothing - you must know who you are. Without knowledge there can be no correlation to being.

With a knowable world reduced to presence, at my feet and within hands reach, there is nothing beyond, nothing other to this correlation and no thing to stop me from becoming who I am. *Carpe diem* - I must simply ‘seize the day’. Every thing is within my grasp, knowable, and no one is responsible for my being, the who or what of my life, other than me. The world, my existence in the world, rests squarely on my shoulders.

The relation between ego and a world of differences to be overcome that rises from the correlation between knowledge and being is a totality, “independent, of course, of any finality exterior to it…self-sufficient…sovereign” (Levinas 77). I exist in the world to think and my thoughts determine the nature of my existence in the world. Nothing can interfere with this Cartesian formulation, for it is the only way of being in the world truth as first philosophy allows for. Within this domain I am free to explore my independence. My success is regulated only by the extent of my thought, my body and the death of it, by my (in)ability to carry/create the world on my shoulders.

The focus on ego renders the correlation between knowledge and being a ‘happy solitude’. It is neither loneliness nor emptiness, but solitude, the freedom to be who or what I am - to affirm the being of my ego, to find myself by exploring the world. It is a finite freedom, however, that begins and ends at the site of knowledge, with the individual, *I*, the cogito. I am responsible for myself and none other. *Cogito, ergo sum* - I think, I am. As I seize, as I know, I exist. As such, the exploration of the world, mentally or physically, is not a one-way journey, but a leave-taking of self to determine Self, always already predetermined by truth as first philosophy as the *accumulation* of the world that is not merely what happens while returning home, but the active *construction* of home and self by way of knowing the world.

The finite freedom of self-consciousness, set forth by the pursuit of knowledge in the world, is the affirmation and domain of being. It is an all-encompassing domain wherein every thing - the past, the future, all relations with beings and things - that can be thought fold back upon self, returning to and adding to myself. As I think I reach, as I know I grasp, as I seize I reduce to the present, to myself and in this way perpetually
affirm the privilege of my existence. The freedom to be is the inclusion of every thing in and as myself.

As an ego, I am also free to think, to seize myself. The cogito does not escape this folding back, but presents additional, unknown territory to be grasped by thought - self returning to Self. Every thing can be known, internal or external to ego, and every thing must be known because only through knowing does the possibility of satisfaction, complete knowledge, finding myself and affirming my being in the world, exist. Self-consciousness is the final reduction of the Other to otherness, the seizure of self as an object to be known through self-knowledge. Thus, it turns out that while the ego is the ground of truth as first philosophy, it is not free from the correlation, which sets every ego out as ground and means, subject and object.

The finite freedom of self-consciousness aims to affirm being concretely. As one ego among many I must aim first and foremost to define my being in the world. I am the center of my world - none other. As such, the affirmation of my being is not merely a celebration of existence, but the concrete grasping of it to secure my sovereignty. Anything must be permitted in this regard since my being depends on it. In this way, I give myself full license to know the world, to seize my place in the world.

As such, there is no thing in the world with a legitimate claim to stop the movement from knowledge to being (‘being’s move’). To interfere with my sovereignty, my knowledge of the world, is to restrict my being, to hinder the sovereignty of my domain and the development of my identity. In short, it is an act of war. The extension of knowledge and self in the world to any thing that can be thought - people, Nature, self, thought, God - being through overcoming, is not just ontological, but political. This way of being in the world is not simply confined to correlation and knowledge in the abstract, which seem inoffensive enough. It is concrete. The correlation between knowledge and being as a thinking through is an overcoming that demands an acting through - grasping, seizing, appropriating (the use of such physical words is no coincidence). All the differences between knowledge and being, between Self and other, otherness itself, must be overcome in the world. Anything exterior to the known, people or places for example, can and must be incorporated; whatever cannot be grasped does not exist or must be destroyed. No stone is to be left unturned – any thing unknown remains a threat.
In this way, the freedom of the ego cannot be separated from the unfreedom of the Other and the subordination of ethics to the politics of being. The affirmation of being by thought that reduces the world to ego is not just politics, it is not merely neutral, but violently holds forth the privilege and sovereignty of Same/Self over difference. As a politics of overcoming, truth as first philosophy is a politics of war.

B. Non-intentional Consciousness

The full extent of the domination of knowledge over otherness is apparent in the ‘Transcendental Reduction’ of intentionality.¹ Within consciousness, knowledge relates to an other of consciousness as an object to be grasped. This grasping within consciousness “is a hold on being which equals a constitution of that being” (Levinas 71). Only consciousness remains independent (sovereign) and this independence is only maintained by the extension/affirmation of the ego as the ground of being. Intentional consciousness is hermeneutical, inescapable. Space and time, concrete or abstract, are reduced to the ego, to the struggle to think the world and existence from the ground of the cogito. In this way, the intentional consciousness of self is not merely ground, but self-transcendent, the ego affirming its own being by overcoming itself and world, self returning to Self, through knowledge.

Levinas asserts that before the intentionality of self-consciousness, the way by which the ego grasps otherness as object, there always remains the prior-ity of non-intentional consciousness, which is ‘devoid of any willful aim’, ‘unknowing’, ‘non-objectivizing’, ‘indirect’, ‘implicit’, ‘aimless’, ‘without initiative’ - it is ‘like time passing, like aging’. But confusion arises because in the intentional consciousness of thought there is something of the non-intentional sensed. This sense does not become a knowing. The non-intentional cannot be grasped. But we come to think the non-intentional as knowable, as reduced to a property of intentional consciousness, an attribute or property of the ego. This is the position of being proper to truth as first philosophy already discussed - anything is permitted, every thing can and must be seized to affirm the sovereignty of the ego.

¹ “This Transcendental Reduction suspends all independence in the world other than that of consciousness itself, and causes the world to be rediscovered as noema” (Levinas 79).
But passivity ‘like time passing’ cannot be reduced to self-consciousness to serve the perpetuation of the sovereignty of ego. Non-intentional or pre-reflective consciousness is beyond ontology. It cannot be reduced to the present and is neither an instrument of truth nor a property of thought. “It has no name, no situation, no status” (Levinas 81). It is an uncertain consciousness, free of intentions, the pure passivity of time as duration. “This duration remains free from the sway of the will, absolutely outside all activity of the ego, and exactly like the aging process which is probably the perfect model of passive synthesis, a lapse of time no act of remembrance, reconstructing the past, could possibly reverse” (Levinas 80).

C. Transcendence
The pure passivity of non-intentional consciousness is not the self-transcendence of the ego, the overcoming of things in the world on the way to the sovereignty of being. Pure passivity is transcendent in that it is not of the world and cannot be understood in concrete, rational terms. It is not a matter of knowing, but is prior to and beyond ontology, that which cannot be grasped. Truth as first philosophy either knows a thing or claims that it does not exist. These are the only alternatives, subordination or nothingness, to be or not to be, possible in a system that defines the site of meaning in terms of knowledge/thought.

Non-intentional consciousness, the Infinite, is indifferent to the world. It is a beginning prior to any mental determination and has no context, no measurable relationship with the ego. Transcendence, then, in a Levinasian sense, is not a difference which can be included in the comparison or consideration of things, or reduced to an intentionality which grasps objects to affirm being in the world. In the world it is never more than the hint of a beginning that is always open, passive and overwhelming.

D. Affirmation/justification
The Infinite, as an ungraspable beginning beyond ontology, removes the certainty of the ego as the ground of existence. As a result, “One comes not into the world but into

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2 For example, God, ghosts, the afterlife etc…they are either in the domain or not, being or not-being, rational or irrational, truth or nothingness. Something either adds to being or not.
question” (Levinas 81). I no longer seek the affirmation of my being through knowledge and determine my identity by the success of my grasp on the world and others, my ability to overcome differences through knowledge, but question the justification of my existence. In the face of the Infinite, that which I can never overcome, the only response possible is a questioning of a different sort.

In the pursuit of knowledge I ask, ‘Who am I?’ I always seek myself through the world, adding to my self-consciousness with each discovery, every answer, filling out my being by unconcealing the truth of my world. My sole concern is the construction and security of my identity, sovereignty for myself - self-mastery by any means. Once I know myself completely I will be fulfilled, complete - knowledge and being meet, the correlation collapses, ecstasy ensues. To be or not to be? But I always already exist. It is not really a question, but the ground of affirmation of the being of beings that coincides with knowledge. Through answers, facts, information, knowledge, I am not questioning how to be, but affirming the essence of being opposed to not-being, in truth. No matter how I go about it, I always come back to the certainty of myself, to truth as first philosophy.³

Non-intentional consciousness does not erase truth as first philosophy, the objects of the world or intentionality, but resituates them in terms of the passivity of the Infinite and forces me to ask a different question: How am I? This is not a question that leads me to affirm my singular being in the world or to consider my existence in opposition to nothingness. In the face of pure passivity, anterior, unknowable, aimless and prior to the everyday intentionality of the world, I am forced to question my right to be. As a question that begins with the Infinite, it cannot be a mere return to myself or home, but a beginning that initiates a journey with no end, that always takes me further from myself and towards the Other.

³ This is essentially the assertion of Descartes’ Second Meditation. Skepticism renders every thing uncertain except my being. My ego, the I always present to the I think, must exist as ground to find uncertainty in the world. This conclusion, however, does not take into account the Third Meditation, which as Levinas points out, is not merely an attempt to prove the existence of God, but an indication of the pure passivity, the non-intentional, that interrupts totality without being grasped. “It is not the proofs of God’s existence that matter to us here, but the breakup of consciousness…The idea of God…signifies the non-contained par excellence” (Levinas GP 173).
E. The Face of the Other

Levinas leaves the site of meaning particular to truth as first philosophy behind and signifies non-intentional consciousness as a beginning prior to intentionality. It is no longer knowledge that affirms being and constructs identity in the world, but the face of the Other which opens me to an infinite questioning that demands an ethical response first. “One has to respond to one’s right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one’s fear for the Other” (Levinas 82). The face of the Other is the concrete signification of a beginning, prior to any ontological ground, that demands justification.

Within the domain set forth by the privilege of thought as knowledge anything is permitted to gain or retain the sovereignty of the ego. I am free to affirm my being. That is my right as an individual. But this formulation does not speak of the usurpation of the space of the Other, of otherness itself, nor of the destruction of others implicit in the pursuit of sovereignty. Otherness is subordinated and the Other is bracketed out when the intentionality of knowledge is privileged. Otherness remains only as a reference to beings and things as objects to be known. Thus, the ‘site’ of the signification (the Other) of that which is beyond self-consciousness (the Infinite), that which demands a response and a responsibility for the Other, is already reduced to the ontological, finite freedom of the knowledge-being correlation. Ethics necessarily comes after and is derived from the rational operation of the cogito in the world, always within or as means to the affirmation of being and the security of sovereignty, if it comes at all.

The Levinasian site of meaning, ethics as first philosophy, the face of the Other, signifies that which is prior to and transcends any human aim. It is vulnerability itself, the eyes that hold me, accuse me, justify my existence, that which exposes me to mortality in a way that precedes death. “The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question” (Levinas 83). I am no longer only responsible for myself in the eyes of the Other. I no longer carry the world on my shoulders. My first obligation, the way in which I exist in the world at all, prior to any thought, is for you and this is a responsibility for the non-intentional universe anterior to any concern for objects as an ego in the world. The proximity of the Other, a relation prior to relations, exposes
the primordial passivity of duration that unites without grasping, signifies without knowing. I am no longer merely an ego, but return to a prior state of being.

In the face of the Other, the signification of non-intentional consciousness, the Infinite, I do not ask why I exist, but how. I must justify my existence rather than merely affirming my ego. My first priority is not who/what I am, but for whom/what I exist. The Infinite in the face of the Other cannot be added to through my knowledge of the world. The face of the Other overwhelms me, demands of me a response prior to the reduction to intentionality. This is what it means to be called to responsibility, “as if I had to answer for the other’s death even before being” (Levinas 83). The immediacy of the Infinite in the face of the Other exceeds the finite freedom of the ego, overwhelms the present, demands that I serve before the question of sovereignty ever arises.

F. Proximity
My responsibility for the Other is not a relation arising out of guilt or alienation. These ontological terms reduce the signification of the Other to an individual (egoistic) experience. I do not feel guilty and then act. I do not respond because I feel alienated. It is nothing personal, neither feeling nor will. I am not the ground. The proximity of the Other, the immediacy of me and you, is prior to any feeling or experience that derives from and returns to the ego. The proximity that unites self and Other begins with the Infinite, beyond ontology, and as such is not reducible to self-consciousness, but maintains a distance that cannot be removed through knowledge. Proximity is not reducible to ontological terms.

Similarly, the demand to respond to the Other is not the result of laws, society or world. There is no commitment, need, charity or sympathy as ground; all of which reside within the ontological domain and re-enact seizure in various ways. Proximity signifies that which is not, and cannot be, coded or categorized. The proximity of the Other is who I am, but it is a subjectivity that begins with me and you, the result of a face-to-face signification which is not just a secondary way of knowing my identity in relation to the world, politics or ego but a primordial questioning of identity that begins elsewhere, beyond the finite freedom of the cogito, before any thematization or objectification.
The proximity between self and Other signifies an irreducible beginning beyond ontology, the pure passivity of the Infinite that holds open ethics as first philosophy. It is the indifference of this transcendence to the world that demands my non-indifferent response in the face of the Other, the maintenance and privilege of my proximity to you prior to any consideration of sovereignty or reduction to worldly relations. I cannot turn away from the eyes of the Other. I am not indifferent, but must justify my right to be. Non-indifference in the face of pure passivity is a first responsibility that prevents the isolation of being in the world. It is an “immemorial freedom that is even older than being, or decisions, or deeds” (Levinas 84) which demands that I take responsibility for you without reducing my obligation to political relations.

G. Demand

The Infinite demand to justify one’s right to be in the face of the Other puts truth as first philosophy, the ego as ground, in a precarious position. In fact, the ego becomes “the very crisis of the being of a being (de l’etre to l’etant) in the human domain” (Levinas 85). It is a crisis in at least two ways. First, at every moment my sovereignty depends on the violence of intentionality, the seizure of beings and things in the world as objects; to make all that is different or other, identical or dead. Second, the finite freedom of the ego remains dependent on and in contact with a non-intentionality that is never fully suppressed by ontology, but which repeatedly interrupts a hermeneutical world of appearances by way of the face of the Other.

The first crisis is not merely internal to the ontological domain, but the very nature, consequence and perpetuation of the domain. The second crisis is the transcendent beginning (the interruption) that disrupts the domain from beyond and suggests the possibility of both recognizing and solving the first. ‘Solving’ does not indicate a return to knowing, but the signification in proximity that demands more than a violent reduction to sovereignty by pointing to a beginning that is immediately, immemorially and passively ethical and resituates the ego in ‘relation’ to the Infinite.

Proximity is an ethical demand, not merely another means of subjectivity, because I am obligated to serve before the transcendent reduction to intentionality. It is uncertain because it does not presuppose any form of community or politics and because
I do not know the Other, proximity or responsibility. But I am all of these things in the face of the Other before I know anything of ego or sovereignty. “The human is the return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness…to its capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it” (Levinas 85). There is no mediation between the ethical demand of proximity and subjectivity. This demand, ethics as first philosophy, how I am in the face of the Other, is immediate and complete in a way that truth as first philosophy can never be.

