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THE DERMICITY OF PHENOMENOLOGY
AND LITERATURE.
PROUST, MERLEAU-PONTY AND LEVINAS
ON THE SENSIBLE¹

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For there is no more a pure literary discourse than there is a pure philosophical discourse; there are only mixed discourses [...].

Macherey, *The Object of Literature*

[...] an idea of philosophy: it cannot be total and active grasp, intellectual possession [...]. It is not above life, overhanging. It is beneath. It is the simultaneous experience of the holding and the held in all orders. *What* it says, its *significations*, are not absolutely invisible: it shows by words. Like all literature [...]. No absolutely pure philosophical word.

Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

Even though assessing a unifying view of classical philosophers on literature is a complex issue, it can be argued that Western philosophy has had from its beginnings and at its heart a negative attitude towards the narrative and poetic arts. Plato's wish to banish a certain kind

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of poetry in *The Republic* has long nourished such a view. Resurrecting «an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry» – old at the time Plato wrote –, the asserted position is that «the only poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and paeans in praise of good men; once you go beyond that and admit the sweet lyric or epic muse, pleasure and pain become your rulers instead of law and the rational principles» [*Rep.* 10.607a; Plato 2003, 351]. The debate around classical philosophy's attitude towards literature is not complex merely because what we understand as literature has long been evolving and did not exist as such at the time philosophy arose, or because – while it is usual to conceptually handle and interpret Western philosophy as a whole – different authors in different periods of their lives will show different views on many of the phenomena we nowadays understand as literature.

In other words, its complexity is not only exterior. It is not only complex for us contemporary readers. Its complexity resides in the fact that it involves reflecting on that old quarrel, trying to grasp what was at stake. The old quarrel is the truly complex issue for it brings us to the midst of a cluster of crucial societal questions philosophy was grappling with at the time: namely, the value and future of rhetorical arts, myths, education, theatre, the fragility of children's and many adults' minds, and the traits of democracy. Reforming society, philosophical and historical debates in these veins shaped a cultural clash between creativity and analytical thought, between a writer's imagination and a philosopher's reason. But for some, «philosophy and literature are like two sides of the same discourse» [Macherey 1995, 234], two sides that have, nonetheless, autonomous legitimacy and cannot be reduced to one another. To see how philosophy creatively narrates and how literature truthfully thinks none of these discursive faces should force one another to speak their language. And there is probably no field where this link between literature and philosophy is more patent than in phenomenology. In the context of this conflict of faculties and composing styles that during the twentieth century has both been revitalized and questioned, I study in this essay the connection that the philosophical method of the connection that the philosophical method of phenomenology entertains with literature, by first examining the possibility of a literary phenomenology, to then explore Merleau-Ponty's and Levinas' stands regarding Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

1. Phenomenological literature, literary phenomenology: Proust on philosophy, Husserl on literature

[...] we have to rediscover, to reaprehend, to make ourselves fully aware of that reality, remote from our daily preoccupations, from which we separate ourselves by an ever greater gulf as the conventional knowledge which we substitute for it grows thicker and more impermeable, that reality which it is very easy for us to die without ever having known and which is, quite simply, our life. Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived – is literature, and life thus defined is in a sense all the time immanent in ordinary men no less than in the artist.

Proust, *Time Regained*

Real life, naked, bare life, the only life really lived is literature: Proust's words resonate not as a reduction of life to literature but as an expansion of literature to life itself. In other words, literature is – puzzlingly, with its phantasy, its fiction, its distance regarding ordinary life – precisely the place where life finally reveals its real texture, its flesh, when the dense, hardly penetrable membranes and crusts of conventional knowledge crumble. Could it be then that the aim of attaining reality and unveiling truth, eminently philosophical, could be closer to the reach of those who practice literary writing than to those who develop philosophical theories? This question is the fingerprint of modern literature as it starts competing both with traditional *Sophia* and *Theoria* [Nancy 2013, 11], as a quest for meaning, vocation and destiny, and it represented a tough dilemma for young Proust, who in a short article of July 15, 1896 states: «if the literary man and the poet can, indeed, go as deep into the reality of things as the metaphysician himself, it is by another route» [Proust 1988a, 137]. In such a route, reason «far from strengthening, paralyses that impulse of the emotions that alone can carry them into the world's heart» [*ibid.*]. Answering this dilemma implies, for those whose aim is to live as deeply connected to the meaning of life as possible, to engage in one of these two contradictory practices (for conceptual exercises would atrophy the affectivity literary writers need to develop): philosophy or literature. Both of which would have a chance of getting similar accomplishments.

