

The Order of Art and Ethical Disorder: Levinasian Thoughts on Creation and Resistance

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This article proposes a reflection on the status of art, and particularly literature, in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In the French phenomenologist's thought, literature occupies an ambivalent position: he frequently engages with it in his philosophical discourse, yet when confronting it directly, he excludes it from the ethical realm. In this study, I seek to highlight a series of arguments that can be advanced from a Levinasian perspective in favor of an ethical literature. I do so first by contrasting Levinas's thought with Hannah Arendt's reflections on narration. Then, I analyze a text that appears particularly suited to a Levinasian reading: *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan. Finally, I show how art can serve the ethical purposes Levinas envisioned: the de-automatization of the *conatus*, that is, the human being concerned solely with the preservation of its own life.

Keywords: philosophy of literature – ethics – aesthetics – Emmanuel Levinas

Introduction

To bear witness and to testify to a past tragedy for those who no longer have a voice and to whom one seeks to restore a voice has become one of the most significant concerns in philosophy, literary theory, cultural studies, and film studies in recent decades. In this endeavor, some of the most fundamental concepts of Western rationality are called into question. The subject who speaks is torn apart, for the one who suffered can no longer speak. As Arnaldo Momigliano noted of historians, one must play the role of a necromancer (Calasso 2021). What makes this task so complex is the entanglement of passion and duty, guilt and justice. Moreover, the witness is always aware of the

inherent limitations of their testimony – it can never fully express what must be said, never find the right word, the precise description. It is precisely against a thought of adequation, which seeks to preserve the excess of Transcendence, that Emmanuel Levinas has positioned himself. This article will focus on his perspective to analyze, through his philosophy of testimony, the possibility of an ethical work of art.

Hanoch Ben-Pazi (2015) has argued that the experience of bearing witness is inescapable and that Levinas's theory of testimony precisely unsettles the false sense of peace that contemporary humanity has granted itself. That is, what Levinas called *the temptation of temptation* (Levinas 2018b) – the modern subject's claim to live experiences and embark on the adventure of the world without truly engaging with it (and assuming responsibility for it)¹ – finds its counterpart in the category of testimony. As witnesses (and this is the inescapability of testimony), but now mediated, the modern subject is a weak and frustrated witness. This is why we must take into account the ethical dimension of testimony: the dimension that concerns the *Saying*, for testimony is not a testimony of the *Said*—of words uttered in a specific time and space – but of our very nature as ethical-linguistic beings. Or, more precisely, of the Infinite itself, which encompasses all that has just been said.²

Following this perspective, in this article I propose a Levinasian reading of testimony in relation to literature through the narrative framework that Ian McEwan deploys in *Atonement* (McEwan 2001).³ My aim is not only to offer an alternative interpretation of the English novelist's text but also to point toward a Levinasian aesthetics capable of overcoming the critiques that the Lithuanian philosopher himself developed against art in his famous essay "La réalité et son ombre" (Levinas 2021b, 107 – 127).

To this end, I will first present a contemporary theoretical model that will serve as a counterpoint to Levinas's own theory of literature. Once some key concepts of Levinasian thought on art have been established, I will proceed to explain and defend my reading of McEwan's text. My exposition of Levinas's philosophy will, undoubtedly, be limited, and this issue could be approached

¹ See Ombrosi (2006) for a reading of this essay in relation with Levinas's conception of philosophy.

² This is the Levinasian theory developed with extreme difficulty and precision in *Autrement qu'être*, Levinas's second masterpiece after *Totalité et infini*.

³ McEwan's work has already shown to be a productive source for Levinas's scholars, as Amiel Houser (2021) and myself (Navascués 2024) have practiced, in different ways, some approaches to the topic.

from other perspectives – such as the concept of “substitution,” which will not be addressed here.⁴ However, I am confident that the chosen approach will provide a clear understanding of my theoretical proposal.

Finally, I will summarize my argument and conclude by demonstrating that Levinas’s theoretical potential lies in the continuous renewal of our literary practices, aligning with what the Russian theorist Viktor Shklovsky advocated: an ongoing *estrangement* of our poetic activities, now infused with ethical awareness.

I. Between Levinas and Arendt: The Sense of Narratives

There is a traditional doctrine, exemplified by Hannah Arendt, which holds that literature serves as a means of bringing order to the chaos of events – piled up and obscured by the passage of time and life – to the point of becoming a therapeutic instrument. As the German philosopher, citing Isak Dinesen, put it: “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (Arendt 1968, 104).