H. Immediacy/non-simultaneity
The proximity between me and you immediately signifies the demand to serve the Other in the alterity of an infinite third party that neither of us fully grasps. Proximity is a demand precisely because this immediate, passive non-relation is immediate, not mediated. There is no thought between me and you or between me and the Infinite.

This immediacy, however, does not indicate simultaneity. Non-intentional consciousness remains prior to intentionality. The substitution of me for you is ethical because of the immediacy and non-simultaneity of a consistent, complete but uncertain beginning in alterity that is anterior and as such not subject to the immanence of ontology. In this way, ethics is not a choice, and not just an immanent possibility, it is first how I am taken hostage both immediately and before any thought.4

I. Language and Literature
In ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’ Levinas mentions language only once: “Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say I, to be in the first person, precisely to be me (moi).” (82) Beyond this brief statement, the importance of language and literature to ethics as first philosophy is left open. In this paper we consider, first, how language and literature are involved in the perpetuation of truth as first philosophy, then, how language and literature signify ethics as first philosophy.

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4 Non-intentional consciousness is also not hierarchical. We cannot compare non-intentional and intentional consciousness directly, situating one higher than the other. To do so would be to try to understand pure passivity as an attribute or characteristic of the world in relation to the ego as ground. Non-intentional consciousness is the Infinite, which cannot be grasped by thought, and as such can only be hinted at.
II. Literature and Ontology

A. Redescribing Roots

We begin with an unusual story that sets forth the implicit power afforded language and literature by ontology. ‘Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ by Jorge Luis Borges starts with the discovery of *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlon* Vol. XI, “a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet” (11). Tlon is the brainchild of an underground society of architects, philosophers, poets, engineers, linguists etc. It is a rigorously imagined world set down in the language of the real world.

Borges emphasizes the *Usprache* of Tlon, which differs significantly from the languages of the real world in that there are no nouns. In the north of Tlon there are impersonal verbs, in the south strings of adjectives suffice to describe any object. The object, expressed in either way, is “purely fortuitous” (Borges 13). The literature of the north and south is filled with ideal objects which are “virtually infinite” (Borges 14), sometimes created by the “mere simultaneity” (Borges 13) of two seemingly opposed or unsuited terms. “The literature…was a literature of fantasy…its epics and legends never referred to reality but rather to the two imaginary realms of Mle’khans and Tlon” (Borges 9).

The particularities of the language of Tlon, the lack of emphasis on the noun or nominative in particular, seem to suggest the power of linguistic structure to determine a world different from the real world. In discussing truth as first philosophy we have already seen how intentionality is characteristic of an ontological domain in which the ego attempts to know every being or thing as an object to be grasped. Time is reduced to presence and space is a world to be seized. In contrast, “For the people of Tlon, the world is not an amalgam of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts - the world is successive, temporal, but not spatial” (Borges 13). As such, there seems to be an ontological difference between Tlon and the real world due to the focus on acts as opposed to intentionality reflected in linguistic differences. It is the supposed power of this correlation between language (form and content) and the world that pervades through to the end of the story when objects from Tlon begin to infiltrate the world - a plate, a samovar, a compass - until, in 1944, the complete set of *The First Encyclopaedia of Tlon* is found in a Memphis library. The fiction of Tlon penetrates the real world. Language
and world infuse each other. “Almost immediately, reality ‘caved in’ at more than one point” (Borges 24). The symmetry and precision of Tlon would inevitably “spellbind and hypnotize mankind…Contact with Tlon, the habit of Tlon, has disintegrated this world” (Borges 24).

But to conclude that the language and literature of Tlon somehow overtakes and recreates the world overlooks several hints which point in a different direction. On Tlon, science is rendered null because every mental state is irreducible; moments and thoughts are connected only by judgment or explanation; systems of thought not only exist, but proliferate. “There are systems upon systems that are incredible” because “the metaphysicians of Tlon seek not truth, or even plausibility - they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy” (Borges 15).

The metaphysicians of Tlon may claim that they do not seek truth but the emphasis on irreducible ‘mental states’, ‘judgment’ and ‘explanation’ mirrors and preserves the sovereignty of the ego in the real world. The proliferation of systems, no matter how fantastic, depends on an origination in thought. The implicit ground of fantasy remains the cogito and the privilege of the ego, if not as knowledge then redescribed as possibility. Not surprisingly, Tlon is discovered as an encyclopedia, the categorization of all things known to the minds of beings.

Further, on Tlon “the subject of knowledge is one and eternal” (Borges 18) and the single subject is all-powerful. “Books are rarely signed, nor does the concept of plagiarism exist: It has been decided that all books are the work of a single author who is timeless and anonymous…Their fiction has but a single plot, with every imaginable permutation” (Borges 18). The ‘plot’ is the ground associated with the correlation between knowledge and being and it is through thought as knowledge that difference, or permutation, is overcome. Thus, Borges’ narrator is misleading when he writes: “Spellbound by Tlon’s rigor, humanity has forgotten, and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels” (Borges 24). Perhaps humanity has forgotten that it is the ego which is the ground of the world, but the juxtaposition of chess masters and angels forgets also that language as a tool of the mind serves only truth as first

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5 Knowledge seems to represent the multiple ways through which the unity of being is reached in the world. This not only corresponds with the correlation between knowledge and being described earlier as truth as first philosophy but reminds of Plato’s privilege of peras (One) over apeiron (multiple) in Philebus.
philosophy and conceals (or forgets) the non-intentional consciousness that remains beyond ontology.

Several aspects of the story are critical to this paper. First, the description of the imaginary world of Tlon supports the ontological ground of ego, immanence and knowledge upon which truth as first philosophy is based, despite the unusual noun-less structure of the languages of Tlon and the seemingly implausible events of the story. Literature, in this way, is not unhinged from ontology, but describes it. Second, the infiltration of the fiction of Tlon into the real world strongly suggests that literature is capable of immanently changing a world through translation or projection. This possibility is further indicated by the way Borges writes the story as a true account of events. In this way, there is the sense that beings can add to the world and to their own being in the world through the manipulation of words - literature re-invents the world, the world re-invents literature. But the power of this mutual translation depends on the dominance of the ontological axis correlating knowledge and being, even in the form of fantasy, and the simultaneous forgetting or concealment of non-intentional consciousness. Literature, beings and world interact and co-create the world. But this ‘freedom’ to define the world, to add to being through knowledge and redescription, is circumscribed by the finite freedom of intentional consciousness which ultimately aims to affirm being in the world rather than the justification of being in the face of the Other, whether considered in terms of objects or acts.

In Borges’ account, language and literature function, not so much to create a new world, as to redescribe the ontological domain of the Western world.

B. Filling Out the Domain
The words of Michael Eskin and Paul Ricoeur, respectively, are selected for the following section help to explicitly outline the traditional role of language and literature in filling out the domain of Western ontology.

1. Greek Ontology
Early literary works are interpreted as the first enunciations of moral truth in Greek culture. “Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, and Aeschylus, to name only a few, constituted a
prephilosophical moral tradition which presumably provided Socrates, Plato, and their successors with the basic themes (and their paradigmatic artistic treatment) of what we have come to call ethics: how we ought to live and act so as to live a (variously conceived) good life” (Eskin LE 575). As such, literature and ethics are inextricably bound together in a number of ways: “Insofar as both are ‘fictional’…they are indeed amenable to being mutually imbricated. And it is the specific subject of their ‘fictions’ - what I have referred to as the ‘human person in all of its relations, facets, and intricacies’ - which warrants in particular their marriage.” (Eskin LE 586) Literature and ethics are connected laterally by way of form (fiction), but more importantly, fall under the same subject (being/beings) and thus are both indefinitely subordinate to philosophy.

In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur considers fiction as a means of redescribing roots and suggests that “the ‘place’ of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb to be.” (6) Discourse is explicitly linked to the Greek understanding of being. It is through “the truth of imagination” (Ricoeur 48) in words that beings connect with being. Stated otherwise, the Greek correlation between knowledge and being is overcome in the true through the thinking/imagining ego.

Both Eskin and Ricoeur maintain Greek, specifically Aristotelian, relations between literature and ontology such that literature serves to perpetuate the correlation of knowledge and being as the site of meaning particular to Western ontology.

2. The Aristotelian Divide

The perpetuation of the division between literature and philosophy in itself indicates a return to Greek ontology. The modern view of literature, as related to but separate from philosophy, owes much to Aristotle’s “(onto)logical distinction between apophantic and non-apophantic speech, that is, assertive discourse aiming at propositional truth (e.g., philosophy, history) and non-assertive, non-propositional discourse (e.g., literature)” (Eskin LE 578). This division is carried further by Ricoeur when he separates language itself into sense and reference to describe the relationship between discourse and world.
The most fundamental support of this transition from semantics to hermeneutics is to be found in the connection in all discourse between sense, which is its internal organization, and reference, which is its power to refer to a reality outside of language. (5)

Reference suggests a linguistic means (sense) of transcending language. “Sign differs from sign, discourse refers to the world” (Ricoeur 256). The extra-linguistic power of language termed ‘reference’ acts not only as the link between semantics and world, but assumes transcendence by way of opposition to the immanence of semiotics. Whereas signs interact immanently within language, discourse goes beyond language, to the world.⁶

Reference is further divided into two parts: “the suspension of literal reference is the condition for the release of a power of second-degree reference, which is properly poetic reference” (Ricoeur 5). In this way, Ricoeur gives us at least two ways of understanding the meaning of discourse - in terms of that which describes reality (apophantic) and that which projects non-reality (non-apophantic). But the method to explain the transition from literature to world, the subdivision of language into sense and reference, and then first and second degree reference, merely perpetuates the original Aristotelian division of philosophy and poetics, apophantic and non-apophantic.

Eskin relies on the Aristotelian division to discuss the relationship between literature and ethics in the modern world. Ricoeur aims to redescribe Greek roots in modern terms by further subdividing language based on Aristotle’s original separation. In either case, there is no thinking beyond the Greek domain of thought.

3. Subordination

Eskin sets forth the sameness of literature and philosophy (both fictions, both concern being/beings in the world) and a separation in Aristotelian terms (apophantic/non-apophantic). He overcomes this difference through the vague subordination of literature to philosophy: “the yarns spun by the poets, their protagonists’ situations, quandaries,

⁶ The assumption here that ‘the world’ is not itself always already articulated by language seems suspect. If ‘the world’ is in fact always already articulated by language, then the distinction between sense and reference collapses. (Kisner)
decisions, words, and deeds served and continue to serve philosophers” (Eskin LE 576). Philosophy is the more original form. Literature is merely a moment of structural possibility derived from philosophy. “It is not the poet’s function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability and necessity (Aristotle 1451a36–39)” (Eskin LE 578). Fiction is limited to the projection of possibilities particular to the real domain of thought dictated by philosophy – ontology. Literature (non-serious, fiction, non-apophantic) remains subordinate to philosophy (serious, non-fiction, apophantic).

Literature is deemed ‘universal’ (in a worldly sense) due to its ability to reach people through variation of form and content and because it is not confined to the apophantic. Literature, however, assumes a universal function only as particular moments or possibilities that fill out the domain of the world determined by the probability and necessity of philosophy. If structural possibilities multiply through the manipulation of language and literature, they do so within (and for) the ontological domain set forth by philosophy. The Aristotelian distinction does not free literature from philosophy, nor from the ‘ethics’ of ontology, but insists that literature operate from a particular ontological ground. Although there is interaction between literature and philosophy, there is also a determining hierarchy that sets truth as first priority as the ethical ground and aim of all literature.

4. Instrumentality

Literature is deemed a rational tool, employed by philosophy to constitute, disseminate and perpetuate the ontological domain. For Eskin, literature is a sort of second-degree ethics that translates Greek ontology. For Ricoeur, language enables the setting-up of being.

Ontology sets forth concepts, thus constructing the domain through which thought resides. Discourse participates in filling out the domain, taking concepts to the world in multiple ways, but in itself does not produce truth. Thus, ontology uses literature, “its

7 “Evoking ‘the magnificent images of the poem of Parmenides as well as the dialectic of The Sophist’ (Benveniste 61), however, the linguist is forced to concede that ‘the language did not, of course, give direction to metaphysical definition of ‘being’ - each Greek thinker has his own - but it made it possible to set up ‘being’ as an objectifiable notion that philosophical thought could handle, analyze and define just as any other concept’ (Benveniste 62).” (Ricoeur 309)
metalinguistic and thematic sibling - to be fully integrated into the human and the social domain that it is ultimately concerned with” (Eskin LE 589). Literature is merely valuable as a means to express concepts, “to project and to reveal a world” (Ricoeur 108) predetermined by ontology.\(^8\) As such, literature leads to a gain in meaning, that is, extends the correlation between thought and being, but “is not carried to the concept, to the extent that it remains caught in the conflict of ‘same’ and ‘different,’ although it constitutes the rough outline and the demand for an instruction through the concept” (Ricoeur 351).

This points to a second aspect of instrumentality, for literature does not only project the concepts of ontology, laying them out passively to be taken up or ignored, but actively overcomes otherness in the world through the conflict of same and different. Literature is not a mere teaching instrument or form of communication but an instrumental means of grasping the privilege of ontology, a way of knowing that seizes objects (difference) for ontology (Same) through words.

5. Hermeneutics and Immanence
a. the hermeneutical circle

Literature remains a perpetual return to the Greek correlation of thought and being because Western ontology determines language as the opening to truth (ontology). The endless ways to redescribe ontology through the immanence of language are determined as so many ‘new beginnings’. But every new beginning is at once redescription and a return to the original site of meaning. Literature is not unhinged from the probability and necessity set forth by the domain, but is the way by which the sovereignty of that domain is maintained in the present.

The mechanism that drives the perpetual return to an original beginning is the hermeneutical circle, “which refers to the fact that in our interpreting activity (‘hermeneutics’) we always already have some sort of prior generalized and often vague

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\(^8\) Ricoeur asks: “Is it not the function of poetry to establish another world – another world that corresponds to other possibilities of existence, to possibilities that would be most deeply our own?” (271) We are reminded of Borges’ tale of Tlon and the power of literature to project another existence, to inject new ways into reality, and yet, without ever straying from ontological roots. The power to project is not unhinged from the real world, but derived from and essential to the immanent redescription of ontological roots.
understanding of what we’re inquiring about” (Kisner). This sense of the ‘always already’ that fills in the ‘outline’ is critical to the modern understanding of literature. If literature were not an ‘always already’ then an author, or a reader, would either have no idea what he was looking for or would not recognize it when he found it. As such, the perpetual return to roots through words that unconceals the truth of ontology always begins in the middle and is therefore already part of the greater project, the outline, the ontological being of beings, which dictates these very terms. The possible worlds created by literature are always already of a pre-existing domain, ontologically prefigured in terms of origination, aim and method.⁹

b. spheres of discourse

Besides the immanence of signs within language, Ricoeur suggests that there is “a network of interactions that causes a certain context to be one that is real and unique…a semantic event that takes place at the point where several semantic fields intersect.” (114) In other words, language participates in the production of meaning by way of the immanent interaction between discourses.