It is in the collection of writings known as *Against Sainte-Beuve* that Proust's motivations for taking the road of literature become tangible [Sturrock 1988, viii]. The critical elements in making his choice seem to have been not only his natural talent of association between ideas and sensible impressions, which would make him particularly able to attain the affective dimension writers make emerge, but the immeasurable joy he could sustain as an artist: «What matters if they say to us: you are wasting your abilities on that. What we are doing is reascending to life, smashing with all our strength the ice of reason and habit which forms immediately over reality and means that we never see it, rediscovering the open sea» [Proust 1988b, 93]. What value could Proust, someone who chose literature, or his perspective on reality, truth and philosophy, have for phenomenology, a philosophy for which the idea of an absolute reality is «just as valid as a round square» [Husserl 1983, 129]? As it will become patent with Levinas' and Merleau-Ponty's analyses, its value is immense, if not as a philosophical theory at least as a chief example of what phenomenological description of sensuous life is.

Proust and Husserl seem to be kindred spirits, bearing witness to the same philosophical turn against idealism at the turn of the century [Simon 2004, 305], commonality they express nonetheless in singular ways. As Proust would put it, reflecting on how writers of the same generation and with other similarities yet diverge ever so slightly, stating the same in unique ways: «See how they touch and how they differ. Follow on from one to the next, as in a garland woven with the soul and made from everlasting flowers, all of them different, in a single row» [Proust 1988b, 95]. In the air of his time, it seems to have been the resistances of life, the resisting will of others, the fleetingness of who he loved, illness and his bodily sufferings, that which prevented the narrator in Proust's *Recherche* from taking idealism to be the truth and reality to be a «simple projection» [Simon 2004, 306]. In phenomenological terms, it was the acute awareness of alterity what kept him away from following the idealist paradigm that had been, however, the core of Proust's extensive philosophical education.

In this manner, in Proust, the personal experience of resistance and difficulty would compound with an epochal trait (the search for a new intelligence of reality, against idealism), a remarkable sensibility and the talent to express it, to create one of the works of art most faithful to sensory

life unfolding. This added to a conscious personal pursuit of truth, the truth that he finds in such ‘lateral’ exploration of the sensible [Robert 2003, 140], would make of his work a notable example of literary philosophy. Son of the same turn, Husserl tried to explore the field of consciousness and its corporeality without falling either into idealism nor psychologism or simple empiricism. In this exploration, «the Body is also to be seen just like any other thing, but it becomes a Body only by incorporating tactile sensations, pain sensations, etc. – in short, by the localization of the sensations as sensations» [Husserl 1989, 158-159]. In other words, if on the one hand, for Husserl the study of sensuous experience is subordinated to the study of how consciousness utilizes such sensuous data in the constitution of every phenomena, on the other hand, consciousness only appears as such, in an apperceptive grasp through its corporeality, from sensations felt as sensations in one’s own, living body. This is why perception and the sensible are such important themes in phenomenology. They are at the most basic constitutional level both of every objectivity (physical objects, imaginative, oneiric and so forth) and of the self.

In this context, how does literature become significant for phenomenology? Fruitful parallels can be established between the phenomenological method and the work of a particular literary artist [cf. Hines 1976, 30-37], one could study phenomenologically the experience of who writes a novel or do research on the theory of literature a given philosopher practicing the phenomenological method or belonging to phenomenological tradition elaborated.² Here, the question points towards something different, towards the intrinsic relationship between literature and phenomenology. From such an angle, one can see that literature becomes significant in a multitude of ways. First, if phenomenology’s flesh and bones is the description of experience, and «what determines the specific nature of an experience is its content, as reported in lucid terms by the subject of the experience» [cf. Descombes 1992, 292 30-37], then literary subjective descriptions are relevant to the method. Second, the study of all layers of consciousness – perceptive or theoretical, individual or intersubjective, axiological or practical – is for Husserl dependent on how well we manage to exercise the freedom of our imagination.