This theory is conceptually grounded in the idea that literary activity is capable, first, of working through the raw material of experience. Then, transforming it through imagination (everything that has not already been reshaped by memory), later structuring it according to a principle of intelligibility, and ultimately materializing it in the literary text.

This activity of stepping outside oneself, where we place a mirror before us, allows us to become aware of our person, to the point of understanding the excess of personality/sublimity that exists in the individual’s identity in relation to their actions. This idea will underpin the notion of forgiveness and will be highly relevant for Paul Ricoeur, who concludes in *La mémoire*,

⁴ This has been explored by Glowacka (2013). Habitually, these types of hermeneutic perspectives focus on the importance of the Shoah in Levinas’s work, an ever-present echo throughout his texts but rarely made explicit (Pollefeyt 2022). Moreover, the publication of the novel fragments that Levinas himself wrote (Levinas 2013) also gives rise to these interpretations, whether around the failure of the West or Eros as a philosophical and literary motif. See Nancy (2013). In this article, such readings are set aside, despite having been very productive in some cases. An interpretation of Levinasian novels – and particularly of the *scène d’Alençon* as a starting point for engaging with Levinas’s philosophy – has been proposed by Sebbah (2018), who places special emphasis on the disconcerting and uncanny nature of the debacle.

l'histoire, l'oubli: "tu vauds mieux que tes actes" (Ricoeur 2000, 642), with a clear Arendtian lineage.⁵

And it is here that therapeutic ecstasy occurs, which reifies itself in the world for others through the object-book. Our observation in the text allows us to free ourselves from the proximity of the sufferings that overwhelm us and the guilt that assails us. It enables us to *understand*, which was the very object of Arendtian philosophy, and to rediscover what the German thinker called *amor mundi* (Arendt 1994, 3). Embracing the contingency of reality and the sorrows that continually fall upon us is realized only through judgment and poetic speech. I call this doctrine *the order of art*.

With this doctrine, Levinas encounters difficulties. He is the philosopher who seeks to express the alteration produced by otherness. That is, the gap existing within subjectivity not in relation to the actions of the person, but with respect to its own ipseity, to the extent of shifting the center of gravity toward an exteriority that I neither possess nor dominate. This exteriority, or infinity, breaks with egocentric imperialism. Levinas is wary of salvation through art. Arendt seeks to avoid aestheticism through politics yet continues to ascribe great importance to culture. The Lithuanian philosopher, by contrast, will argue that culture must be understood from an ethical perspective.

This is what he paradigmatically expressed in a later essay: "Détermination philosophique de l'Idée de Culture" (Levinas 1991, 199 – 208). In Levinas's view, in this late Europe –marking the end of a certain Europe that had dreamed of instituting charity as a political regime (Levinas 2006, 165) – culture could no longer, nor should it, be conceived solely from art or from knowledge. In Europe, in the *mauvaise conscience* of the contemporary European, "à l'heure des bilans" (Levinas 2018a, 43), something needed to be placed above what Hegel had conceived as the tripartition of the Absolute Spirit. It was time to acknowledge the otherness of the other human being and, in doing so, to conceive of an ethical culture in which both knowledge and art would emerge from the human, rather than the other way around.

From this perspective, it is possible to save Levinas from himself – from a firm and unilateral condemnation of art, as seems to be implied in some parts

⁵ Ricoeurian work could serve as a counterexample, as is the case here with Arendt, to Levinas's aesthetics or theory of literature. Indeed, "*la conception ricœurienne d'un soi, réflexif et mémoriel, cherchant à reconquérir son autonomie sur fond de vulnérabilité n'accepte pas l'archi-passivité du soi levinassien interpellé par autrui*" (Galabru 2019, 125). Moreover, the Ricoeurian premise of the need for coherence, for the totalization that a narrative requires to make sense, is in complete opposition to Levinas's demands.

of his work. And that is my thesis in this article: without claiming any salvation through art we can nonetheless articulate a philosophy of art based on Levinas that understands works of art as preparatory to an ethical life. Invitations to a consciousness of non-alienated writing dedicated to the Other. An unmeasured literature, yet precisely poured out in the impossibility of grasping, gathering, and fixing an entire life in the text. A form of writing that invites repeated readings, never exhausting the meaning through which it testifies to the Other that it unjustly welcomes within these pages.