My inclination is to see the universe of discourse as a universe kept in motion by an interplay of attractions and repulsions that ceaselessly promote the interaction and intersection of domains whose organizing nuclei are off-centered in relation to one another; and still this interplay never comes to rest in an absolute knowledge that would subsume the tensions. (Ricoeur 357)

In this interpretation of the immanence of literature there is no Truth to be found, no point of rest beyond the world, no way of moving outside the tensions that play out on the immanent plane of language, or between language and world. The goal is only, always already, hermeneutics - the perpetuation of the immanent interplay within and between discourse and world - which serves the perpetuation of the original site of meaning

⁹ Ricoeur states: “Hermeneutics then is simply the theory that regulates the transition from structure of the work to world of the work” (260). This is true, but the statement conceals the ontology which drives the theory itself, the ground which sets forth the self- affirming always already which predetermines the perpetual, immanent redescription of roots and the domain within which truth is privileged. Not only is the ground of hermeneutics concealed, but so too is the prior-ity of non-intentional consciousness.
particular to Western ontology. Linguistic planes of immanence, semiotic or semantic, do not indicate directionless chaos or the loss of hierarchy, but multiple, always ‘new’, entry points to the hermeneutical circle, an infinite number of returns to Greek ontology, the original ground, passing from present to present. Language is not Truth, but mediation, the way by which we experiment and “understand what principle of philosophical thought, applied to grammatical being, produces the series of meanings of the term to be” (Ricoeur 309). Hermeneutics, immanence and ego are assumed. Thought is applied to language to produce to be, but thought itself, necessarily that of an ego, is always already of to be. The emphasis on thought maintains the primacy of intentional consciousness, the privilege of the present and disregards any possibility of transcendence beyond the world.

There is a relentless cycling back made possible by the privilege of the present and the governance of hermeneutics that permits the redescription of an original site of meaning and keeps the correlation between thought and being from collapsing. It is a way of holding open the ontological domain that never grows old and a means of ensuring that the world ‘progresses’ but never strays from Greek origins. In other words, the being of beings is illuminated by way of the immanence of language and discourse.

c. a continuum of mutual translatability

Eskin does not divide between the immanence within language and that between spheres of discourse (in the works considered). He suggests that the relationship between literature and ethics should be considered in terms of mutual translatability.

My essay’s main impetus boils down to an attempt to displace the common distinction between moral philosophy and literature on logical-referential grounds in favor of an integral conception according to which both are to be located along one discursive-semiotic continuum, needing and ‘meaning’ each other without becoming identical or equivalent. (Eskin 564)

The discursive-semiotic continuum of mutual translatability is an immanent domain within which literature, beings, world and ethics play out the same ontological tune.
Eskin’s proposed shift from logical-referential grounds to a continuum is not a shift at all. Rather than an alternative to Greek ontology, this formulation merely attempts to keep open the ways by which literature and ethics allow a return to ontology and the expression or translation of those roots to the world. A continuum or integration between literature and ethics, or between Ricoeur’s spheres of discourse, seems to suggest a certain fecundity, as if two or more fields intersecting opened up a way to multiply possibilities. This may be so, but so long as literature and ethics remain subordinate to Western philosophy there is no change to the ground that guides the ultimate aim of those possibilities.

d. self-transcendence
Connected to an ontological domain based on intentionality, the possibilities afforded by literature are necessarily limited to the world. The movement from semiotics to semantics to world is internal to ontology. As such, the term ‘transcendence’ takes on a very specific meaning.

There is no reference problem in language: signs refer to other signs within the same system. In the phenomenon of the sentence, language passes outside itself; reference is the work of the self-transcendence of language. (Ricoeur 85)

Transcendence can only take the form of self-transcendence in a directional and hierarchical way because the aim is to take language from thought to hermeneutics and no further. The application of thought to words takes me beyond myself, to the world, from semiotics to semantics, from discourse to hermeneutics, but the origin of thought, the original site of meaning, is never transcended - literature never goes beyond the domain of being, always already predisposing transcendence as a way of referring back to oneself. (The I of the I think remains center, ground and certain.) Hermeneutics and redescription are the purpose and limit of discourse - it is simply a matter of entering and administering the hermeneutical circle properly, such that to be, my being, is produced. ‘Beyond’ is the world, being in the world, and as such the transcendence of language and literature can only be extra-linguistic.
6. Text and Reader

According to Eskin, what is at stake in literature is the solicitation of a ‘just response’ from the reader in relation to the ‘text-as-other’ (564). The ethics of literature is derived from the relationship between other (text) and being (reader). What does it mean for the text to be ‘other’? The ontological domain within which literature is already subordinate and instrumental presupposes a ground of intentional consciousness that determines every ‘other’ as an object to be grasped. The otherness of the text, then, is reduced from Other to object. The ‘just response’ is not solicited from the object but is evident in the reduction to object itself. The way by which beings overcome difference and affirm being through seizure is ethics. Anything after this grasping is secondary and occurs within the ontological/ethical domain. The reader, as an individual, draws from the text-as-other a ‘just response’, but the reader (ego)/text (object) dichotomy is assumed to be part of the continuity and universality of the ontological domain. In this way, what is at stake is not really ethics at all, which can only come after objectification, but the just ontological ground that affirms the sovereignty of the ego. The hermeneutics and immanence of the ontological ground, no matter the interpretation of the reader concerning a particular text, predetermines ethics or justice in terms of an egoistic return to self.

Ricoeur asks: “Lacking the power to summon up the intention of the writer, is it not the reader’s preference that ultimately makes the decision? ...To put it more precisely, how do we know which potential meanings should be attributed to a poem and which others should be disclaimed?” (109) His answer: “It is the reader, in effect, who works out the connotations...that are likely to be meaningful” (109).

Without explicitly stating how the correct connotations are to be worked out, the way is apparent. The reader’s ‘preference’ (which should be understood as a rational decision in this case) is secondary and misleading. It is as an ego, working out the connotations on one’s own, that the reader re-presents the ontological ground of intentional consciousness through the cognitive interpretation of literature. The meaning of the text is predetermined by the way in which the reader, as an ego, privileges thought as the site of meaning and determines the truth of a work in relation to himself. Again, it all comes down to immanence and hermeneutics. Individual interpretation is continuous with intersecting spheres of discourse, with the mutual translatability of literature and
ethics, reference and the world, self-transcendence. There is always a sense of flowing words, discourses, beings and objects that interact immanently and seamlessly across a plane of existence, a sense of individual freedom to make decisions, to have preferences, but the ontological ground does not change. It is in fact perpetuated by such implicitly hermeneutical descriptions. For example, Ricoeur states: “As we read a poetic sentence, we progressively restrict the breadth of the range of connotations, until we are left with just those secondary meanings capable of surviving in the total context” (111). This may be true. I make the work my own by reducing it to the present, to the world, to that which fits the ontological domain - to myself. But this reduction to intentionality conceals the non-intentional consciousness prior to any ontological sense of ethics, justice or interpretation in the world.

Eskin seems to suggest that there is something ethical signified by the text, in the words, that is prior to any specific content: “The force of the ethical-in-the-literary does not depend...on the representation of ethically charged, challenging, or thought-provoking characters, incidents, or plots but, rather, as Coetzee's novels exemplarily testify, on a text's/author's comprehensive ability to introduce into the event of reading itself the sense of being ethically-aesthetically engaged” (567). But that which is signified prior to specific situations or events in the text by the act of reading, which is always already the act of an individual, retains the site of original meaning particular to Greek ontology. In this way, no matter how we come to the text we are always taken back to the same ground which privileges the present, thought, ego. The act of reading the text in this way, no less than the text-as-other, is an ontological event.

7. Thinking Being
For Western ontology, that which must be for something to appear or for something to be said is my being in the world. I speak, I know, I exist; I immanently create and recreate the real world and myself through language.

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10 Once literature is determined to be an instrument of ontology every characteristic of literature seems to serve the perpetuation of ontology. For example, “Form, in other words, is that dynamic ‘in’ which the ethical shows itself aesthetically and ‘in’ which the aesthetical shows itself as always already ethical” (Eskin 566). The aesthetic form of literature is always already ethical (ontological) because literature functions to translate ontology. In this way, stating that the aesthetic is ethical is essentially meaningless because an unsaid prior determination has already subordinated literature to ontology.

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When I speak, I know that something is brought to language. This language is no longer intra-linguistic but extra-linguistic; it moves from being to being-said, at the very time that language itself moves from sense to reference. Kant wrote: ‘Something must be for something to appear.’ We are saying: ‘Something must be for something to be said.’ This proposition makes reality the final category upon which the whole of language can be thought, although not known, as the being-said of reality. (Ricoeur 360)

I assume the domain of being for language, as the priority of my existence, insisting that language functions only to perpetuate that domain. As such, I am the first and final category upon which the whole of language can be thought. I am the site, the ground and the limit, then, not just of language, but of thinking itself. Language functions to perpetuate the correlation between thought and being, but as a result, the ontological domain of ego expressed is also the extent of my thought. In this way, thinking (and language) never exceeds the parameters of the correlation, but always begins from and returns to the ground of ego and never thinks from beyond thought.

8. Action and Mediation
For Ricoeur, the goal of each and every act, including language and literature, is the good life. As an ego, I am free to act, to speak, to read and write, to ensure that my existence is satisfactory. I begin with myself, my sovereignty, and aim for the Good. As such, the Good is always, first and foremost, the satisfaction of the ego, happiness in overcoming.11

To exist, then, is to act. Thus, the other takes on an important role in Ricoeur’s understanding of the world. But the other is situated between me and the good life. My capacity to live well, to experience a good life and ensure the sovereignty of my being, depends on the mediation (not the proximity) of the other. What is ‘mediation’? In benign terms, it indicates a relationship, or perhaps partnership, between beings. Self and other are seen in terms of friendship, sympathy and mutual esteem. “The irrereplaceability and non-substitutability in friendship leads to a level of recognition that grounds our ethical

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11 Ricoeur sets the good life as “the over-arching horizon (the infinite pole) that informs our actions in the present” (Muldoon 69).

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feeling…It signifies that I can acknowledge who is the author of their actions, preferences, and soliciutudes such that there is the mutual understanding of ‘you too…as myself.’ It is the recognition of the shortest distance between the ‘I’ and ‘you’ where the esteem of the other as myself and the esteem of oneself as an other are seen as equivalent (Ricoeur OA 194)” (Muldoon 84).

With ‘substitution’ and ‘irreplaceability’ we come across Levinasian terminology that seems to suggest a similar ethics to that signified by the face of the Other. But Ricoeur’s conception of ethics is different from ethics as first philosophy in several crucial aspects. First, irreplaceability and mutual understanding do not signify transcendence beyond ontology, but ‘ground ethical feeling’, indicating “being enjoined to the structure of selfhood (Ricoeur OA 354)” (Muldoon 85). The other is considered in terms of self (I feel, I acknowledge, I recognize). As such, the other is the affirmation of the ego as ground by way of cognition and the mediation of one’s position in relation to others in the world. The other is one way in which sovereignty is managed and the good life possible. Others are necessarily present to consciousness, part of the world and the mediation (overcoming) of the plurality of voices/objects in the world on the way to the Good/Being/Self. There is an extension of oneself as a ‘moral’ (ontological) being to both the other and the world, in general, but it is grounded on the ego in relation to the other as intentional object rather than beginning with the proximity of the face of the Other. Others (including language and literature) are always secondary in that they mediate the way in which I make my way in the world predetermined by ontology. Friendship, sympathy, need and charity, do not signify the immediacy of the Infinite in the face of the Other but indicate further that the ground of Ricoeur’s ethics is the self.

The overwhelming, unifying presence of the cogito as ground and the transcendental reduction to intentional consciousness dominate both Eskin and Ricoeur’s view of literature and ethics. With the hermeneutical and immanent ground of self returning to Self I am free to add to my being and identity, through language and literature, thinking and knowing, to mediate beings and a world of objects to secure my sovereignty, my good life, to pursue myself in the name of the Good. Within this domain,
language and literature are never unhinged from the probability and necessity of redescription that perpetuates Greek ontology.

C. The Ecstasy of Becoming

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari redefine the immanent participation of language in the creation of world and undermine the traditional, hierarchical relationship between literature and philosophy. By describing the world as a rhizomatic plane of consistency, Deleuze and Guattari reconsider language and literature in terms of multiplicity, not predetermined by an ontological domain that demands the subordination and instrumentality of words to Greek roots.

1. The BwO

Language is and is part of a map. Every line of flight, every possibility put into words, springs from and comes back to the map, to language. In this sense, there is a perpetual return, but it is not a redescription of ontological roots. Language as a map is not a ground, but a beginning, only one of many multiplicities that make up a single, always changing, immanent plane of inclusion, the body without organs (BwO):

So what is this BwO? - But you’re already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic: desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight - fight and are fought - seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love. (D&G 150)

The BwO is the plane of consistency upon which, over and across, language scurries, beings grope, life runs. “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole.” (D&G 151) Upon the BwO the opposition between One and many, apophantic

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12 "Language is a map, not a tracing" (D&G 77). This formulation aims to get away from the traditional view of language as merely tracing anew the unchanging origins of the Western world. Rather than addressing an unchanging root that can be traced in so many different directions, language participates in the production of an open field of immanence.
and non-apophantic, still exists - Greek ontology does not disappear - but each binary opposition, every ontology, any line of flight or return to roots, exists upon the plane as one multiplicity among an infinite number of others. There is no hierarchy, no grand return to ‘the beginning’. The map is flat and inclusive. There are an endless number of beginnings, infinite returns, but the ‘ground’ is always the BwO, the plane, an opening, “A formal multiplicity of substantial attributes that, as such, constitutes the ontological unity of substance…A continuum of all substances in intensity and of all intensities in substance. The uninterrupted continuum of the BwO. BwO, immanence, immanent limit…The BwO is the field of immanence of desire, the plane of consistency specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it).” (D&G 154)

Every thing exists on the map, on the plane, upon the BwO - this is being - there is no transcendence, no root to return to (or as many as you like).

2. Saying to Saying

Language, then, is a multiplicity among multiplicities. It is not a matter of distinguishing between being/being-said or reality/word. “If language always seems to presuppose itself, if we cannot assign it a non-linguistic point of departure, it is because language does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said, but always goes from saying to saying” (D&G 76). Language flows in the present, drawing no hard line between said and world. “There are variables of expression that establish a relation between language and the outside, but precisely because they are immanent to language” (D&G 82).

Language, as a saying to saying, never signifies anything beyond the world, but as a multiplicity participates relentlessly in the immanent creation of the plane (BwO). Multiplicity is the key to an experimental philosophy that suggests and encourages an infinite number of starting points: “What we must determine is not an origin but points of intervention or insertion…” (D&G 86) Saying to saying does not open to the truth of being, but upon the BwO. It is not knowledge that takes us to being, but creation. What, then, does it mean to do philosophy? What is the function of language and literature? “To create concepts on planes of immanence” (May 141) and “to engage us in the interesting,
the remarkable, and the important” (May 142). Start wherever you like, add whatever you will, experiment, create, the more the better - read, write, philosophize. We are not applying thought to words to redescribe a particular ground. We are creating thoughts, from saying to saying, as many as possible.