² For instance, Ingarden’s theory. Cf. Falk 1981, 30.

In this sense, literature is crucial: «fiction allows the writer to present a reality – within the bounds of logical intelligibility – that allows the free invention of modes of *quasi*-objective reality, that are not constrained by having to conform to what actually exists» [Crowther 2022, 142]. Husserl himself establishes a strong parallel between the neutralization of daily affairs performed by literary works of art and the one performed by the phenomenological method [cf. Wilberg 2021, 134-136]. The significance of paragraph 70 of *Ideas I* is frequently emphasized in this regard, most particularly Husserl's assertion that «if one is fond of paradoxical phrases, one can actually say, and if one means the ambiguous phrase in the right sense, one can say in strict truth, that “feigning” [*Fiktion*] makes up the vital element of phenomenology» [Husserl 1983, 160]. Although this second point needs to be tempered with the fact that all literary art has an objective aspect – the text – that is the basis for “inter-subjective orientation” in all those who can access it by reading or hearing [Crowther 2022, 137]. Lastly, as «the phenomenologist's way of being in the world is pervasively linguistic» [Kee 2025, 75], literature, the art form that deals with words and narrations, poetic creation and speech, appears thus as invested with singular importance for this philosophical practice.

However, literature is not only relevant because it is one among other styles of describing subjective experience, because among many artistic forms, it allows phantasy to exercise itself with words, or even because it illustrates imaginative variation in general, a crucial part of the phenomenological method, the part which allows by continuous contrast for the never-ending elucidation of experience in all its facets. Literature seems to actually coincide with phenomenology: «modern literature comes close to phenomenology in playing with similar strategies of description, in describing the world not as simply given but as phenomena» [Gosetti-Ferencei 2007, 87-88]. All in all, whether we think phenomenology and literature are the same, expressions of a single motivation or just analogous, the Husserlian motto “To the things themselves!” should, without a doubt, translate into a literary phenomenology, i.e. an effort to reveal existence in their detailed sensuous and affective appearances [Nancy 2013, 12], where literature would no longer be understood as mere fiction, but as “a demonstration of truth”, a concrete, performed and living truth [*ibid.*, 14]. This should be at least a part of phenomenological practice.

If Proust has in numerous occasions been studied in its similarities and contrasts with phenomenology [cf. Elsner 2017], it is because he seems to have reached such practice, the one phenomenologists themselves look for, touching upon a deep sensible dimension. For this reason, his work can be qualified as ‘proto-phenomenological’ [Apostolopoulos 2019, 148]. No other writer seems to have translated the meaning of the sensible in its making [Robert 2003, 139]. Hyperboles aside, with Proust, it would seem that literature finds a new dimension of thinking, crafts its own speculative style, one that goes yonder than any purely theoretical attempt ever could, one that would continue in a rich path of sketches, ideas and transformative conclusions far after philosophy has stopped. Here a different kind of truth, a truth accessible only to literature would arise [Buceta 2019, 127]. As Deleuze indicated: «If time has great importance in the Search, it is because every truth is a truth of time. But the Search is first of all a search for truth» [Deleuze 2000, 94]. This truth that is not rational in the traditional sense, one could only presume would be kept away from phenomenology as long as it does not become literary phenomenology. But could one aspire to follow both paths, to achieve both philosophical and literary truth, becoming a philosopher-novelist [Nancy 2013, 10], a phenomenologist-writer?

2. *Levinas and Merleau-Ponty on Proust*

In 2013, the third volume of Levinas’ *Complete Works* revealed a lesser-known side of the philosopher: his unfinished novels and poems. Highlighting the ideas of drama, intrigue and mystery in Levinas, in his preface to this volume, Jean-Luc Nancy identifies in it what he calls the desire of literature [Nancy 2013, 17], the desire to write [*ibid.*, 18] or novelistic desire [*ibid.*, 25], namely a strong critical force that would infuse both epoch and authors throughout the twentieth century with a will to express meaning while it is emerging, not in the enclosed frame of fixed concepts [*ibid.*, 19]. Later, Nancy will insist that Levinas’ literary sketches reveal a generational search for concrete, living and active thought, in the context of a general disappointment regarding philosophical representations [Cohen-Levinas & Nancy 2015, 131], which would

lead to attempts to literarily write. In the case of Levinas specifically, Nancy attaches this desire to write to his dual culture, Russian literature and Judaism, where the common trait is to valorize the movement of narrating events and sensations, over theoretical thought [*ibid.*].