In this sense, literature conceived from a Levinasian point of view corresponds with the very practice of philosophical thinking that Levinas championed. It would employ skepticism, constant retraction of the Said to the Saying, and deletion as its instruments. As expressed in *Autrement qu'être*, Skepticism, for Levinas, is the possibility of denying any philosophical proposition without causing it to lose its meaning – invoking its ever-failing and unjust character (Levinas 2021a, 20 and 76). Retracting what has been said follows the same principle. Levinas distinguishes between “dire” and “dit” (Levinas 2021a, 17), that is, between language in its pure essence and language as a system of signs. The Saying is what precedes and at the same time inaugurates language: the existence of the Other, which Levinas expresses in the notion of the *Visage*. Every utterance strives to approach the Saying, yet it invariably fails. Thought and writing are a perpetual failure in their attempt to describe the interhuman. And as a method of constructing argumentation, we should find something akin to exacerbation, emphasis or hyperbole (Levinas 2004, 141). All these themes are articulated around Levinas’s original concept of time: diachrony. Time in its flow, yet without the moments being coupled with one another, wherein the meaning of this time is derived from the Other and from my relationship with the Other (Galabru 2020; Severson 2013). In contrast to synchronicity, where the Greek *syn* composes order, the *dia*-chrony dislocates the real. My hypothesis is that these strategies can be transferred to the literary text.

Moreover, this is an argument that takes into account the centrality of the distinction between *sens* as orientation⁶ and *signification* as cognitive and therefore representational content. This is what Levinas develops in “La

⁶ Which, moreover, connects Levinas with the concerns of a philosophy of culture such as that of Cassirer.

signification et le sens”⁷ in an effort to reach a level prior to the purely cognitive domain. Once again, it leads to the problem of language and to the distinction between “dire” and “dit.” This distinction lies at the foundation of Levinas’s theory of literature.

That doctrine I propose to designate as *ethical disorder*, a disorder which, as I will argue, can be captured in literature. Despite his condemnation of aesthetics, we know that Levinas loved literature. His first contact with philosophy occurred precisely through Russian classical literature. In this sense, I agree with Galabru (2020, 154), who maintains that one must differentiate between a “good” work of art and a “bad” work of art.⁸ The moral nature of this differentiation does not preclude its internal analysis; rather, it must be understood within the framework of what ethics means for Levinas – namely, its capacity to ultimately respond to the reality of interhuman relations (Levinas 1984, 28), which is the condition for the possibility of any form of intelligibility. Thus, this Levinasian literature, as his philosophy, must be capable of saying *autrement* (*qu’être*). In this way, the literature towards which Levinas turns must include these alterations. Ian McEwan, in his novel *Atonement*, is an excellent example of this ethical literature through the particular role of his narrator-witness.

II. Beyond Understanding: Art as an Ethical Response

It seems that art is condemned to inhabit a paradigm of understanding and knowledge. Even surrealist models, which seek to make the comprehensible disappear, end up telling us: here is the absence of meaning, understand it. In contrast, the ethical model is not a model of knowledge, but of listening and action: it is a model of excess and transcendence. The heart of Levinas’s critique of phenomenology, as the final avatar of Western philosophy of immanence, lies precisely here: in its inability to acknowledge the surplus between consciousness and its object in an act that is not cognitive. The challenge that, according to my interpretation, Ian McEwan faces, is to show that there is a damage, an intimate damage, which art cannot repair, but which it must reveal.

⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for having reminded me of this text, which strengthens my argument.

⁸ See too what Michael Fagenblat (2021, XX, note 20) writes in this respect: “Levinas has two distinct conceptions of literature at work, one aligned with primitive religion and the elemental ontology that ethics opposes, the other allied to prophetic monotheism and the ways of Saying that transcend the Said.”

This wound appears in the structure of the real, the real that Levinas designates as “l’extériorité.” One of the forms this exteriority takes in *Totality and Infinity* is called “résistance éthique” (Levinas 2021c, 217): it is the opacity, the resistance, that the alterity of the other offers me, the impossibility of killing the only being I can properly kill. My interpretation is that ethical resistance, which is what the Face of the Other presents to me in its appearance, in its height and immense dignity, and in its simultaneous nakedness, has a counterpart in McEwan’s writing. However, the awareness of this only appears in the final part of the novel: it is a long path of accepting the ethical hostage-like condition that the subject faces with regard to their neighbor.