3. Indirect/direct discourse

The saying to saying of language as a whole is an indirect and immanent multiplicity - an abstract, collective assemblage from which direct discourse between beings takes form.

Indirect discourse in no way supposes direct discourse; rather, the latter is extracted from the former…direct discourse is a detached fragment…but the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I draw my name…to write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day…to select the whispering voices…from which I extract something I call my Self (Moi). I is an order-word…my direct discourse is still the free indirect discourse running through me, coming from other worlds or other planets. (D&G 84)

The direct verbal exchange between two beings, the unconcealment of the unconscious in writing, my Self - all are but fragments taken from the greater, indirect discourse as multiplicity that runs through each being, all beings. In this sense, we seem to have something of ‘the more in the less’ or a hint of non-intentional consciousness, but this ‘more’ is an assemblage upon the plane of consistency ‘running through me’ (and only me), involving other worlds or planets, all multiplicities, simultaneously, always upon the BwO. As such, “there is no being beyond becoming, nothing beyond multiplicity…Multiplicity is the inseparable manifestation, essential transformation and constant symptom of unity. Multiplicity is the affirmation of unity; becoming is the affirmation of being.” (Deleuze NP qtd in May 143) Indirect language does not transcend the plane. There is no interruption of the BwO from beyond the world. Indirect language as an “assemblage has neither base nor superstructure, neither deep structure nor superficial structure; it flattens all of its dimensions onto a single plane of consistency.
upon which reciprocal presuppositions and mutual insertions play themselves out” (D&G 90). Being is affirmed at every instant by the unity and inclusiveness of indirect language.

Language participates in the creation of the world as a multiplicity and thus cannot be isolated from the infinite multiplicities that create the BwO (being). The saying to saying of indirect discourse is always already creating the world (the plane). There is no beyond, no divinity, every thing exists on the map. Upon the single plane of consistency every thing comes together and every thing affects every other thing and the whole simultaneously. Language, then, is nothing without the worldly, indirect context of the map as a whole.13

4. The Order-word

But as much as language is indirect in terms of multiplicity, it also defines the world in a very direct way. “The elementary unit of language…is the order-word…Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience” (D&G 76). Language is concrete and political. “Language is not life; it gives life orders. Life does not speak; it listens and waits.” (D&G 76) From the saying to saying of indirect discourse language takes shape in the world, immediately and definitively, as the order-word. The passing from language to world is reciprocal: “We constantly pass from order-words to the ‘silent order’ of things, as Foucault puts it, and vice versa” (D&G 87).

The order-word, within and through the context of multiplicity, defines the politics of the moment, sets momentary borders through the capture of assemblages in time. The BwO and indirect discourse seem abstract, but “Philosophy is, in a word, practical and normative [for Deleuze and Guattari]. It is a practice whose point is not that of getting the right take on things but of making a contribution to our living.” (May 140) Language is not concerned with the Truth or merely with abstract notions of being. Truth as first philosophy is free to roam upon the BwO, to order, but no more so than any other multiplicity. In indirect discourse there is no truth, only participation. In the passing from indirect discourse to the order-word there are many truths, as politics. Language, then, as multiplicity and order-word contributes to political being immanently and without

13 “We get nowhere until the pragmatic, but also semantic, syntactical, and phonological determinations are directly linked to the assemblages of enunciation upon which they depend” (D&G 91).
returning to roots. But the politics of the order-word is no less an ordering, a command, a sentencing, than ontology.

Order-words bring immediate death to those who receive the order, or potential death if they do not obey, or a death they must themselves inflict, take elsewhere… it is like a warning cry or a message to flee…You are already dead when you receive the order-word…In effect, death is everywhere, as that ideal, uncrossable boundary separating bodies, their forms, and states, and as the condition, even initiatory, even symbolic, through which a subject must pass in order to change its form or state. (D&G 107)

The order-word dictates a political boundary, the delineation of a political moment, between beings. In the order-word is the immanent connection between two assemblages on a single plane of consistency. The question is not how to avoid the order-word. That is impossible. The question is “how to elude the death sentence it envelops, how to develop its power of escape, how to prevent escape from veering into the imaginary or falling into a black hole, how to maintain or draw out the revolutionary potentiality of the order-word” (D&G 110). We are constantly, immanently coping with order-words, the saying to saying stratified in the order-word, with the politics of language, language as politics, trying to maintain our footing, our place on the plane. Language as a whole indirectly connects things on the map, as assemblages, multiplicities, lines of flight; but the order-word is direct, political, stratifying the moment, all moments, as the reduction of saying to saying to the said that demands obedience, committing some to death, exonerating others, relentlessly, infinitely drawing and redrawing limits, domains, territories.

5. The Politics of Multiplicity
When reading A Thousand Plateaus it is not difficult to find yourself meandering from multiplicity to multiplicity upon the plane, enjoying the intensity, the velocity, perhaps…and this of course is how it is in Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of being, multiplicities interacting infinitely, indefinitely, immanently, creating the BwO, always
creating - the ecstasy of becoming. But saying to saying does not exist without the order-word. Ecstasy and death go hand-in-hand. So, between multiplicity and politics, am I under any obligation to treat others as more than multiplicities in various phases of stratification? We know it is not a matter of a return to origins - no more Plato and Aristotle to guide my way through the world – but a return to the BwO, which always already affords a new beginning. Through the order-word I experiment with multiplicity. It is through the order-word that I stratify the BwO, it is through multiplicity that I determine a new line of flight. Either way, there is no Truth, no ground, only experimentation. The management of the two, the indirect and the direct, is politics (and ethics) on the plane, the management of so many assemblages in passing. Thus, my obligation to the Other is secondary, another means to the immanent creation of the plane by way of multiplicity and the order-word.

Is there anything beyond the politics of multiplicity? But multiplicity is the unity and affirmation of being. The BwO is all. The Judaic conception of an infinite beyond and the modern ego are considered equally as alternative moments of deterritorialization on the plane.

God withdraws his face, becoming a point of subjectification for the drawing of a line of flight or deterritorialization; Moses is the subject of enunciation…The Cogito, consciousness, the ‘I think’ is the subject of enunciation that reflects its own use and conceives of itself following a line of deterritorialization represented by methodical doubt. (D&G 128)

God does affect the BwO, “For the judgment of God weighs upon and is exercised against the BwO; it is the BwO that undergoes it…The judgment of God uproots it from its immanence and makes it an organism, a signification, a subject. It is the BwO that is stratified.” (D&G 159) But every multiplicity stratifies the BwO through the order-word, even if only for a moment; all multiplicities contribute politically to the immanent unity of being in this way. There is no beyond, only the politics of multiplicity.

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14 Baudrillard: “Ecstasy is all functions abolished into one dimension” (23). The ecstasy of multiplicity seems also to be all relations reduced to one dimension, that of the plane or the BwO.

Ethics as First Philosophy: Levinas and Literature
6. Freedom and Sovereignty
What does it mean to say that I exist in a flat, political world in which I am always different, changing, becoming, territorializing and deterritorializing according to the influence of immanent collective assemblages upon the plane of consistency? How do I exist within this politics of multiplicity? Even if there is nothing of ontology or roots and my subjectivity rests upon the uncertain, indirect multiplicity of the BwO, is it not always through me, as a result of my experimentation and the order-words that I speak, that I secure my place on the plane? Isn’t this, again, the privileged sovereignty of my ego over all others?

My position on the plane, determined by multiplicity and the order-word, is always twofold: freedom and sovereignty. My subjectivity is not defined by a predetermined ontological domain, but is open to the immanent interaction of multiplicities. I, as a multiplicity, am free to interact on this field of immanence. But I is also the order-word that determines politics (and ethics), the stratification of multiplicity at the moment the order-word reduces saying to saying to said, that determines relationships in the world. I have little control over multiplicity as a whole. The context of the BwO is always far greater than any single individual can comprehend or control. In this uncertainty is not just freedom, but the basis of a threat. There is nothing static about a world of immanent multiplicities. Every moment is dynamic. Although I am not hindered from exploring, the always changing, territorializing and deterritorializing plane puts me in jeopardy. I am compelled to fight for and preserve my sovereignty on the plane. The order-word that stratifies (and kills) is my weapon, my way of being. There is a sense of freedom, individuality perhaps, in the ability to wield words, to give orders, to carve out a sovereign domain for oneself in the world, but ethics is reduced to the flip side of that freedom (politics), the sovereignty of the ego and the demand for security.

All that matters now is only to resemble oneself, to find oneself everywhere, multiplied but loyal to one’s personal formula…Resemblance is no longer concerned with others, but rather with the individual in his vague resemblance to himself; a resemblance born of the individual’s reduction to his simple
elements…One is alienated from oneself, from one’s multiple clones, from all these little isomorphic ‘I’s… (Baudrillard 41)

The way towards being (the BwO), multiplicity and the order-word, remains centered on the ego. The traditional ontological root is cut, but the ego continues to obscure non-intentional consciousness by way of a monotonous ecstasy in which my immersion (and my success) within the whole (the world) demands that I recognize myself above all others. My first responsibility is for my survival (not for the Other). “All that remains is for you to become ecstatic over (in the literal sense of the word), or to withdraw from, this inhuman extrapolation. This withdrawal…is that of the subject for whom the sexual and social horizons of others has disappeared…” (Baudrillard 42)

In the midst of the political tension of multiplicity, armed with and against the order-word, I am alone, overwhelmed and alone, forced to respond to immanence by way of the perpetuation of the inhumanity of sovereignty, of my becoming over other humans.15 In such a world, my response is not merely to be, but to become. I am free and sovereign, but also compelled to explore and secure, to become myself, everything I can and must be. This is my subjectivity, my politics and my ethics on the plane.

7. Caution and Method

Language is saying to saying and the said, multiplicity and the order-word, the immanent, political creation of the BwO. I am free and sovereign, that is, free to determine my sovereignty, as are all others (egos). As such, caution is required. Equality before multiplicity means that one may dominate or be dominated, it depends, there may be extremes. The endless creation and destruction, territorialization and deterritorialization of spaces, political boundaries, between me and you, these cities, those states, appear as multiplying sets of self-transcendent beyonds that provide no way of locating ethics because there is nothing that connects me to you that is not also open to the shifting politics of multiplicity. How do I exercise caution, then? How do I live?

15 “In truth, there are only inhumanities, humans are made exclusively of inhumanities, but very different ones, of very different natures and speeds” (D&G 190).
This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times...We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency...you have constructed your own little machine, ready when needed to be plugged into other collective machines. (D&G 161)

The method reflects the politics of multiplicity, determining both my subjectivity and my relations with others: multiplicity and the order-word, freedom and sovereignty, experimentation and consolidation. I must be prepared to fight, to go to war. I find/win a place on a stratum or within a predetermined stratification. I mark out/seize my territory/identity. Some may be put to death. I/my domain, remains a part of the greater multiplicity, open to the order-word of others. I defend it. Some may be put to death. I explore the stratum and seek to push to the boundary of the stratification, to go beyond it if possible. Some, including myself, may be put to death.

8. The Inhuman Face
At the moment the order-word is laid down we do not come face-to-face, we do not look each other in the eye. “Faces are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations...The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of; it constitutes the wall of the signifier, the frame or screen. The face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through” (D&G 168). The face of the other does not signify transcendence. Just as the order-word is merely the reduction of indirect discourse, which is the immanent multiplicity of the plane, the face is merely another aspect of the ecstasy of becoming, mediation and overcoming, in an immanent world.
The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start…if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face…by quite spiritual and special becomings-animal, by strange true becomings…Yes, the face has a great future, but only if it is destroyed, dismantled. (D&G 171)

On the plane, where the “face is a politics” (D&G 181), the face of the Other is reduced to a site of political stratification. The being of ontology overcomes the face of the Other through knowledge and the reduction to object. Becoming demands caution, avoidance or destruction of the face of the Other. There is a shift from truth to politics in this formulation, but not from the violent reduction to self that conceals the priority of non-intentional consciousness. Ethics upon the BwO is not about wisdom, but caution, doses of caution by way of experimentation in the present and as such retains the inhuman subordination of ethics to being.16

For Deleuze and Guattari language is a political multiplicity, the assemblage of saying to saying and said, that participates in the becoming of being (the BwO). The immanent becoming of the BwO sets the ego free, there are no roots per se, but this finite freedom depends on the perpetual definition and preservation of sovereignty in the world by way of stratification. Ethics, then, is reduced to a political duality between experimentation and caution which remains true to the privilege of the ego and being in the world. The resultant conflict between abstract faces is a matter of life and death, it is war, even when put forth as so many possibilities for creation, as matters of sovereignty always are. Language and literature, in turn, reflect and perpetrate this inhuman state of affairs.

III. Levinas and Literature
Ontology assumes the function of literature to be both continuous with and subordinate to a predetermined domain. As such, the role of literature is always already the immanent redescription of ontology in the real world. Whether translating/projecting roots or

16 “Not wisdom, caution. In doses. As a rule immanent to experimentation: injections of caution.” (D&G 150)
becoming the BwO, aiming for the truth of being or the politics of the plane, considered in terms of spheres of discourse or the order-word, literature participates in the creation of a world that perpetuates the dominance of an ego that overcomes the Other and conceals non-intentional consciousness. The proliferation of ways to being that stem from the finite freedom of intentional consciousness indicate how language and literature are interpreted as a theme after, resulting from, an assumed *ground* of thought, as so many ways to affirm the privileged being of beings. The works discussed thus far provide only several variations of thematization and reduction, but indicate the extent to which thought has strived to privilege the ego. As such, the task of unconcealing literature as the signification of ethics as first philosophy rather than the affirmation of truth as first philosophy appears daunting. “The conception of a word serving only to communicate a thought, or to dissimulate it, rests on a tradition that is so ancient and venerable that we scarcely dare touch it” (Levinas TW 149). But with *ethics as first philosophy*, a beginning beyond ontology, “Then the first question has to be: can discourse signify otherwise than by signifying a theme?” (Levinas GP 173)

In Part I we saw how the face of the Other signifies the passivity of non-intentional consciousness prior to self-consciousness and that this signification renders truth as first philosophy a secondary, reduced totality concerned only with the intentionality and immanent participation of the ego in a political world. We explored ways of assuring the privilege of the ego and perpetuating an ontological world through language and literature in Part II. We are now “seeking in language contact and sensibility, behind the circulation of information it becomes” (Levinas S 89) as the servant of totality. We are after the primary sense of language prior to ontology, otherwise than being, the way in which language and literature signify more than information or communication, knowledge and categorization, subjects and objects, form and content; more than what is said, how language *first* says beyond the world.

In ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’ Levinas hints at the way language signifies: “Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say I, to be in the first person, precisely to be me (*moi*).” (82) This hint is more explicitly brought out by Levinas in other works which we refer to here so far as they relate to language and literature for the purposes of this paper.
A. Speech
For Levinas, responsibility for the Other and language are inseparable. Language is first and foremost a way of speaking to the Other that takes me beyond myself, not merely to the world, but to you. It is the proximity of me and you, ethics as first philosophy, no less in language than in the eyes of the Other, that signifies the Infinite. Conversation insists on the predominance of the Other over egoism because “the proposition that posits and offers the world does not float in the air, but promises a response to him who receives this proposition, who directs himself toward the Other because in his proposition he receives the possibility of questioning…A proposition is maintained in the outstretched field of questions and answers” (Levinas TI qtd in Hendley 155). Language as speech is not first political or egoistic, communicational or informational, then ethical, but ethics prior to any thought or thematization. Language is ethical prior to the politics of words said. In speaking, I do not order you, but am exposed to you, opened to you, to the Infinite and the ethical demand that takes prior-ity before any priority has been thought. As such, language in its primary role as speech is the immediate signification of an ethical beginning in the Infinite prior to the ontological reduction that sets the ego as ground.