Nancy shows how the philosopher, with such cultures behind him, saw literary writing as the most appropriate place for describing the relationship between self and other [*ibid.*, 20]. Referring to the captivity notebooks, Nancy later insists on this saying that «at this moment, Levinas felt that to write a narrative, a fiction, was to allow ‘mystery’ [...] to be welcomed, to grant it a complete place of its own» [Nancy 2021, 21-22]. In other words, the philosophical idea that most interested Levinas, namely the mystery of the encounter between self and other, was thought to be much better grasped by literature than philosophy. This is how Levinas, even if he perhaps did not trust his ability to write otherwise than in a – albeit certainly original – philosophical style, conceived of his own work, like Proust and while reflecting on his literature, as necessarily literary, at least in part [cf. Levinas 2009, 74]. This gesture, this novelistic desire would reflect a general wish, an epochal will of «freeing thought from concept, letting it engage in effective proximity, in contact» [Nancy 2013, 28; my translation].

Within this context, it is not surprising that Levinas’ relationship with literature, eminently expressed in his 1947 essay on Proust, whose works he encountered through Maurice Blanchot [Kleinberg 2006, 29; Cohen-Levinas & Nancy 2015, 129], would refer us back to sensations. Not surprising either that the whole of the philosophical perspective Levinas will develop throughout his life would explore the realm of sensible proximity, namely a contact beyond rationality, and even intentionality, where the other only remains graspable as «the exposedness of a skin laid bare» [Levinas 2006, 49]: «[...] a subject is of flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin. [...] The tenderness of the skin is the very gap between approach and approached, a disparity, a non-intentionality» [*ibid.*, 77, 90]. Levinas redefines subjectivity in this manner, away from solipsistic rationality, as a sensuous interconnectedness, where the other has priority over the self. To explore and comprehend such a new understanding of subjectivity, literature would seem essential.

Now, if one attempts to understand Levinas' attitude towards literature not from his writing practice and notes, only recently revealed, but from his expressed positions and books, it might seem fairly confusing as it is by necessity ambiguous. As Robbins puts it, «Levinas asserts *every* image is in the last analysis plastic (and this includes the non-plastic arts of music and literature). Every artwork is in the end a statue, an immobile instant, an idol» [Robbins 1999, 132]; meaning that in their plasticity, artworks are ultimately motionless, lifeless: mere reductions – falsifications even –, bad translations of the ethical encounter one has with the face of the other. Literature along with every other art form would seem to be condemned to dismissal for they belong to what Levinas calls the “said” as opposed to the “saying”, i.e. to a reproduction of classical philosophy, focused on closed concepts and coherence, a reproduction of “sameness” as a principle opposed to “alterity”, to which the “saying” resists: «The pre-original, anarchic saying is proximity, contact, duty without end, a saying still indifferent to the said [...], the-one-for-the-other, a substitution» [Levinas 2006, 161]. Levinas' project is to transform philosophical discourse, to stop it from misleading and impoverishing our dealings with life and what is most important in it: the responsibility we have for one another. In this context, art is usually severely treated, as a vehicle for what would be most hindering in philosophical tradition: according to Levinas, the philosophy of being.

Art is then not a blissful wandering of man who sets out to make something beautiful. Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. They are ontological *par excellence*: they make the understanding of being possible. It is then not by chance that the exaltation of culture and cultures, the exaltation of the artistic aspect of culture, guides contemporary spiritual life; that, over and beyond the specialized labor of scientific research, the museums and the theaters, as in former times the temples, make communion with being possible, and that poetry passes for prayer. [...] Artistic expression would thus be an essential event that would be produced in being by artists and philosophers. [...] the cultural activity disclosing being; the one that works this disclosure, the subject, invested by being as its servant and guardian [Levinas 1987, 82].