The plot can be quickly summarized: between 1935 and 1999, the novel follows the story of a family, the Tallis, from the British upper class. The central sections, particularly for the reading I present here, are the first part and the final epilogue. In the first chapter, an unconventional love story develops between the daughter of the Tallis family and the son of the woman who works for the family. The young Tallis sister, Briony, interrupts a sexual scene in the library between the young couple, and her overflowing imagination leads her to believe that it is a rape. Robbie is sentenced to prison when, during the night, the Tallis cousin is raped, and Briony, in the darkness, falsely identifies Robbie. The rest of the novel recounts the tragic consequences of the first chapter, until, in the epilogue, we discover that the narrator of the work is Briony herself. Now an adult writer, she has attempted to atone for her mistakes through this final confession, as she has been diagnosed with a disease that will kill her. Her role as writer-witness is therefore to testify to a truth and a subjectivity of which we are the hostages: a perfect illustration of the Levinasian ethical situation.

For the reader of *Atonement*, all these early events are marked by evil, like a cancer that begins to spread, an evil that grows like a mushroom. The first part is filled with tension, which seizes the characters and pulls them further and further in. The gradual and linear progression of the plot indicates that the tragedy is near, that no one knows when it will strike, but that it will come like a flash of lightning. It materializes in the heat, in the sense that something is about to explode, that a summer storm is approaching, with that anticipated smell of rain that will break the drought, the petrichor. Thus, the colors and the climatic elements are sublime, in the aesthetic sense of the term: they attract as much as they terrify. With a strong cinematic dimension and a very fluid sense of movement, the characters intertwine in the family network, which at first is nuclear, but will implode and scatter the characters across different geographical

and existential points. This identity, which will then transform into difference, is fundamental.

On the other hand, the settings, magnificently orchestrated by McEwan, serve as counterpoints, with anticipations and symbols that fit together like pieces of a puzzle. On one side, the mother of the family, Emily Tallis, is depicted with perpetual migraines (which also make her “distant, even unfriendly” (McEwan 2001, 20), meaning anti-social and unable to establish interpersonal relationships). The migraines force her into darkness and to close her eyes. She neither can nor wants to see what is happening around her. Her view of the surrounding world is summarized in this expression: “shrinking, everything was shrinking” (McEwan 2001, 64). In contrast to this collapse, this darkness of the *Oikos*, there is the public space, the *Agora*, bathed in sunlight and sensuality, which culminates in a key scene around a fountain. Youth and maturity are opposed here: it is the passion for maturity, for an unrestrained maturity, in a wild imagination, that will lead to tragedy. To be a child is to care for others, to depend on others. This is why Briony wants to be an adult and dominate the world – through literature. At multiple points in the text, Briony shows her passion for creating a world in literature, and consequently, the discomfort she feels when reality is not as malleable as the pages she fills with ink. In the face of this dominating tension, the young characters, although overwhelmed by a certain anxiety and constant unease, live with the hope of summer and youth.

The underwear, which triggers the first *pólemos* of the work, is another central element of this first part: the wet garment, the fountain always sensual. Let us recall that it is an inherently playful element: Boccaccio places in his *Decameron* a fountain in the midst of delightful gardens as the meeting place for storytelling and human living. The perpetual drop, or in Boccaccio’s text, the statue on a column that spouted water and produced that delightful sound as it fell, represents the encounter with a peaceful, tranquil nature, which we know will resume its usual rhythm at any moment. It is an inexorable tide. A blend of Reason and Passion, the fountain is a central element of our Western aesthetic imagination. In the version straddling kitsch and pretension articulated in the novel, in the form of Bernini’s Triton, this is where the tragedy is triggered. It comes in the form of small blows: in this first instance, where Cecilia undresses and jumps into the fountain in front of Robbie to retrieve a vase, the juxtaposition is between external eroticism and Briony, observing from the tranquility of the interior, who misinterprets the situation and believes it to be violent. Signs of a future tragedy.

And indeed, the rupture comes. The beginning of the novel is marked by this opposition between interior and exterior, darkness and light, which creates an extremely strong tension until its explosive resolution. But the tragedy is told in an Apollonian manner: the tragedy is in content, not in form. It remains ordered because we move within the realm of aesthetics. And as we will discover upon re-reading, this text we are reading has been written and rewritten for decades by Briony. This first part, everything we read, is already in the novel that young Briony had begun to write. But the work she will write at the end of her life, decades later, will include the final postscript, which is undoubtedly the key to the text: a paratext that invalidates everything that has been narrated while simultaneously legitimizing it. In this dual movement the ordered structure of aesthetics (composition, control, domination, etc.) shatters into a thousand pieces. It is this rupture that makes us understand the incomprehensible and elusive disorder of ethics: disintegration, disorder, the lack of control over life, concern and responsibility for the other to the point of exhaustion.