The subject who speaks does not situate the world in relation to himself, nor situate himself purely and simply at the heart of his own spectacle, like an artist. Instead he is situated in relation to the Other (Autre). The privilege of the Other (Autre) ceases to be incomprehensible once we admit that the first fact of existence is neither being in-itself (en soi) nor being for-itself (pour soi) but being for the other (pour l’autre); in other words that human existence is a creature. By offering a word, the subject putting himself forward lays himself open and, in a sense, prays. (Levinas TW 149)

Language as exposure to the Other, the signification of divinity, sets out in broad terms the transcendence of words, a signification beyond comprehension, that completely changes the way by which literature ‘relates’ to ethics. Language, as the signification of transcendence, “is thought thinking more than it finds…” (Levinas GP 180), thinking a beginning that is prior to intentional consciousness, unknowable, ungraspable. This, then,
is the ‘function’ of the word, of language and literature, in the Levinasian sense. The literary work is not the redescription of roots or the extension of the free and sovereign ego in search of being. Language as speech sets forth a beginning that precedes ontology, interrupts it and thus resituates it, in terms of the saying of one to the Other, the signification of that which comes first – ethics.

B. Said/saying to

The transcendence of words, beyond ontology and otherwise than being, not merely an immanent form of self-transcendence that remains within the world, cannot be understood in ontological terms – it cannot be understood at all. There is only a hint in the saying to of language prior to what is grasped in the said.

The said is the appearance and thematization of speech - information, communication, parts of speech etc. Said and saying are co-existent (in the word). But when the said is privileged and language as a whole is assumed to be nominative, based on the sign or the noun, the world is reduced to intentionality, the ego acts as ground, and saying seems to result from categorization and naming. In this way, the saying to of language is understood in semiotic terms, as the extension of the manipulation of signs, the working of the mind, to create information or to communicate a thought. This reasoning rests on an ontological predetermination that coincides with and fulfills the privilege of epistemology and rationality, the correlation between knowledge and being, the world of the ego overcoming in the true, the Western tradition. By naming the proliferation of objects (branches) in the world, being (the Tree) grows; the root (knowledge/being/ego) is perpetually redescribed in the present, fueled by a sense of satisfaction in adding to being, to identity, progress. Through exaggeration of the said, and the forgetting or reduction of saying to, language becomes the “borrowed mask of being” (Levinas S 96). Language regarded in this way is merely instrumental, the filling out of the ontological domain of being through intentionality, and implicitly suggests that the ego controls or knows language, both saying and said.

A consideration of language that determines the said to be the ground, means and aim of knowing the world is the antithesis of Levinas’ emphasis on substitution, the accusative dimension of language located in saying to the Other, indicating first and
foremost the *condition* (and not the context) for all communication. “Saying opens me to the other before saying what is said, before the said uttered in this sincerity forms a screen between me and the other. This saying without a said is thus like silence. It is without words, but not with hands empty.” (Levinas GP 183) Saying to is the way in which language is an opening to the Other prior to words said, an opening to the Infinite, which cannot be captured by totality and manipulated by the ego.

In language the non-intentional (saying to/for-the-other) confronts the intentionality of consciousness (said/by-the-other). Language is both saying to and said – said and saying to have the word in common. But Levinas puts the said in its proper ontological place, posterior to the transcendence of saying to the Other. The-one-for-the-other is “the exception that cannot be fitted into the grammatical categories of noun or verb, save in the said that thematizes them” (Levinas S 107). The said always says being (ontology). Proximity and substitution are not contained in the said. The face of the Other interrupts the totality of the said and always remains beyond.17 “Saying makes signs to the other, but in this sign signifies the very giving of signs” (Levinas GP 183). The said never contains saying to, which would be to say that in the word is held the Infinite, but hints at the beyond which overwhelms and remains irreducible to the world and the word. “If silence speaks, it is not through some inward mystery or some sort of ecstasy of intentionality, but through the hyperbolic passivity of giving, which is prior to all willing and thematization. Saying bears witness to the other of the Infinite which rends me, which in the saying awakens me.” (Levinas GP 183)

Saying to at once returns language to a silent beginning, to a giving prior to words, and signifies a being overwhelmed by the Infinite in the face of the Other. Identity in this sense is not a certainty, as with the persistent return to myself as sovereign ego, but “the uncovering of self in saying” (Levinas S 99) which is always the uncertain, yet

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17 “The said of language always says being. But in the moment of an enigma language also breaks with its own conditions, as in a skeptical saying, and says a signification before the event, a before-being. Events happen to subjects that undergo or provoke them. The verbs by which the events are said and the nouns by which the subjects are said are formalized, even the verb being, even the noun being. The homonym is here an extreme amphibology in which the difference rests not on a common genus, but uniquely on the commonness of the word. Language thus shows itself to be something quite different from a doubling up of thoughts. The oneself and substitution do not enter into this framework.” (Levinas S 122)
complete opening to the Infinite. As a beginning that opens to a responsibility\(^\text{18}\) that is irreducible and not asked for, saying to indicates a subject that is first accused.

C. The Accusative
The primordial proximity of the Other is signified in language by the accusative, the for whom/what, rather than the nominative who/what, that emphasizes me (me and you) rather than I. “Everything is from the start in the accusative” (Levinas S 102). In the face of the Other there is an immediacy prior to any thought of being, to any thought at all, concern for knowledge or myself. The accusative structure is the linguistic hint, when we are open to its prior-ity, that signifies saying to, speech, the face of the Other - ethics as first philosophy.

Before there is any name or knowledge of language in the form of the said there is an accusation that is silent. The accusative of language refers the ego back to the absolute accusation, the demand of the Other. “In the accusative form, which is a modification of no nominative form, in which I approach the neighbor for whom, without having wished it, I have to answer, the irreplaceable one is brought out (s’accuse)” (Levinas S 113). It is not merely that I accuse you of something, as if a rational decision or an event provoked the accusation; the accusative signifies the death of others before it happens and my responsibility for whom/what demanded in response. “The accusative (me voici!) here is remarkable: here I am, under your eyes, at your service, your obedient servant. In the name of God.” (Levinas GP 184) In the face of the Other there is no excuse because there is no mediation in the proximity that signifies non-intentional consciousness. There is no choice when I look into the eyes of the Other. A choice is only available when the ego is assumed as ground, the Infinite forgotten or concealed and the Other reduced to an otherness to be grasped. When the Other is my beginning, a silence or absence of world, I cannot rationalize giving or not giving, helping or not. These decisions depend on the thinking of an ego, the thematization of the world. Prior to the mediation of

\(^{18}\) “This responsibility is prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers, to the thematization of the said, which is superimposed on my being put into question by the other in proximity, and in the saying proper to responsibility” (Levinas S 101).

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consciousness in the rational world, the accusative form of language signifies ethics as first philosophy, a beginning prior to commitment, to acts, to words said.\(^\text{19}\)

D. Saying/hearing

Language is first accusative, the saying to the Other of speech that signifies ethics as first philosophy. Literature, then, is not merely the said of language that, in isolation, extends the privileged ground of the ego into the world through knowledge but a way of speaking that takes me beyond myself, to you, from the Infinite. In *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot tells us that “the work is a work only when it becomes the intimacy shared by someone who writes it and someone who reads it, a space violently opened up by the contest between the power to speak and the power to hear” (37). To suggest, then, that literature is the mere reading and writing of words, the construction and understanding of the said, is deceiving; it is, in fact, a denial of the primordial function of language and literature, the speaking to *and* the power to hear, together, that opens us to that which is beyond ontology. A relationship between reader and author indicates a connection between beings, but does so only in a worldly sense, limited to the passing of knowledge from one to another, without any indication that in the words themselves, in the passing or proximity, there is something beyond, prior to the world. The writer stops that which cannot be stopped, the Infinite in the said, names the unnamable - he does so through the word - and is always (partly) successful. The said is never more (or less) than the hint (the saying). The reader is not learning things, but is, first, opened to the face of the Other through the accusative, to a sense of being prior to comprehension of the words.

It is not a question of how to read in the usual technical or instrumental sense, nor of learning in the Platonic sense (*anamnesis*), for it is not a matter of hermeneutics or knowing, but of returning by way of forgetting (*amnesia*). Every time we read we must forget; first forget, then read. We forget the imposed primacy of the ego, the privilege of knowledge, the affirmation of being. In this way, it is no longer merely reading the said,\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) This is a beginning and an ‘understanding’ of language that has radically different consequences for identity. “The I is a passivity more passive still than any passivity because it is from the first in the accusative – oneself (*soi*) – and never was in the nominative; it is under the accusation of the other, even though it be faultless” (Levinas GP 178). I am oneself (in your eyes, under God) and not merely an ego. From the first, in the accusative, my subjectivity is a responsibility for you prior to any thought as an ego.
but the hearing that must accompany the saying to of literature to bring out the primacy of ethics as first philosophy. “Reading simply ‘makes’ the book, the work, become a work beyond the man who produced it” (Blanchot 194). If there is speaking, there must also be hearing; this is the proper receiving of the words, of language and literature, that allows for the signification of non-intentional consciousness prior to what is said. Reading as forgetting is the return itself, to what is not written, to that which is prior to experimentation and politics, the subjects and objects of the world. It is the way by which we hear the silence of the Other prior to any reduction to knowing.

Hearing is not reading as an ‘event-in-itself’ that leads us back to the certainty and repetition of intentionality and hermeneutics. The words are spoken when they are heard; we must make the work communicate its proper meaning, as a work and not an event, to go beyond authors and readers, first beyond the events and characters, to return to the signification of language itself. This is the opening of the ‘space’ (Blanchot’s term) that accuses me, takes me beyond myself, prior to thematization and rationality.

Hearing has nothing to do with understanding the text. Hearing is prior to comprehension. It is the way by which we allow the work to communicate the primordial silence, to unconceal the Infinite in the face of the Other. Hearing the text “does not produce anything, does not add anything. It lets be what is. It is freedom: not the freedom that produces being or grasps it, but freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes, can say only yes, and, in the space opened by this yes, lets the works overwhelming decisiveness affirm itself, lets be its affirmation that it is - and nothing more.” (Blanchot 194) The work of literature is not a means of working the knowledge-being correlation but is a work in so far as it transcends this totality. As readers with ears we affirm an ethical sense of being. On the street, we see the face of the Other, we lock eyes, and in this immediate demand transcend the totality of the world. On the page, we see the said, the secondary form of language that orders ontological being. But we cannot only read (see and understand) the words, for this is to merely uphold the way by which the said reduces and conceals saying. We must hear the speech that accuses, we must hear with our eyes. Only in this way are we awake to the first meaning of language, to the proximity between
reader and Other that comes out in reading as hearing and signifies ethics as first philosophy.\(^{20}\)

E. Space/the Infinite
This ‘prior to’ - the “being of beginning” (Blanchot 198) - the primordial space unconcealed by reading-forgetting-hearing is an indecisive return, the return to a space that is not predetermined. There are no rules produced by this silent return, it is not a rule in itself. Ethics as first philosophy is not an ontology. The Infinite cannot be thematized, it is never grasped. Literature as the signification of the Infinite, then, does not set forth a guiding correlation, but hints at a beginning that always remains open. The said says being, orders the world, but in language as speech there is no presupposition of community or politics of any kind. The proximity between me and you is not a correlation, not an order, but a silent demand. It is not mediated in any way. It cannot be thought out.

The world of culture is a means of emphasizing the privilege of the said and redescribing the limited space of the ontological domain.\(^{21}\) Literature in Levinasian terms, on the other hand, has nothing to add to the Infinite, a space which can neither be comprehended nor contained. The work is a thing, an object, paper and words, things said and as such takes up space in the real world. But the work is first and foremost speech, and in this way, “the work becomes a thing beginning” (Blanchot 206). The space of the Infinite meets the domain of the world. When we say the Infinite meets ontology, or non-intentional consciousness meets intentional consciousness, we do not suggest that they are equal, only that they meet. It is not a matter of equality or inequality, which are ontological terms. The Infinite overflows the world, words and beings, making ontology

\(^{20}\) In Part II we referred to the intent of Eskin and Ricoeur to preserve ‘Greek, specifically Aristotelian’, relations between literature and ontology. However, as regards hearing words we can mention another Greek, Parmenides: “Come now I will tell thee - and do thou hear my word and heed it - what are the only ways of enquiry that lead to knowledge. The one way, assuming that being is and that it is impossible for it not to be, is the trustworthy path, for truth attends it.” The focus is on the truth of being, but the way of unconcealment is also to ‘hear my word’. It is through hearing that language opens. This is perhaps also “why the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus’ word for ‘being’ - the unconcealment of what is - was a word that also meant speech: logos.” (Kisner) The question, then, is to what language opens us to, the being of beings or ethics as first philosophy.

\(^{21}\) “In the world of culture, the work becomes the guarantor of truths and the repository of meaning” (Blanchot 205).
and things said possible and meaningful. It is in words, the proximity and signification signified in saying/said, that passivity and present, the Infinite and the world, the face of the Other and self exist together.

This meeting of being said and the Infinite signified suggests the way by which the reader comes to the world. Language first signifies the beyond that cannot be understood in terms of power immanent to the world of beings - a return to the absence of power, politics and ontology. Thus, as ethical readers, we are forced to question the world presented by the text, and the world we live in, by first holding open the space of the Infinite signified in the saying to of the work. The questioning that begins with the face of the Other heard in the text, thus opening the reader to the world from beyond the world, sets forth authentic communication. The proximity of the Infinite that precedes the ego and ontology exposes me to a space that cannot be reduced before I come to the world. This way of seeing the world, taken in the broadest sense, is not something I thought up. It is the way I am in the world before I think. Language and literature expose me to this existence, to this space prior to I, to an ethical subjectivity before world that turns the way I read and live towards the face of the Other; opens the Infinite through the Other and as such makes possible an ethical questioning of the world and authentic communication with others.

In this way, the work of hearing the text, which opens me to the events and characters of the work from beyond ontology, also holds open the way by which the domain of the world and my identity become meaningful. “The problem of communication reduced to the problem of the truth of this communication for him that receives it amounts to the problem of certainty of the coinciding of self with self, as though coinciding were the ultimate secret of communication, and as though truth were only disclosure” (Levinas S 109). In contrast, literature communicates a primordial space, and reminds us that “space belongs to the sense of my responsibility for the other. The everywhere of space is from the everywhere of faces that concern me and put me in question, despite the indifference that seems to present itself to justice. Being will have a meaning as a universe and the unity of the universe will be in me as subject to being.

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22 “The relationship with the other precedes the auto-affection of certainty, to which one always tries to reduce communication” (Levinas S 108).
That means that the space of the universe will manifest itself as the dwelling of the others. It is inasmuch as it is inhabited by the others that look at me that the pre-geometrical eidos of space is described.” (Levinas S 123) It is from the space of ethics as first philosophy communicated by literature that the space of the world, the way in which we dwell in proximity, is set forth properly for further questioning.