Literature and philosophy, art and rational discourse are in Levinas condemned as carriers of traditional ontology. Nonetheless, just as philosophy and literature plummet together, the possibility for a

different philosophy and a different literature unfastens. This is what Robbins also remarks while analyzing Levinas' understanding of literature, identifying multiple moments where his radical position against it flinches, particularly «in the extraphilosophical medium of the interview» [Robbins 1999, 127] and while critically addressing authors such as Blanchot and Proust. Full of admiration for his capacity to explore both individual and collective souls,³ Levinas proclaims Proust's *Recherche* to be the early expression of the possible transformation he envisions for philosophy, albeit in the field of literature: «Proust's most profound teaching – if indeed poetry teaches – consists in situating the real in a relation with what for ever remains other – with the other as absence and mystery. It consists in rediscovering this relation also within the very intimacy of the *I* and in inaugurating a dialectic that breaks definitively with Parmenides» [Levinas 1996, 104-105]; Parmenides being the name that represents classical ontology and the very discourse Levinas wants to transmute, if not break down. Proust's work would be a gate – although oblique and veiled – to feeling and understanding irreducible alterity, absolute otherness; and to understand it *in us*, in the midst of our ever-flowing perception and rippling memory.

Starting with how both harsh and understandable Sartre's judgement of Proust as a mere psychologist is – as *The Nausea's* author belonged to a generation brought up on Proust's *Recherche*, the last volume appearing posthumously in 1927 –, Levinas' 1947 essay on Proust does not focus on his analysis of the human psyche, nor on the amorality of his work, but on a purely phenomenological matter: absolute alterity, as the source of all appearances and as portrayed mainly by Albertine's character.

This is the true interiorization of the Proustian world. It is not the result of a subjective vision of reality [...]. Nor is it due to any metaphysical basis that might be sensed behind the allegorical, symbolic, or enigmatic appearances. It

³ Levinas does not lack adjectives for expressing this: «A master of the differential calculus of souls, a psychologist of the infinitesimal. A magician of inexpressible rhythms. One who, by a linguistic miracle, rediscovered and re-created a world and a time that had been lost in the scattering of instants. An emulator of Freud and Bergson [...]. The new Saint-Simon» [Levinas 1996, 99].

arises, rather, from the very structure of the appearances, which are at once what they are and the infinity of what they exclude [...]. It is this movement of defined reality slipping free of its definition that constitutes the very mystery penetrating Proustian reality. [...] is the narrative of the inner life's sudden intensification brought about by an insatiable curiosity about the alterity of the other, at once empty and inexhaustible. The reality of Albertine is her evanescence, in her very captivity – a reality made up of nothingness. [Levinas 1996, 101, 103].

Levinas highlights the *Recherche's* inherent ambiguity and indetermination – present in all its described objects and situations – as its core, conceiving of this work less as an exploration of individual human psyche than as a window into the very structure of phenomenalization and appearance – among them the appearances of self, objects, and so forth –, which, according to the philosopher, is to be found in alterity, an alterity that we grasp only through the ungraspable contact with the other person. As Levinas notes in his second captivity notebook, he thinks that Proust is the poet of the social, not because the poet depicts society and its morality, but because he translates in the ambiguity of his writing the very fact of our social being, the very structure of sociality [Levinas 2009, 72]: namely, that we are not *solus ipse* juxtaposed to one another but imbricated beings-for-the-other, for an unseizable other who appears only as a sensible mystery, in the proximity of a tactile relation that does not fully touch, in an unquenchable thirst of contact.

Consequently, from this theory of subjectivity where the other has preeminence over the self, an alternate conception of social relations and communication emerges: one that does not have fusion as its paradigm nor communion (be it around a common ideal, a collective representation or a common enemy) as its goal, for «these will unite individuals who cannot touch one another, cannot suffer one another» [Levinas 1996, 104]. As opposed to these views, social relations and communication in the paradigm of alterity conceptualized as proximity – as Levinas puts it when thinking of Albertine's character – «brings to the definitiveness of our identical existence all the virtuality of the non-definitive» [*ibid.*]. Thus, Levinas' essay on Proust is not only a commentary on *La Recherche* but a trace of how at the time Levinas hybridized philosophy and literature to better achieve the sensible dimension of existence as fugitive as it is. In Nancy's words, during this

period Levinas «marked the difficult relation of philosophy to literature with respect to the sensible mystery: that which is connected to eros. Or rather, he marked the sensible mystery in general, or the mystery as sensible, or the sensible as mystery» [Nancy 2021, 34-35]. Albeit the idea of mystery can become an echo of the eulogy of silence that Levinas criticizes and understands as a trait of contemporary philosophy and literature, as a «romanticism of the solitary genius», expression of an arrogant ego, who thinks he can better deal with reality on his own, far from the verbal dialogue with others [Levinas 2011, 69]; albeit the idea of mystery can be the symptom of such conceited mistrust of language, the key feature of sensibility that Proust has shown to Levinas is precisely its mystery: the deepness, the refraction of the phenomenal light of the world that sensibility has as its very skeleton.