It is essential to observe that there is a transition in the mode, the form, and the intention with which Briony writes over the years. Formally, in the third part of the novel, Briony continues to write, but something has changed, and this change will continue gradually. During this part, we discover that what would become *Atonement* was initially called *Two Figures by a Fountain*, and was rejected by a magazine (McEwan 2001, 312). The difference is remarkable. The title is different: it seems that originally, it was merely descriptive. The novel will end, on the contrary, from the very first word, which evokes the existence of the whole, with a subjective immersion and a plea for forgiveness. In contrast to the *philosophie du neutre* (Levinas 2021c, 332), incapable of prescribing any behavior, an ethical dimension of subjectivity will emerge in the poetic word.

This will occur through the critique by Cyril Connolly, who writes to her from the magazine. Briony is fully aware, thanks to the blow of the letter, that she is a coward, that she hides from herself, from her involvement and her guilt in the tragedy of her life under aesthetic resources. But this opens the possibility of an ethical writing (and an ethical critique). It is this possibility that she will choose at the end of her life. Setting aside the “truth” of facts to reach a deeper truth, she will imagine through her novel an alternative version of reality: without compromise with Being, she will place literature beyond, toward the Good.

These categories (the Good beyond Being, justice, and responsibility to the end) resonate profoundly with Emmanuel Levinas. Ultimately, the Levinasian approach consists of deconstructing the traditional notion of truth (the correspondence between the thing and the intellect), which placed the center of truth in the object, to consider a notion of truth on the side of the subject. The pole of meaning (or truth) is no longer in the object but in the subject. Truth consists in bearing witness to the existence of the Other of the Human, or the Other of the self – which is the private. It is putting an end to the private through speech that delivers me to the Other. Or, better yet, the testimony here is the acceptance that I already belong to the Other, that I owe myself to them, and thus I say: “Here I am.” This is why Yasuhiko Segimura (2023) emphasizes that Levinas’s being-witness is characterized by a way of saying: it means or is said as “me voici.” The being-witness is a response, a response of biblical origin, of course, but one that Levinas universalizes for this accusatory subjectivity that is the hostage: hostage of the Other.

Now, we must re-read the novel and consider, at every moment, in each present, because as Levinas thought it is in each present that the Messiah can arrive⁹, what the ethical responsibility that drives us is. The underlying violence in Briony’s observation of the erotic scene with the vase in the fountain must become apparent: we cannot judge alterity with the categories of identity. My identity must open, without prior security, to the unexpected of exteriority. This is achieved by listening to the “voix prophétiques,” that recall the unmet ethical promise in politics. Or in this case, the coherent totalization, the external meaning, produced in the face of alterity, as Levinas would later speak of (Levinas 2018a).

We must thematize without exhausting, in our conceptual and literary effort, ethical resistance, the resistance to stop at a preconceived understanding of the world. The world is not a collection of things, but a collection of beings that we cannot even understand as a whole, for it escapes generalization and categorization. We must assume that the Other offers us the commandment: you shall not kill, and that death is spoken of in various ways. Every time I draw the alterity of the other into my own rationality, I kill a world. And literature must be responsible for this.

⁹ Such is the central argument of the Talmudic readings to which Levinas engages in *Difficile liberté* (Levinas 2023, 97 – 150). This is a similarity between Levinas and Walter Benjamin in his *Theses*, who despite being separated on many issues, find common ground in the messianic, as it has been pointed out by various authors, most recently Chambon (2022).

From a Levinasian perspective, what can we conclude about McEwan's practice? And can we extract from this particular reading a thesis for the entirety of Levinas's philosophical production regarding art? "*Me voici' comme témoignage de l'Infini, mais comme témoignage qui ne thématise pas ce dont il témoigne et dont la vérité n'est pas vérité de représentation, n'est pas évidence*" (Levinas 2021a, 178). This formula encapsulates all of Levinas's speculative efforts, as we have already seen. But it seems to condemn, from the outset, any possibility of writing. If, taken in its purity, it forbids any form of thematization (of the Said) in favor of the trauma of alterity that the appearance of the Saying generates in our subjectivity, there is no capacity for artistic production, always reifying.