F. Hearing/reading

In hearing the work we aim to hear silence. Why should this be so difficult? In setting the ego as ground (and in the said itself), ontology strives to take account of hearing no less than all other senses. In this way, beings are limited to the sight (knowing) of every thing as some object. Hearing does not escape intentionality, nor does silence itself, which becomes yet another object to be known. Ontology claims to be about the unconcealment of truth through knowledge - truth as first philosophy. It is this, but cannot help but also be the concealment of that which is prior to such a formulation. Ontology, then, is both unconcealment and concealment. That which is concealed, however, is covered over in unconcealment. Silence, for example, cannot be just forgotten, it does not go away on its own. It is concealed by the way in which it is discovered in the world and claimed as a known part of the world. Ontology has its say by overcoming silence in the true, thus situating that which is really prior to ontology within ontology. This is no less the case with silence as it is with being. That which is prior to the world and unknowable by beings is concealed by perpetual unconcealment, set forth as part and parcel of a being’s experience of the world. Intentional consciousness at all times remains the center and the ground, ordering even that which is prior to order itself.

We have said that the text is a work. What we want to say now is that reading literature as a work demands hearing. In language, we find the way by which we break out of the ontological domain, interrupt the totality of intentional consciousness and the privilege of immanence - the transcendence of the Other. But this break through, although there to be heard, requires the sort of work that takes us past what is merely visible, on the surface, secondary. An authentic reading of a text is never passive, but depends on openness to the first meaning of literature, which is not the site of knowledge or thought indicated by the said, but the face of the Other signified in the saying to of
language. This is a difficult beginning because it can be traced or hinted at, but not measured. “Here meaning is not measured by the possibility or impossibility of the truth of being…” (Levinas GP 176) There are no predetermined guidelines, no easy answers, only a perpetual questioning in terms of the justification of existence and my right to be that must be held open and maintained as priority.

Once we hear language, the events, subjects and objects of the text take up their proper position within the greater space of ethics as first philosophy. Suddenly, we have an obligation to accept the signification of ethics in the words rather than trying to understand every text as if we could add to our being. Reading, then, affords us the opportunity to return to an ethical beginning and question the world accordingly.

G. Dostoyevsky/Borges

We are coming to a position from which we will begin to question specific works of literature in terms of ethics as first philosophy. But first we turn to the words that Levinas himself referred to often: “Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for each one, and I more than others” (Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* qtd Levinas GP 182). Levinas refers to Dostoyevsky, whose works almost wholly concern the relations (proximity) between people, because he finds in the explicit indication of a demand of the one-for-the-other a sense of the face-to-face responsibility implicit in language and literature. Levinas, of course, is and must be sensitive to words, to the voice of the Other to be heard in literature, to catch the signification in Dostoyevsky’s words. He works to make literature communicate, to hear, that which is first to language - the saying to that accuses and holds me responsible for the Other.

To demonstrate further how Levinas holds up these particular words we can look at a very similar statement written by Borges: “Whatever one man does, it is as though all men did it. That is why it is not unfair that a single act of disobedience in a garden should contaminate all humanity…I am other men, any man is all men” (TS 104).

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23 “The text depends upon an enactment which, following the indications for thinking indicated in the text (indications which are more like hints than instructions), attempts to let the matter of inquiry show itself in its own terms. Without this enactment the text is simply an empty sequence of oracular propositions. Indeed, insofar as the reader is not the passive recipient of a theory presented by the text, this enactment is part and parcel of the text ‘itself’…” (Kisner)
There certainly seems to be a sense of ethics hinted at in these words. I am not merely an isolated I, but am all men, immediately and without escape. There is a feeling of belonging to a collective, but in this assertion is there anything that demands responsibility for the Other? To say that I am all men somehow affirms my being in the world as a man among men, but “The biological human brotherhood…is not a sufficient reason for me to be responsible for a separated human being” (Levinas GP 180). We are all equal, one ego is another, interchangeable, just as one currency can be exchanged for another. You are me and I am you, but why should I do unto you as I would have you do unto me? What if I am able to get more out of you than you are out of me, or vice versa? Perhaps, I do not have to exploit you, but there is nothing stopping me from doing so, either. And in so far as the affirmation of my being goes, the consolidation and protection of my sovereignty in the world, it may be necessary. The affirmation of being trumps ethics in all cases. I am you, we exist, but I am first!

All for one and one for all is, ultimately, an ethics of indifference because it says nothing of the non-indifference signified in the face of the Other and the unmediated proximity of the Infinite. The emphasis on humanity remains an abstract self-transcendence of ego, from self to Self, mediated by the mutual translatability or overcoming from one being to another in the world, upon the plane, aiming for the good life perhaps, but says nothing of the politics of ordering relations and stratifying the domain. ‘I am other men’ is correct in a limited sense, but fails to unconceal the primordial space from which an authentic sense of subjectivity, the world and ethics is signified. For Levinas, “The word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone” (S 104). I do not affirm my being by being the same as you or with you, but justify my existence in responsibility for you.

Levinas leads us from ethics as first philosophy and language as speech to Dostoyevsky and to the hint we must be open to hearing and holding open in literature. From the space of the Other, it is ethics as first philosophy, the voice of the Other, that cannot be ignored, even in the said, which always tends towards being.

H. The Space of the Other
We have outlined two interpretations of language and literature:
1. Discourse redescibes/translations/projects the predetermined ontological domain of being. “The poem gives birth to the image; the poetic image ‘becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being…one would not be able to meditate in a zone that preceded language’ (Benveniste 62).” (Ricoeur 254)

2. Literature participates in the becoming of being. “To write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience…Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. Writing is inseparable from becoming: in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or vegetable, becomes-molecule to the point of becoming-imperceptible.” (Deleuze LL)

We have discussed literature as the signification of ethics as first philosophy:

3. The saying to of language signifies proximity and the Infinite that transcends ontology. “For Levinas, words create an infinite anxiety unless the space created by words includes a relation with someone…in the saying there is always the trace of the alterity that goes beyond anything that can be measured in terms of its thought content” (Hand 144).

Each interpretation contributes to the creation of world, but only with the beginning set forth by Levinas does the space prior to any a priori allow literature and world to become something other, something more than an aspect or instrument of ontology. The work remains a signification first, that must be held open. This is what literature has to offer - the opportunity to hold open the space that makes possible, demands the exposure of one to the Other, ethics as first philosophy. The proximity of the Other, language as saying to, reading as forgetting/hearing - the space of the Other - this is the beginning prior to truth as first philosophy we have tried to trace in language.
IV. Hearing the Other

Making literature communicate authentically means first hearing the voice of the Other in the saying to of language so that the characters, relationships and events said take on their proper meaning in relation to the Infinite space of the Other. With ethics as first philosophy as our beginning, we consider four works of literature, trying to read the words authentically, to hear the silence of the space held open by language.

A. Bartleby: Self and the Other

‘Bartleby’, by Herman Melville, is the story of a Wall Street clerk, his relationship with the lawyer that hires him to copy papers and with the world.

The lawyer calls Bartleby to his office to examine a short paper, as is customary practice in the legal profession at the time. Bartleby, “without moving from his privacy…in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, ‘I would prefer not to’” (Melville 103). The request is repeated. Again, ‘I would prefer not to’ is the only response Bartleby offers. The lawyer is obviously perplexed by this unusually straightforward form of insubordination, for not only does Bartleby ‘prefer not to’ but “His face was leanly composed; his gray eyes dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him.” (Melville 103) The lawyer stands before Bartleby and asks, “Why do you refuse?” Bartleby again, calmly, without the slightest emotion: “I would prefer not to” (Melville 104).

The lawyer proceeds to employ logical arguments, noting the customary habits of the office and the legal tradition, vigorously entreating Bartleby to help with the examination for the good of his own work and to help the other copyists, even inquiring of the opinions of the others in the office, but gets nowhere. “You are decided, then, not to comply with my request - a request made according to common usage and common sense?” (Melville 104) Bartleby indicates without speaking that his decision is irreversible.

Melville encourages the reader to see Bartleby’s behavior as somehow on the other side of normalcy, with Ginger Nut even suggesting that he is “a little luny” (Melville 105). It becomes clear that the longer Bartleby’s quiet refusal to opt out of common practice continues the more it becomes a moral dilemma for the lawyer. He seems compelled to prod Bartleby into compliance of some sort, testing him in one way
or another, trying to find out exactly where the line is drawn, where precisely Bartleby is coming from. The lawyer asks Bartleby to step out to the post office. “I would prefer not to.” “You will not?” “I prefer not.” (Melville 107)

It is the word ‘prefer’ that is most telling in this account. If Bartleby says that he will not, the refusal takes the form of opposition. In other words, the decision can be understood as a direct relation, a binary opposite to acceptance and thus categorized accordingly. But to prefer not to do something is not so easily captured by thought. It does not fit well into a world view grounded on the certainty of rationality. A definitive refusal is easy to understand because it complies with standard binary categories. But Bartleby does not choose either of the answers (yes or no) made available by the lawyer. He withdraws from the question itself by opting other than the clear choices presented to him and as such refuses to be thematized. It is not indecision that irritates the lawyer, for Bartleby is firm in his preference, but the nothingness of the non-response which leaves the question dangling, seemingly meaningless. “Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as passive resistance” (Melville 106) because there is nothing exactly to grab hold of that enables a proper (rational) response. What does one do with nothing – with a form of nihilation rather than mere negation? There is no right or wrong in preference upon which a reaction can be based. Instead, it is the nothingness signified by Bartleby’s non-response that seems to make the rationality of the question, and the lawyer, appear absurdly out of place. The lawyer is compelled to find a place for Bartleby that fits into his own thinking, to legitimate his stance, and so refers to Bartleby’s “perverseness - such unreasonableness” (Melville 109). If Bartleby cannot be determined within the rational domain then he must be irrational, not of this world, which of course allows rationality to remain central, as the standard by which irrationality is judged.

The lawyer, however, is not wholly antagonistic, but somehow sympathetic to Bartleby without understanding him. There is something about Bartleby’s passivity that stops the lawyer from throwing him into the street even though this is clearly the rational thing for an employer to do under the circumstances. The result is that Bartleby ends up doing nothing in the office but his own copying. He does not participate in group work of any sort, nor does he run errands of any kind. He seems wholly self-absorbed, keeps to his desk and simply gets on with his tasks. But the lawyer soon discovers, on a Sunday
morning when the office is usually closed, that Bartleby’s separation from the norm goes much deeper than an aloof or enigmatic character. He lives in the office. He never leaves, not even to eat. The lawyer begins to take notice of certain peculiarities. Bartleby is extremely thin and pale. He eats only ginger nuts and bits of cheese. He does not drink beer, coffee or tea. He never reads, but stares out the window for long periods - at the brick wall. He offers nothing about who he is or where he comes from. In short, there is little or nothing of Bartleby besides the lean figure that appears behind his desk each day - he is an anomaly, although a peaceful, industrious one. He seems to exist without actually living, without taking part in the world, to such an extreme that his preference for withdrawal cannot be described in relation to the behavior of the others. The lawyer pleads with him, trying to draw him back: “…in short, say now, that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable: -say so, Bartleby…” but Bartleby will not submit, “At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable…” (Melville 114)

Bartleby extends his withdrawal. Eventually, he gives up copying all together, first due to poor eyesight, but later, without saying whether or not his eyes have improved or not, he simply states that he will never copy again. He stands for long hours gazing through the window of the office at the brick wall across the way. He becomes nothing more than a fixture, completely withdrawn from the life of the office. After long deliberation, the lawyer concludes that his behavior is far too unreasonable and dismisses Bartleby, leaving him standing alone in the office at the end of a work day, expecting that he and all his things will be gone in the morning. The line between rational and irrational is finally imposed. Bartleby has gone too far.

But how exactly is the line drawn? The lawyer makes the following statement in his account of the affair: “I assumed the ground that depart he must, and upon that assumption built all I had to say” (Melville 117). A certain conscious domain of thought is set forth, projected, within which all Bartleby says and does is determined as either rational or irrational. When Bartleby stood beyond the domain long enough action had to be taken. The ground upon which that action must be based is the rationality of the ego, a particular set of assumptions about the world that may or may not be rational in and of themselves. The lawyer, however, was pleased with his method, for it made sense, complete and perfect sense, as any one in their right mind would attest, allowing self to
return to the certainty of Self, but found that the potential ‘success’ left him with misgivings concerning the practice. Why should this be? Why the hesitation? Had he not been charitable enough in waiting so long and tolerating what was perhaps merely laziness and disrespect? Certainly, but there is something about Bartleby that undermines or stands apart from the world the lawyer knows. In some way, Bartleby is beyond the thinking domain to which he always refers to determine the truth of the matter at hand, the reasonableness of things and himself. In short, Bartleby’s passivity, his non-sense, interrupts the totality, the security and certainty, of the lawyer’s world.

Of course, Bartleby does not quit the lawyer or the premises, but is found the next morning in the office as usual, preferring not to leave. Even the lawyer seems to understand, after the fact, why this was perhaps not wholly unexpected. “It was a truly beautiful thought to have assumed Bartleby’s departure; but after all, that assumption was simply my own, and none of Bartleby’s” (Melville 117). This is not a clash of egos. The lawyer and Bartleby are not directly in conflict. This is not merely an ontological problem. Bartleby ‘withdraws’ to a non-intentional space prior to conflict, prior to any predetermined set of relations with things or beings, prior to the intentionality of the world. This ‘withdrawal’ need not be understood as a choice, and in this sense the term itself seems to deceive. His withdrawal is first passivity such that he does not choose any thing or direction any more than an individual chooses the primacy of non-intentional consciousness. The description of Bartleby’s non-movement as ‘withdrawal’, or the choices set before him by the lawyer, are ontological impositions, means of grasping, built upon a consistent, rational set of assumptions about the world.

Just when the lawyer seems finally on the verge of calling the police or physically abusing Bartleby a strange thing happens. He recalls the following statement: “A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another” (Melville 120). If there is a direct ‘conflict’, then it is here, not between beings in the world, but at the meeting of non-intentional and intentional consciousness, in this case, represented by the bible and reason. The lawyer makes a fresh attempt to tolerate Bartleby, assuming the responsibility of allowing Bartleby the withdrawal he desires. The lawyer seems to salvage himself, his moral self, by moving from self-interest to charity, by allowing the words of the bible to take priority over rationality. But this jump from cold reason to a
feeling for humanity is merely one more way by which the lawyer affirms his being in the world. His actions stem not from proximity with Bartleby, nor from the words of the bible, but from lack of comprehension and the will to somehow fold Bartleby back into the rational world, to overcome uncertainty and difference. Charity is one way of seizing that which appears irreconcilable with reason. The bible takes the form of a resource to reason to aid in the justification of charitable behavior, an alternative that can be referred to as needed, as worldly circumstances dictate. The lawyer’s fluctuation between anger and forgiveness, the law and the bible, never leaves the singular plane of existence grounded in intentional consciousness. The choices he lays out for himself are in fact not choices at all. Charity fits as opposition to selfishness, but retains the ground of Self.