The resonating structure that Merleau-Ponty hears in Proust's writings is the same, although with a crucial difference: whereas Levinas sees in Proust the possibility of understanding the sensible as sensible encounter with the other and as a retort in the face of ontological tradition, with Merleau-Ponty, ontology is renewed precisely as the exploration of being as sensible, investigation in which Proust is a major figure. Still, as Levinas, who in thinking with the poet of the social got to deepen his understanding of how irredeemable the sensible alterity of the other is, Merleau-Ponty will think with Proust the mystery of the sensible too – even if in his later works this was made in an ontological framework – but in a much more sustained way, throughout his life: from 1942, evoking Proustian fragments⁴ that show that the body cannot be understood merely as an expression of the soul nor the soul as intentions in the body, fragments that contribute thus to show the connection of body and soul [Merleau-Ponty 1983, 209], until *The Visible and The Invisible*, where the phenomenologist emphasizes: «no one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth» [Merleau-Ponty 1968, 149]. Merleau-Ponty saw in Proust, as Franck Robert highlights it, a parallel of the project of Husserlian phenomenology and of his own

⁴ Specifically, episodes where the body enacts habits it has built up, with movements that we interpret as more than what they are, for example, in a dying person.

[Robert 2003, 142], as well as perhaps the most accomplished attempt to explore sensibility.

Already in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, flooded by Proustian references, sensibility appears importantly as having an enveloping structure that *La Recherche* perfectly displays, where the present appears as impregnated with absences that paradoxically not only exist within it but constitute it: for example, the narrator's dead grandmother serving as analogy for how consciousness keeps allowing for the presence of absences like a distant friend or a missing limb in what is constituted as the present [Merleau-Ponty 2012, 83], or the body that appears as the crucial vector that enables keeping the past in the present in the reopening of time from the implications of present sensoriality [*ibid.*, 187], or the structure of love as a *via negativa* [Merleau-Ponty 2010, 77]. To better see why this mystery and this negativity are so present in the thematization of the sensible and how Proust nourishes Merleau-Ponty's investigations on this topic, I will touch upon two main concepts commentators have drawn attention to: the concept of *logos endiathetos* and the concept of sensible ideas. As Catherine Hansen indicates: «*logos endiathetos* is basically defined as the language latent, immanent [...]. The *logos prophorikos* is then the *logos* expressed and made external. It is creation, where the *logos endiathetos* is only potential creation [...]. For Merleau-Ponty, the *logos endiathetos* is the language implicit in the body's relation to the world and to itself» [Hansen 2006, 34-35]. Although Hansen's description could leave us with the impression that *logos endiathetos* is imperfect with regards to *logos prophorikos*, traditionally the relation between these concepts is reversed, *logos endiathetos* being the principle that governs *logos prophorikos*. *Logos endiathetos* is the logic before the logic of the flesh of the world, the sensible *logos* emanating from even the smallest, sheerest of things, while *logos prophorikos* is language manifested.

In Merleau-Ponty's perspective, our opening to «the "amorphous" perceptual world» [Merleau-Ponty 1968, 170] reveals that we are amid a sensible being, an ontological sensible conveying an immanent dimension that represents «more than all painting, than all speech, than every "attitude," and which, apprehended by philosophy in its universality, appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it (Proust): it is the *λόγος ενδιάθετος* which calls