But we can also understand that in this Levinasian excess, what we find is a classic method of contemporary thought: hyperbole as a tool to awaken consciousness. Just as Roland Barthes "killed" the author in a belligerent exercise against a certain form of literary history, we can understand that Levinas urges us to produce an art conscious of its limits. However, he does not call for the disappearance of art. He calls for an ethical art – with all that ethics means for Emmanuel Levinas. And this would imply that the Saying must never disappear.

This implies that, in contrast to Hegel, who declares that "the wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind" (Hegel 2018, 387) it must be said that writing does not heal without leaving scars. That Hegelian reconciliation, even if it were possible, is not desirable; that responsibility is infinite, and that one can never be satisfied¹⁰. That, like Briony, we must (re)write to the very end.¹¹ And be aware that our guilt comes from the deep "profond jadis" of Valéry.

This mode of ethical consciousness – the disinterestedness toward the self that animates the subjective structure of the one-for-the-other – is what I ultimately seek to connect with Viktor Shklovsky's (2017) theory of art in pieces like "Art as Device." Rather than an artistic atrophy, which we might believe Levinas invokes to dissolve all human reality into ethical commitment, we are instead confronted with a defense of disalienation – or, in the words of the Russian theorist, "defamiliarization" or "estrangement." The artistic process would extract us from the mechanisms of automation and routine to which our

¹⁰ Satisfaction, or the satisfied man, is precisely the hallmark of Hegelian anthropology according to Levinas (2004, 214).

¹¹ As an anonymous reviewer suggested, there is a fruitful line of inquiry to pursue here in connection with the phenomenology of forgiveness at the end of *Totalité et infini*. However, developing this argument lies beyond the scope of the present article.

contemporary modernity leads us. Testimony, then, taken with the radicality that Levinas urges us to conceive it, becomes a rupture in the order of things, allowing us to become aware of our deepest humanity and to realize ourselves not as machines or selfish beings, but as ethical subjectivities. Literature plays a crucial role here: writing without being carried away by language, attaining a precision in its use that nonetheless acknowledges that words never quite reach where we must go: toward the lack to which we testify, toward the greatness and the vulnerability of the Other.

III. Conclusion

I hope that the logic of my argument has fundamentally demonstrated two main points. First, the ethical character of literature, as a contribution to ongoing debates within Levinasian studies. Although this is not an entirely novel claim, the ambiguity in Levinas's approach to literature has at times not received the emphasis it deserves. Moreover, the contrast between order and disorder, between representational meaning and orientation, represents a development that offers a new way forward in addressing this issue.

Secondly, I have sought to demonstrate the originality of Levinas's treatment of literary artefacts in comparison with other contemporary theories, with particular emphasis on the ethical dimension of estrangement. Against the emphasis on the pure coherence of texts, Levinas offers interpretive tools for engaging with twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary practices.

Finally, I believe that the McEwan case study – marking the transition from a general theoretical framework to a textual analysis that returns to broader philosophical theses – has demonstrated a fruitfulness that strengthens the argument as a whole.

And so, by way of conclusion, I will suggest, tentatively, one final interpretative key. A key that would render the text more radically Levinasian, one that would free Briony from all guilt in the eyes of a Western consciousness. What if Briony, in the end, in a final rewriting – one to which we have no access, but which exists somewhere, in an extension of the text, in a final paratext (but is there ever a final paratext?) – confessed that she was never guilty? What if Briony had ultimately assumed a responsibility that “was not her own”? What if she had accepted, as Levinas demands of us, the responsibility for the responsibility of the Other? A response for what we have not committed, a responsibility arising from absolute passivity – *kenosis*. But let us leave this merely as a suggestion.

Modernity can thus offer another kind of testimony. A testimony that is not weak, but one that fearlessly confronts the adventure of ethical existence. Like Abraham.

I have examined the motifs of testimony in *Atonement*, but the examples are numerous. The concern here is not so much with specific works as with the spirit, the disposition of mind with which one approaches literature. This is not about committed literature; rather, it is about a commitment to literature. To an art that does not become mechanized, to a form that remains foreign to the mechanical and automatic processes that pervade our daily lives. Everydayness is the *conatus* of Spinoza that Levinas so greatly feared –preoccupied with its own survival and persistence in being. There is, therefore, a literature to be fulfilled. For the time to come – *l'à-venir*.

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