As such, Bartleby remains a problem to be thought out. Throw him out for vagrancy? He does not move. Because he cannot support himself? But he does so quite easily. For some criminal behavior? His honesty is above reproach. Because he asks too much? He asks for nothing.

After a period of time, during which the lawyer must endure the curiosities and offhand remarks of professional colleagues concerning the idle, strange and melancholy Bartleby fixed in a long stare in the middle of the law office, the lawyer decides to change offices and rid himself of Bartleby. It seems the only decision that will at once relieve his sense of rationality without offending his sense of charity. It is, however, a thoroughly rational decision and in no way implies that the lawyer takes responsibility for Bartleby or does him any favors by not dealing with him directly. He simply cannot stand to look Bartleby in the eye each and every day and not take responsibility.

It comes to this: Bartleby doesn’t leave the office, but is expelled by the new tenants. He goes no further than the hallway, finally planting himself at the entrance to the building. At the request of the new tenants, the lawyer returns and puts the situation in plain terms for Bartleby: “Either you must do something, or something must be done to you” (Melville 125). Bartleby prefers to do nothing, even denying the lawyer’s final, frustrated appeal to take him to his own home. “No; at present I would prefer not to make any change at all” (Melville 126). Bartleby recognizes no sovereignty, not even his own, sees nothing to be grasped or protected, knows of nothing to be added to his being and thus prefers to change nothing. What could possibly contribute further to being? Bartleby
is reminiscent of a stone, passive and enduring, passing through the world untouched by reason and society.

Having come face-to-face with Bartleby, with the face of the Other, faced with the justification of his existence rather than the mere affirmation of being the lawyer is unable to respond. He flees the city for several days. When he returns Bartleby has been dispatched to the Tombs indefinitely as a vagrant. On his first visit the lawyer finds Bartleby “standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows…peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves” (Melville 127). The lawyer tries to absolve himself of responsibility, to point out the advantages of the situation, but Bartleby responds coldly: “I know where I am” (Melville 127). Bartleby, like time passing, remains the passive underside of reason, but is not unaware that it is the ground of reason, the politics of the ego that has found not only him, but non-intentional consciousness itself, some thing to be seized upon, locked up, thematized and in this way known or forgotten. The affirmation of the ego depends upon the concealment of that which is beyond ontology, but also the overcoming of all that is different in the true. Several days later, despite having arranged for special meals, the lawyer finds Bartleby curled up at the base of a wall, stone cold, eyes open, pale and lifeless.

Why does the lawyer even bother to return to visit Bartleby in prison? Why does he try and help this insignificant figure when clearly there is no *rational* reason to do so? If we interpret the story from the perspective of ontology, that is, from a rational point of view, then we proceed from the lawyer by way of the law and consider Bartleby as an outsider. He is an irrational freak who refuses to take his proper place in society, to *contribute* to humanity, and as such must be removed to where he will not detract from the project at hand. In this case, the lawyer is correct in changing offices and leaving Bartleby to his own devices. It is the rational thing to do. It is the lawyer’s right as a ‘free’ and sovereign individual. The way in which he returns to Bartleby either seems superfluous as a personal choice or indicates the subordinate position of ethics to the rationality of the ego.

But if we begin with ethics as first philosophy, then it is from the proximity between the lawyer and Bartleby that we must proceed. From this beginning we may take
two paths. First, we may state that the lawyer’s behavior in the face of the Other contradicts the fundamental demand of proximity to take responsibility for the Other. He fails to fulfill his obligation, to justify his being. The lawyer perhaps felt something when he saw Bartleby, but it was a feeling overwhelmed by thought, stemming from the ego, and not the signification of the Infinite in the face of the Other that precedes all thought, thus leading to a reduced, intentional form of responsibility, charity. He could not think beyond ontology, from the space of the Other, even when he was compelled to do so by the passivity of Bartleby. Instead, he remained confused, perpetuating the privilege of rationality while futilely grasping at the Other through subtle forms of knowing. There is the hint of a divine interruption with the biblical reference, a sense of giving in the way of charity, but every thought and action stems from intentional consciousness and remains a reference or addition to the totality of being in the world.

On the other hand, we may ask if the lawyer’s behavior in the face of the Other does not demonstrate the impossibility of the fundamental demand to take responsibility for the Other? If the lawyer’s responsibility for the Other is infinite and irrecusable, as Levinas suggests, then isn’t the point that he can never fulfill this obligation? The proximity between me and you will always remain (ungraspable). As such, the lawyer is not a moral failure, but exemplifies the perpetual challenge of proximity set forth by ethics as first philosophy – a perpetuity that is never wholly reduced to right/wrong or rational/irrational. In this way, the Levinasian ethical beginning remains firm, but there is no normative set of guidelines with which to pass judgment.

In our reading of ‘Bartleby’, Melville does not merely set forth the ontological domain of rationality. The domain itself is questioned by the interruption of the Infinite signified by the subjectivity exposure to alterity. In this way, the story is not simply a comment on or representation of the ethics of the times. It has nothing to do with the present and does not aim to teach anything. Non-intentional consciousness cannot be learned, it is prior to knowing, and it is the space of the Other, ethics as first philosophy, that is unconcealed by Melville’s account. This occurs through the events of the story, as we have aimed to show, but only because language as speech, the speaking and hearing that signifies proximity between beings, opens us to the world from beyond the world. It should not be surprising, then, that ‘Bartleby’ takes the form of a letter, the saying to of
one to another, or that the letter ends with the lawyer noting that his curiosity led him to find out what Bartleby did prior to his clerkship on Wall Street. In turns out that Bartleby was a subordinate clerk at the Dead Letter Office in Washington. Should it be surprising that he who represented an existence beyond the world was also responsible for letters that never found their target, for the saying to in words that signifies proximity and ethics? Melville seems to suggest that it is not surprising because Bartleby himself was a dead man, a dead man because he had nothing to do with the real world, with the life of the polis. But could it not be that Bartleby was not dead to the world, but beyond it because he was never an ego to begin with, but signified the absence (and proximity) that precedes the ego as ground? Does he not signify the silent passivity of the Infinite prior to the politics of the rational world? Doesn’t the man who received letters in Washington, and later wrote them on Wall Street, signify the prior-ity of ethics as first philosophy?

B. Meursault: The Other and Society

The Outsider, by Albert Camus, tells the story of Meursault, a young man who seems oblivious to the structures of society. He works, sleeps and enjoys the simple pleasures of life when he can. He drifts through the city, living in the moment, content with his immediate surroundings without being particularly attached to them.

After the death of his mother and a sequence of unforeseen circumstances Meursault shoots a stranger on the beach. He is charged with murder and brought to trial. While testifying, he appears unable to acknowledge the gravity of the proceedings. Those watching are disconcerted by his lack of emotion and seeming detachment from both the events in question and the court. Does he not realize that the trial is a matter of his life? How can he remain passive in the face of justice and after what has happened? The jury is told of his unusually calm behavior after the death of his mother - he smoked in the parlor, drank café au lait, further cementing the image of a man entirely self-absorbed, removed from the world. His answers concerning the shooting are truthful, even forthright, but strangely cold. He puts forth the words without embellishment, with no effort to wrap them in regret, anxiety or shame. As a result, uneasiness pervades the proceedings. It is obvious to those in attendance that Meursault is a man with an unusual understanding of or feeling for death.
But mere curiosity turns to anger and shock when it is clear that Meursault cannot be easily accounted for in the usual way. He is clearly not irrational, as his simple, well-worded answers indicate. Meursault’s indifference is not due to a lack of comprehension or confusion. He understands his position in court all too well. But the case of murder is the most extreme violation of the rules of society, an action that clearly stands beyond the norm, and as such it is expected that Meursault would either be overwhelmed by regret or insane. He is neither. As such, he cannot be easily labeled or categorized and then condemned or released accordingly by a system that ultimately must decide one way or another, between right and wrong. The questions put to Meursault in court demand the truth, but when Meursault gives nothing but what is correct, his words stripped of all reference beyond fact, his answers seem unusually empty, somehow devoid of the power associated with justice. The proceedings seem surreal, ridiculous and arbitrary. Thus, despite what might have been a strong case for self-defense, he is convicted for what appears to be lack of sentiment, largely on the basis of indignation - not the events and circumstances exactly, for those are clear enough, but his refusal to show remorse over the transgression or to indicate his inability to understand justice, to adopt and express the expected responses particular and common to society.

But what is it exactly that is so offensive in Meursault’s behavior? In his indifference or passivity, Meursault does not directly confront the system, nor does he oppose the proceedings of the court in any way. In fact, he doesn’t really do anything and this is the fault that is so grotesque in the face of justice. He does not defend himself. He does not try to escape. He does not protest when he is locked up. He merely passes through the system, seemingly unscathed by the words and actions of others, living no differently than before the shooting, despite the circumstances. He is not preoccupied with the present or his own death, but seems to view the events from somewhere else.

It is this indifference or ‘somewhere else’ that is critical. It is the cold correctness of Meursault’s testimony, exactly what a court of justice would seem to be after, which signifies his position as an ‘outsider’ and the inability of the court to know this place. Meursault gives the court exactly what it asks for, but that is all, and it is what is not reducible to the present, that silent passivity which cannot be captured by the court in the name of truth that leads to unease. From the space of the Infinite and time as duration, the
affirmation of being by way of truth as first philosophy is revealed as closed, posterior and limited. Meursault’s passivity signifies the anterior transcendence that interrupts the world of correctness, the ontology of truth. The space of the Infinite does not render worldly events or the court meaningless, but resituates them in proximity to the condition for all events, beings and being in the world.

It is the prior-ity of this extreme passivity, the uncertainty of non-intentional consciousness from beyond the ontological domain administered by the court which cannot be comprehended by any system of laws or seized by any thought, a space anterior to the thematized spaces of the world that sets Meursault’s thinking apart. His thinking begins with the Infinite and not with the mind, and as such he is thinking from beyond the certainty of a system of justice that assumes his own ego as the ground of sovereignty that must be defended at all costs.

Try as I might, I couldn’t stomach this brutal certitude. For really, when one came to think of it, there was a disproportion between the judgment on which it was based and the unalterable sequence of events starting from the moment when that judgment was delivered. The fact that the verdict was read out at 8 p.m. rather than at 5, the fact that it might have been quite different, that it was given by men who change their underclothes, and was credited to so vague an entity as the ‘French People’ – for that matter, why not the Chinese or the German People? – all these facts seemed to deprive the court’s decision of its gravity. Yet I could but recognize that, from the moment the verdict was given, its effects became as cogent, as tangible, as, for example, this wall against which I was lying, pressing my back to it. (Camus 109)

Meursault cannot accept the relative, hermeneutical and immanent sovereignty of the ego, individual or state, over other beings. The truth of the matter, confined to the court, for Meursault, is quite absurd in the face of the Infinite passivity concealed by such a ground. There is no doubt that once the verdict is given, within the ontological domain, it becomes no less real than the chair he sits in, but this does not release Meursault from the
sense that there is something beyond and prior to the court, beings and things in the present.

As with Bartleby, Meursault comes up against the ontological ground of *society*, a projection of rationality, normalcy and political being in the name of justice and the form of the trial, the self-affirmation of the being of beings. The trial serves as the way by which difference is overcome in the true, rationality is reserved as ground and the correlation between knowledge and being is affirmed. In this way, the trial is the affirmation of truth as first philosophy. But it is also the concealment of non-intentional consciousness. Meursault’s passivity in the face of mortal death interrupts ontology and renders the closed interpretations of the court somehow superfluous. In this way, it is not exactly Meursault’s guilt that comes to the fore, but the signification of a beyond that transcends the court and the common understanding of mortality as not-being. It is this signification, which resituates the ground of ontology and death in terms of non-intentional consciousness that must be concealed through the unconcealment of truth. Meursault must be banished or put to death to affirm being and ego as ground and to conceal the condition for that ground.

It is the confrontation, not between beings within a system of rule, but between non-intentional and intentional consciousness, that allows Meursault to reconsider the world and other beings in terms of non-indifference. “And I decided that, if ever I got out of gaol, I’d attend every execution that took place” (Camus 109). Why does Meursault decide that he will attend every execution? In ontological terms, we might say that it is the anxiety of death, a fear of dying that inspires one to live, to affirm being in the world. But Meursault will not attend the death of others to remind himself of his being or to know his fate. He will go to the executions to meet the eyes of the Other, to be overwhelmed by the transcendence of his first responsibility, an obligation to the Other prior to any formulation, thought or fear rooted in the ego or sovereignty. It is not the fear of dying in the world that comes to Meursault’s mind, but the horror of not having justified his own existence, dying without yet having done anything for the Other that haunts Meursault in his cell.

In ‘Bartleby’, the lawyer’s reference to the bible is a false alternative, setting up rationality and morality as opposed, both stemming from intentional consciousness.
Meursault, on the other hand, refuses the priest and as such denies any thematized form of transcendence. His response to the concealment of truth is not the affirmation of his being in relation to God, but the unconcealment of transcendence in the eyes of the Other. What is revealed, then, in the story? It is that contact between non-intentional and intentional consciousness by way of the trial suggests to Meursault how ethics is first philosophy, signified by the proximity of the Other. Before the trial, the death of his mother and the shooting do not seem to bother Meursault. His passivity renders them merely events in the world, tragic in their own way perhaps, but unavoidable, like aging or time passing. In court, however, confronted with the extension of ontology to matters of life and death, Meursault senses how passivity and the Infinite are seized by ontology for the sake of humanity, in the name of universalism or truth, for the purpose of sovereignty. It is only Meursault’s passivity that allows him to sense this false representation and to make the connection between the face of the Other and the Divine. It is here, in proximity, that Meursault finds affirmation, not of being, but of a pure self, in the accusative, prior to the freedom of a just, rational world.

The Outsider is not merely an account of justice or the way by which being is affirmed in the world by overcoming otherness. It is a story of death and transcendence. The mother’s death, the death of the stranger on the beach, Meursault facing death and his promise to attend the death of others - in this procession, against the background of truth as first philosophy represented by the court and justice, Camus hints at the proximity and transcendence that lead us, not from self back to Self, but to the Other and the world from a beginning beyond the world inseparable from a responsibility for the Other. Meursault is not so much ‘outside’ the system or society, as the title suggests, but signifies beyond the world and opens the way to a world that begins with ethics as first philosophy.

C. Michael K: Earth and the Other

Life and Times of Michael K, by J.M. Coetzee, is the story of a young man, marked by a hare lip at birth and brought up in an orphanage, who was physically, mentally and socially scorned throughout his childhood. K is made redundant from his job as a gardener for the city of Cape Town. He ignores the civil war wreaking havoc all around
him and tries to take his sick mother out of Cape Town on an improvised trolley back to the farm of her childhood. She dies on the way and K is forced to continue alone.

Coming out of Cape Town, where life was hard, roaming through the vast open veld to avoid military convoys passing on the road, K does not know what he thinks or believes about people and the world. A farmer tells K: “People must help each other, that’s what I believe. K allowed this utterance to sink into his mind. Do I believe in helping people? He wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible. He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help. Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought.” (Coetzee 65) In other words, ethics for K is more or less situational, immanent, dependent on the individual - a rational choice.

