“What must a Jewish thinker be?”

“For the fraternal other is not first in the peace of what is called intersubjectivity, but in the work and the peril of inter-rogation; the other is not certain within the peace of the response in which two affirmations espouse each other, but is called up in the night by the excavating work of interrogation. Writing is the moment of this original Valley of the other within Being. The moment of depth as decay. Incidence and insistence of inscription.”

--Derrida, “Force and Signification” p30

In her 1994 biography of Emmanuel Levinas, Marie-Anne Lescourret described the scene of the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de langue Française, the nearly annual meetings of which Levinas was one of the founding members and arguably its animating spirit. She reproduced the terms of its debates and articulated the aims of its participants: “to use their experience of Judaism, to draw from the Jewish tradition a wisdom, and comprehension of the human predicament.” She listed the eminent figures who participated, including Edmond Fleg, Jean Wahl, Vladimir Jankélévitch and Raymond Aron and then noted, in an aside, “that among attending French philosophers of Jewish origin, one will never find there Jacques Derrida.”

It must have been with great delight then that Jacques Derrida in early December of 1998 took up the podium at the thirty-seventh meeting of the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de langue Française, and quoted these lines. The irony being that not only was Derrida standing at the colloque in 1998, but that he had already been there in the 1960’s, decades before Lescourret had written her book. In 1998 he came with a story to tell about that last time, about a joke Levinas had told him during the 1965 meeting.

The theme in 1965 was “Israel in the Jewish consciousness and that of other

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1 Marie-Ann Lescourret, Emmanuel Levinas, 170. Italics mine. Translation mine.
peoples.” In 1998 the conference convened to ask the question, “Comment vivre ensemble?” How to live together? For Derrida his story was perfectly fitting, for it seemed to call into question the transparency of the conference’s greatest spokesman and to make its participants rethink what it was they presumed to share in common. Already a few minutes into his talk, Derrida announced that the story would serve as his preface:

Before beginning, I recall what Emmanuel Levinas told me on that day in an aside [en aparté] and which I also evoked on the day of his death. I recount in the present tense as is done sometimes in the rhetoric of historians in order to make things more tangible for representation. Levinas, on that day says something which resonates otherwise concerning what “living together” might mean for the Jews, living or not. André Neher was in the middle of speaking, Levinas whispers in my ear: “You see him, he’s the protestant, me, I’m the catholic.” This quip [mot d’esprit] would call for an infinite commentary.

Jacques Derrida, who had, as Lescourret herself rightly tried to communicate, resisted aligning himself with the Jewish intellectual scene came to the community of which Levinas was a founding member and central figure and revealed an inside joke between the two philosophers, a small ironic quip Levinas had made, one which suggested that even Levinas might occasionally have his tongue in his cheek. The colloquium aimed to develop a particularly Jewish mode of addressing universal questions, and, at that meeting in particular, its speakers strived to shore up a perception of Judaism’s image and role in the world. Nonetheless Levinas had joked that their interpretations could be parsed in Christian terms. Derrida responded with a series of question:

What must a Jewish thinker be to use this language, with the profundity of seriousness and the lightness of irony that we hear in it? How can he remain a Jew together with himself, while opening himself to another, probable or improbable,
Jew, in this case me, who has never felt very Catholic, and above all not Protestant?4 A Jew who, coming from another shore of Judaism than Neher and Levinas, a Mediterranean shore, immediately remarks in the abyss of these doubles or of this Judeo-Catholic-Protestant triangle, the absence of the Islamo-Abrahamic? At issue here for Derrida were all of the differences the joke opened up, between the Jew and the Protestant, the Jew and the Catholic but also between the protestant-Jew, the Catholic-Jew and now the Algerian Jew, who, Derrida admitted, was not even sure he could or should be identified as such.5 But at the same time, and perhaps even more importantly, Derrida was concerned with the ironic gesture itself, which, offered up as an aside, in a whisper, like a secret, seemed designed to open up a space of intimacy between Levinas and Derrida, by excluding the rest of the conference. The gesture would seem to depend upon a sameness, a shared pre-determined understanding, and yet the very joke exposed the fissures that would make such an understanding impossible.

At the same moment that Derrida was inquiring about the nature of this irony and its effect, he added to the irony of the situation by revealing the anecdote. Derrida had told this story, he said, as a means of illustrating his own proximity to Levinas. The comment was prefaced by the assertion that Derrida’s relation to the colloque was mediated by his own proximity to Levinas. He had attended the colloque in the 1960’s, he said, “close to Emmanuel Levinas, near him, perhaps together with him. In truth, I was here thanks to him, turned toward him. That is still the case today, differently.” But in the process of making such an assertion he had in fact betrayed Levinas, by revealing something said between the two, to the very group from which it had been withheld.

To Derrida’s question thus, “What must a Jewish thinker be to use this language, with the

4 Ibid, 186.
5 Ibid.,186.
profundity of seriousness and the lightness of irony that we hear in it?" We can add, "What must this proximity be, this friendship, which is demonstrated by a betrayal?" 