for *λόγος προφορικός*» [*ibid.*]. Although this idea needed the radicalization of Merleau-Ponty's critique of traditional theories of being and consciousness to fully develop, it is already implied in the early works: «The sensing being [*le sentant*] and the sensible are not opposite each other [...], my gaze pairs off with the color and my hand with the hard and the soft. In this exchange between the subject of sensation and the sensible, it cannot be said that one acts while the other suffers the action [...]. Without the exploration of my gaze or my hand [...], the sensible is nothing but a vague solicitation» [Merleau-Ponty 2012, 221-222]. As Mauro Carbone puts it, if Merleau-Ponty refers so often to the Husserlian idea of aesthetic logos when thinking about this play of reciprocal calls and answers between sensing and sensible, touching and touched is «because of the reconsideration it suggests of the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible» [Carbone 2010, 17]. With *Logos endiathetos*, or logos of the aesthetic world, Merleau-Ponty is looking for conceptual openings that allow us to grasp the ceaseless reversibility and reciprocity of sensing and sensible. Another such conceptual opening is the one of “sensible ideas”.

In *The Visible and The Invisible*, by the second half of *The Intertwining – The Chiasm*, Merleau-Ponty expands on the notion of ideas that are not contrary to the sensible, those that Proust had better than anyone described, as quoted above. These are “sensible ideas”, namely ideas that «would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility» [Merleau-Ponty 1968, 150], ideas that rather depend of and are only accessible because we are sensing-sensible flesh amid the flesh of the world: «Literature, music, the passions, but also the experience of the visible world are – no less than is the science of Lavoisier and Ampere – the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas. The difference is simply that this invisible, these ideas, unlike those of that science, cannot be detached from the sensible appearances» [*ibid.*, 149]. This «ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions» [*ibid.*, 152] is inherently mysterious, not something that will in time be revealed, «a certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing» [*ibid.*, 151]. Levinas description of the sensible encounter with the other would pretty much be the same: «the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject; prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness

before any loan» [Levinas 2006, 111]. Nonetheless, are these phenomenologies comparable?

3. *Concluding remarks*

Trying to see how philosophy creatively narrates and how literature truthfully thinks, I have followed a path where literature seems to answer to a philosophical desire for going beyond reason and solipsistic consciousness towards the affective and sensorial description of existential experiences. It answers the desire for a critical existential philosophy, and then the works it produces bring us to rediscover the sensible in all its details, nourishing back contemporary philosophy, which then develops a carnal turn and a focus on the senses. At this point, one could ask: what would contemporary philosophy be without literature?

From Jean-Paul Sartre to Michel Henry and Bruce Bégout, many of those who dive into the distinct philosophy phenomenology is have also dived into literature. I started studying for this article astonished by this, with the following questions in mind: was this a coincidence merely due to a historical moment particularly appropriate for the emergence of phenomenological literature and literary forms of philosophical enquiry? Was it due to a certain disposition towards the literary description of experience that such phenomenologists share, that maybe the school of phenomenology encourages and helps to develop? Or was it due to a more intrinsic link between phenomenology and literature as methods and ways of approaching the world, maybe even due to a form of truth that they would share? After examining the connection between phenomenology and literature by studying literature's significance for phenomenology and how Proust can be seen as a proto-phenomenologist, to then explore Merleau-Ponty's and Levinas' stands regarding Proust's *Recherche*, my answer to these questions, following the authors and commentators, is that there is certainly a series of epochal traits that make of modern literature and phenomenology almost sisters. The weakening of idealism, the quest for a concrete and pathic description of experience beyond reason and intentionality, determine a common return to the sensitive basis of experience, to the sensitive basis of knowledge in the case of Husserl and of art in

the case of Proust [Fontanille 1999, 226], that represents a definitive permeability, a porousness and penetrability, i.e. a dermicity, between literature and phenomenology.

Henceforth, not only every theory of literature will implicitly or explicitly refer to a phenomenological dimension – as Fontanille indicates, to the extent that they do wonder how sensibility determines significance [Fontanille 1999, 228] –, but phenomenologists will strive for richer, more detailed descriptions of experience, almost in a literary vein, when not completely absorbed by it. But at the same time, after the road taken, irreconcilable differences appear, not between phenomenology and literature, but between the two phenomenologies explored, both nourished by Proust's literature. Indeed, although both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty find in Proust the finest explorer of the sensible, their focus is noticeably different, for Levinas the focus being the non-ontological, pre-phenomenal encounter with the other, whereas for Merleau-Ponty is the carnal experience of sensible phenomena, notes, colors, textures, in the ontological framework of the carnal world.