He leaves the hospital, carrying the ashes of his mother in his hands, searching for “islands without an owner” (Coetzee 61), a place to be free. What he finds instead are islands with many owners, camps set up in time of war to hold people with no fixed abode. No one is forced to stay, despite the armed security and the wire fences. No one is forced to return, although everyone is picked up and brought back. The residents are despised by the people in the town, but sought out and exploited for labor by the farmers. A perverse mentality takes shape among the residents of the camp. One of the men, explaining how lucky they are, asks K, “Why do you want to leave? People are having a hard time out there ‘in the world’” (Coetzee 85). But the real world for K is beyond the rational system of inclusion/exclusion that forces him to exist according to rules that make no sense to him. The camp is a forgery, an imposition, the false freedom that reduces his being to the actualization of someone else’s thought, the realization of someone else’s sovereignty, and keeps him from the fields and hills far from and free of society.

K jumps the fence of the camp one night and walks back to the farm where his mother grew up. Away from the city, the camps, people and organization, K is finally content, able to follow his instincts, living in a cave at the edge of the farm where his mother grew up, growing and eating the pumpkins he grows himself. “Now finally I can think of myself as lost…nothing to do but live” (Coetzee 66). This is not merely an extreme self-consciousness measured against loneliness or space, but a primordial return
to the earth, to a co-existent beginning that exists before K and is greater than anything the intentional consciousness of a single individual can grasp.

There is a profound sense of passivity in K’s yielding to the earth, returning to a multiplicity that is beyond his control, reminiscent of the passivity of both Bartleby and Meursault. In all three cases it is society, the structures of ontology, reason and egoism that confront passivity and pass judgment. The individual in the ontological domain must do something, or something must be done to him. That, essentially, is what the camps are all about. K prefers to do nothing - nothing but live, that is. Alone in the field, among the rocks and shrubs, with his pumpkins, K is happy to be “beyond the reach of calendar and clock” (Coetzee 115). A sense of the Infinite overwhelms him, the passivity of time washing over his days, his thoughts turn away from the world towards his emergence “from a line of children with no end” (Coetzee 117).

When K is found, almost dead from a meager diet of pumpkins and insects, he tells the soldier, mumbling incomprehensibly, “I live nowhere” (Coetzee 120). K has not merely found his space in the world, his patch of earth, but has renounced his sovereignty over all beings and places in the world. His freedom is not merely a return to the earth, but a return that takes him beyond an ontology that prizes the power and affirmation of sovereignty above all else. He is free from want and desire, from the present, from the truth of being. K does not simply become aware of and react to the destructive and oppressive social structures of a country engaged in civil war. He is not revolting against the present. He makes no attempt to deconstruct or oppose the system. It is passivity that takes him from the city, from the camp, even from the old house on the farm and in this way his actions are beyond opposition, prior to any ontological thematization of action as positive or negative, for or against. K is portrayed as so weak, so utterly incapable of rebellion, alone on the veld, merging into the earth, becoming one with the night, the sun, animals and plants, that the concept of rational/irrational ceases to make sense. K is not simply a misfit to be tucked away in the far corners of the system, but is so passive as to suggest the real possibility of something beyond the system.

It is no coincidence that Coetzee shows K retreating, not merely from civilization, but from the light. K lives in a cave, carefully concealing the entrance, but soon begins sleeping through the day, only coming out at night to tend and protect his pumpkins.
Ontology aims to uncease, to illuminate the earth from one end to the other, to bring the truth to the light of day. K is withdrawing from the affirmation of being in truth, returning to the darkness that is concealed by light. This is not the mere cultivation of being, but the return to the passivity of the Infinite prior to being, to that which there is nothing to add. He refuses to cross from the “darkness into the firelight” (Coetzee 109), from silent passivity to society, to join with the renegade soldiers passing in the night who might have adopted him, pulled him from the darkness of his cave and back into the light of the world, because someone must keep the idea of gardening - life - alive…“because once the cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children” (Coetzee 109). K returns to the beginning, a passivity prior to the concealment of mediation, beyond ontological being.

This withdrawal seems to take us back, from an individual in Cape Town to the Infinite by way of the earth, but does it indicate ethics as first philosophy? Does the primordial return to the earth exclude people? Are we to understand that it is the relationship between an individual and the earth that is foremost, that which precedes any form of ontology or ethics? This seems to be the case until we look at Part II of Life and Times, which takes the form of a memoir written by the doctor of the second camp where K is kept. It is quite clearly, through the change in form and direction, an explicit turn towards ethics as first philosophy.

The doctor’s attitude is striking in comparison with that of the soldier in charge of the camp. “His responsibility is to his programme, I reply, mine to my patients, that is what being medical officer entails” (Coetzee 180). From the first, the doctor not only questions the very existence of the camp and the system, “Do any of us believe what we are doing here?” (Coetzee 183) but sets forth the primacy of his concern for people.

It is the relationship that develops between K and the doctor that begins to reveal something greater, and missing, from K’s return to the earth in Part I. K: “Why fuss over me, why am I so important?” Doctor: “The answer is that you are not important. But that does not mean you are forgotten. No one is forgotten.” (Coetzee 186) It is true that within the system, K is nothing more than one more man occupying a bed in a camp. What is not forgotten, however, is what is concealed by the system - K is a human being first. There is a turn from the relationship between a being and the system and from a being and the
earth to the proximity between beings. The doctor does not particularly care *who* K is (dependent on one’s place/sovereignty in the system), but recognizes him as the Other for whom he is responsible before the mediation of any thought. K is reluctant to accept human care, scarred by a lifetime of ill-treatment at the hands of people trying to make their own way in the world. But the doctor wants nothing *from* K. “We do for you what we have to do” (Coetzee 186). The care provided is simply what is demanded - it is the demand of responsibility *for* the Other, nothing less.

While treating K, the doctor comes to realize that K has no connections to the world other than the pumpkin seeds he keeps under his pillow. He “lives in a world all his own” (Coetzee 194). “No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are” (Coetzee 195). This only strengthens the demand the doctor feels to take responsibility for K, for the Other. “You can’t take care of yourself, you don’t know how. Felicity [the nurse] and I are the only people in the world who care enough to help you. Not because you are special but because it is our job. Why can’t you co-operate?” (Coetzee 199) Again and again the emphasis is on care as a form of duty. It is what *must* be done *prior to any choice*.

There is a (false) conflict of sorts between K and the doctor, K’s renunciation of sovereignty and the doctor’s emphasis on the Other. K refuses to eat camp food, to be pulled back into the system. He reverts to passivity so extreme as to make mortal death, even his own, meaningless. The doctor persistently combats the rigidity of the system, putting patients and care above rules and regulations. The barrier between the doctor’s help and K’s passivity is the camp itself. Each tries to go beyond the camp in his own way, the doctor through responsibility and K by withdrawal. The doctor seems to yield. He tells K that he will let him die, that he is a free man, not a child or an animal. But he quickly abandons this stance. He cannot revert to the ground of ego and thus avoid responsibility in the face of the Other. He asks K, “What sort of food do you want? What sort of food would you be prepared to eat?” (Coetzee 201)

K: No one was interested before in what I ate, so I ask myself why.
Doctor: Because I don’t want to see you starve yourself to death. Because I don’t want anyone here to starve to death.
K: What is it to this man if I live or die?
Doctor: You might as well ask why we don’t shoot prisoners. It is the same question.
For a long while we stared at each other.
Doctor: Everything was well with me before you came. I was happy, as happy as one can be in a place like this. Therefore I too ask: Why me? (Coetzee 203-4)

K does not comprehend the doctor’s sense of responsibility for the Other. The doctor struggles to understand his relation to the passivity that allows K to accept death. Both are thinking beyond ontology, each in their own way, yet somehow together, struggling to hold open the way towards ethics as first philosophy. The doctor writes,

Michaels means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me…if the origin of this meaning were no more than a lack in myself…I would have every justification for retiring to the toilets behind the jockeys’ changing-rooms and locking myself into the last cubicle and putting a bullet through my head. Yet have I ever been more sincere than I am tonight? (Coetzee 226)

Not surprisingly, the doctor’s memoir turns into a letter to K, a saying to the Other that signifies responsibility prior to thematization. “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory…of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away?” (Coetzee 228) As both saying to and said the letter reveals the transcendence that interrupts the ontological system and signifies the Infinite that justifies the doctor’s sense of obligation.

In the final part of Life and Times K escapes again, but returns to the city and to people. A stranger offers K wine and food, takes him back to his temporary home on the hill in the forest, then tries to steal from him in the night, disappointed by the only thing K has with him - a packet of pumpkin seeds. The next day the stranger offers more alcohol and his sister engages K sexually. K recognizes the acts for what they are - charity, perhaps, the basis of exchange, certainly, the giving and taking, the grasping of
one being by another in so many subtle ways typical of the rational world in which the sovereignty of the ego reigns. The stranger says to K: “It is difficult to be kind to a person who wants nothing. You must not be afraid to say what you want, then you will get it. That is my advice to you my friend.” (Coetzee 244)

K’s return to the city reveals that nothing has changed. The city remains a place in which people survive through exploitation and seizure. One must participate in the affirmation of being; one must seize a place in the sun. But overall, Coetzee leaves us with the sense that K’s return to the city is necessary. Ethics as first philosophy demands responsibility for the Other, for all others, including the earth, and not isolation. A return to the earth suggests the primacy and passivity of that which is beyond our control, but the passivity of the Infinite is first signified in the eyes of the Other and it is this opening, the setting forth of non-intentional consciousness, that affords an ethical response in the world. It is the face of the Other that signifies the Infinite beginning from which the earth, the world and beings take their proper, ethical direction.

D. Funes: self and Self

In ‘Funes, His Memory’, Borges puts forth a remarkable question (again in the form of a letter): what is the result of a world overwhelmingly preoccupied with truth as first philosophy? His answer is the story of Ireneo Funes, an eccentric young man, known in his village as ‘chronometric Funes’, with a strange ability to tell the time of day without the aid of any device.

One day, Funes is bucked off a horse and hopelessly crippled. As a result, an amazing change takes place. “He had lived, he said, for nineteen years as though in a dream: he looked without seeing, heard without listening, forgot everything. When he fell, he’d been knocked unconscious; when he came to again, the present was so rich, so clear, that it was almost unbearable, as were his oldest and even most trivial memories…Now his perception and his memory were perfect.” (Borges F 96)

Funes represents the possibility, and the result, of the all-knowing ego - the crystallization of an ontology wholly concerned with the overcoming of difference in the true, the accumulation of all knowledge in the present, the isolation of the ego as the ground from which the world, being and oneself are constructed.
Funes has “more memories than all mankind since the world began” (Borges F 96). But “Funes, we must not forget, was virtually incapable of general, platonic ideas...He was the solitary, lucid spectator of a multiform, momentaneous, and almost unbearably precise world.” (Borges F 98) In other words, despite the sensitivity of his perception and capacity to remember every thing, he could never escape the presence of the world within his reach. Before the accident, despite his strange ability to know the time of day intuitively, Funes was capable of forgetting facts. But after, every thing to be seized was his forever, and as such, he was no longer capable of forgetting, or escaping, the present. Funes could hardly sleep he was so overwhelmed by the details present to his mind, incapable of withdrawing from a complete knowledge of the world, a world that, due to the intensity of his sensory experience, had to be restricted to his room. He spent his time lying upon his bed in the darkness, still and alone, often with eyes closed, consumed by the burden of his perceptions and memories. His closed world, that of facts and sensations remembered, left him isolated and immobile, but also reduced his thought to immanence.

He had effortlessly learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very good at thinking. To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract. In the teeming world of Ireneo Funes there was nothing but particulars – and they were virtually immediate particulars. (Borges F 99)

To think one must be able to conceive of the general or universal; to abstract, to forget the particulars. Funes cannot forget, and as such, is an extraordinary demonstration of that which remains unavailable to ontology, the non-intentional consciousness prior to the radical limitation of a world focused on truth and intentionality. The absolute privilege of knowledge exaggerated by Borges in the form of Funes limits thinking, but also subordinates the face of the Other, as one more object to be grasped in the world, to ontology. In a world grounded upon truth as first philosophy, subjectivity with no access to any sense of reality beyond ontology, there can be only knowing and remembering, identification and overcoming. Funes’ relation to the world is merely the perpetual,
hermeneutical return of self to Self through knowledge that affirms the individual being of a single ego and conceals the non-intentional consciousness prior to intentionality. Subjectivity, the world and the space of thought are predetermined by the unconcealment of the ‘real’ world by thought as knowledge. As a result, the proximity between me and you is merely a relation to be known. If the world is the gathering of all that was and all that is into a single moment, at every moment, upon the ground of ego, there is nothing that suggests a divine beginning from which ethics is sustained. In contrast, it leads to isolated individuals - Bartleby, Meursault, Michael K - determined in relation to a rational system, deemed individualists or outsiders, criminals or insane.

Funes, wholly engaged with the world of things, overwhelmed by intentionality to such an extent that he cannot stand the full light of day, is partially repelled back into darkness and silence. But the darkness and silence of his room is not that of a beginning in passivity, the space of the Other, but the collapse or completion of the hermeneutical circle, the final meeting of self with Self that leaves no room for the signification of the Other and the interruption of transcendence. There is nothing of the Infinite or a beyond in a world grounded on the seizure and accumulation of objects. There can be no ethical relationship with others because responsibility is reduced to sovereignty. This is the collapse of all dimensions to an ecstatic, unthinking, one-dimensional world in which I am blind to anything that cannot be known.24

In each of the stories discussed we find something assumed - an ontological ground that conceals ethical subjectivity through the exaggeration and privilege of truth as first philosophy. But we also find, when we are open to language and literature as speech first, the meeting of non-intentional and intentional consciousness in the words, the interruption of transcendence that overflows the stratification of the said. It is necessary to hear the face of the Other in these works, to work from the signification of the Other in the saying to of language towards the said and the world, fictional or otherwise. Authentic communication begins with the space of the Other, non-intentional

24 “She ended up knowing so much that she could no longer interpret anything. There were no longer shadows to help her see more clearly, only glare.” (Henry James qtd in D&G 197) In a world where there is only light there can be no depth, no escape from the illumination of truth by way of intentionality, and thus not only a lack of thought, but more importantly, ethics – that which is prior to the cogito.
consciousness, and when we strive to hold open this space, we find literature does not merely depict ethical options as ontological events or actions, but signifies the beyond that demands and affords an ethical questioning of our existence. There is something that is not captured by the text. When we hear the speech implicit in literature we open ourselves to that something - ethics as first philosophy. Only in this way do we interrupt the totality of the rational world that appears in the said and reveal the ethical space from which a concern for literature, justice, oneself and philosophy becomes meaningful.25

Conclusion

It is only from ethics as first philosophy and through the full trajectory of this paper that we have come to a sense of literature as more than instrumental, more than a means of redescribing, filling out or radicalizing the ontological domain particular to Western ontology. Literature, first, takes us beyond the world, prior to any ontology or thematization, to a beginning anterior to ego and immanence when we hear the voice of the Other, the saying to before the said. This reading is the authentic communication that unconceals the space of the Other, the Infinite that demands of me, accuses me, makes me an irreplaceable servant for you (whoever you are) prior to the mediation of any thought.

Works Cited


25 “The unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgotten” (Levinas S 118).


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