This difference in focus determines a different conception of philosophical discourse: if for Levinas, the philosophical effort moving forward should be to grasp otherness by hyperbole fissuring, breaking with ontology and phenomenology,⁵ for Merleau-Ponty, philosophy should continue as a renewed ontology that seizes on the passage from sensible ideas to intellectual ones, without losing the phenomenological, experiential or horizontal structure. This would be an ontology that expands on the «*metamorphosis* of the flesh of the sensible into the flesh of language» [Carbone 2004, 39], exploring either the sensible or the intellectual dimension of the «fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech [...], reversibility which is the ultimate truth» [Merleau-Ponty 1968, 155]. The relationship between these two different philosophical paths and conclusions, stemming both from Husserlian phenomenology, can

⁵ «Subjectivity is not here aroused by the mysterious housekeeping of being's essence, [...] is brought out by transcendence, or the hyperbole [...]. Our philosophical discourse does not pass from one term to the other [...]. This book interprets the subject as a hostage and the subjectivity of the subject as a substitution breaking with being's essence» [Levinas 2006, 184].

be interpreted in two ways. They can be seen as parallel developments, where Merleau-Ponty's carnal ontology would be a subjective (because it maintains the horizontal structure) and impersonal (because it does not focus on inter-human relations) branch, not touching the Levinasian inter-human, ethical, pre-subjective (in the sense of pre-intentional) branch. But they can also be seen as continuous developments: where Merleau-Ponty's analyses stop, in the ontological flesh of the world, Levinas would see yonder, towards absolute alterity and the-one-for-the-other. Two phenomenologies of sensibility arriving to two different ultimate sensible instances, both explored according to the authors by Proust. But what sensible is Proust truly exploring, Merleau-Ponty's or Levinas'? And if it has, indeed, become apparent that "literature thinks" [Eaglestone 2013, 1] just as much as philosophy is able to express concrete experiences and feelings, narrate stories and sometimes sing, shouldn't we try to listen to Proust's sensible autonomously?

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Keywords

Proust; proximity, logos endiathetos; sensible ideas; dermicity

Abstract

From Jean-Paul Sartre to Bruce Bégout, many of those who dive into phenomenology have also dived into literature. Is this a coincidence merely due to a historical moment particularly appropriate for the emergence of literary forms of philosophical enquiry? Is it due to a certain disposition towards the literary description of experience that phenomenologists share? Or is it due to a more intrinsic link between phenomenology and literature? In this article, I look into these questions by studying literature's significance for phenomenology and how Proust can be seen as a proto-phenomenologist, to then examine Merleau-Ponty's and Levinas' stands regarding Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In this examination, literature appears not only as relevant for phenomenology but even as coinciding with it, the degree of dermicity between philosophy and literature achieving with phenomenology its acme. I conclude by comparing Levinas' and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologies of the sensible with regards to their focal theme and their interpretation of what philosophical discourse should become.

Da Jean-Paul Sartre a Bruce Bégout, molti tra coloro che si sono dedicati alla fenomenologia si sono anche dedicati alla letteratura. Si tratta di una semplice coincidenza, favorita da un periodo storico particolarmente propizio all'incontro tra filosofia e forme letterarie d'indagine? O piuttosto di una tendenza condivisa, che porta i fenomenologi verso la descrizione letteraria dell'esperienza? O ancora, è il segno di un legame più profondo e intrinseco tra le due discipline? Nell'articolo affronterò questi interrogativi, analizzando l'importanza della letteratura per la fenomenologia. Mostrerò come Proust possa essere letto come un proto-fenomenologo e, successivamente, esaminerò le riflessioni di Merleau-Ponty e Lévinas su *À la recherche du temps perdu*. L'analisi rivelerà che la letteratura non solo è importante per la fenomenologia, ma giunge in un certo senso a coincidere con essa: nella fenomenologia, la «dermicità» – ovvero l'intima fusione tra filosofia e letteratura – trova la sua espressione più compiuta. Concluderò mettendo a confronto le fenomenologie del sensibile di Lévinas e Merleau-Ponty, con particolare attenzione ai loro temi centrali e alla loro visione del futuro del discorso filosofico.

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