I. “The Son is a Parasite as Literature”

The aim of this book is to explore the nature of the two thinkers’ proximity, which Derrida treats in multiple texts from the period surrounding this address, and thus following in the wake of Levinas’s death. But it is furthermore to examine how this proximity is linked to the means by which they each respectively negotiated their allegiances to the fact of Jewish identity and to the discourse and discipline of philosophy.

Derrida and Levinas shared in common that they came to France from Jewish backgrounds, Levinas Ashkenazi, Derrida Sephardic. For both a philosophical education, was the path toward acclimation into the culture of the Métropole. And for both, France and its philosophical tradition, was a means toward self-determination and self-formation. In November of 1942 Derrida was expelled from the state run Lycée Ben Aknoun in Algeria as a consequence of restrictions put on the number of Jewish children allowed in state-run schools following the 1940 repeal of the Crémieux decree under Vichy rule, but it was his subsequent enrollment at the Jewish Lycée Maimonide, which he seemed to experience as the most unbearable restriction, a kind of forced inscription which


7 For an alternative response to this question, see Simon Critchley’s The Ethics of Deconstruction” (107-141). Critchley suggests that Derrida’s betrayals are a kind of loyalty to the principle of dissymmetry a the heart of Levinas’s ethics, such that gratitude would only reinvoke a kind of reciprocity with which Levinas in countering the tale of Ulysses with the tale of Abraham would want to break. I don’t dispute this reading but I think it fails to contend with the more fundamental disagreement between the two, over the workings of signification.
“mirrored too symmetrically, that corresponded in truth to an expulsion.”

It was only the discovery of a vocation in philosophy that provided the avenue of transformation and transportation to an affiliation with the Métropole. For Levinas it was a philosophical education that took him from Kovno, Lithuania to the University of Strasbourg and brought him in touch with French culture and intellectual life, which he already associated with the emancipation of the Jews and the victory of “ethics over politics” in the Dreyfus Affair. And it was philosophical discourse itself that represented the means of translating the experience of the particular into universal terms.

Much has been made of this proximity by Derrida and Levinas themselves and by their commentators. In a 1986 interview, Derrida insisted on the parallels above and resisted demarcating his philosophical differences from Levinas even in response to the interviewer’s prodding:

We share the same traditional heritage, even if Levinas has been engaged with it for a much longer time and with greater profundity. Therefore, the difference is not there either. This is not the only example, but I often have difficulty in placing these discrepancies otherwise than as differences of ‘signature,’ that is of idiom, of ways of proceeding, of history, and of inscriptions connected to the biographical aspect, etc. These are not philosophical differences.

While this quote has been taken as evidence of Derrida’s unconditional endorsement of Levinas, as was often the case with Derrida, the meat of what he had to say was in what he didn’t. It was indeed not a philosophical difference between them but another discourse that intervened, one that was not only a difference of “signature” or of idiom,

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9 See François Poirié, Emmanuel Levinas: Qui êtes-vous?, 69-70.
11 Derrida, Altérités, 75.
12 Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction....COMPLETE FOOTNOTE.
but a difference concerning the *nature and function* of the “signature” and the idiom.

In their respective transitions and transformations from a Jewish upbringing to the center of French philosophical life, there was, I argue, for both figures, an important intermediary, a discourse whose attractions and risks accompanied philosophical acculturation, a discourse around which their differences can be located, or dis-located, as Derrida would have it. That discourse was literature, whose relation to philosophy in Twentieth Century France was consistently one of both proximity and threat.\(^{13}\)

While the parameters of what is included in the term literature have varied according to historical period and theorist, since the late eighteenth century the distinction between the respective means by which literary texts and philosophical texts access meaning has been a preoccupation of French and German philosophy.\(^{14}\) Nonetheless the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries were populated by thinkers such as Schlegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Bataille who resisted confining themselves within one or the other genre. At the same time, as categories, they came to be defined more strictly by their respective relations to formal considerations. The classic Platonic distinction between semblance and truth retained its relevance particularly as a means for

\(^{13}\) Jill Robbins’ *Altered Readings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) approaches the question of the role of literature in Levinas’s work, and in this work she treats the overlaps between Levinas and Derrida particularly on the theme of the trace. Her work will thus be one with which I will remain in conversation. The stakes of the projects ultimately diverge however, in so far as her book is primarily concerned with discovering the status of literature for Levinas’s ethics.

\(^{14}\) Pierre Macherey dates the moment of distinction between the two discourses as sometime between 1760 “when Lessing began to publish his journal *Briefe die neueste Literature betreffend* and 1800, which saw the appearance of Mme de Staël’s *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*. Pierre Macherey, *The Object of Literature*. Trans. David Macey, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 3.
philosophers with literary leanings to turn its hierarchy on its head.\textsuperscript{15} In postwar France, Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1948 \textit{Qu’est-ce que la literature?} initiated a forty-year debate which included Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière over the meaning and role of literature in relation both to philosophy and politics.\textsuperscript{16} In the case of Levinas and Derrida, their respective relations to this debate marked out the crucial space of difference between the two. While both expressed their attractions to literature and their desires even to write it, for Levinas literature was ultimately viewed as a register of communication to be purified and eliminated from discourse in the translation of Jewish texts into philosophical truths. For Derrida, on the other hand, literature’s dangers, its indeterminacies and its cultural markers were to be cultivated, often for the very reasons that Levinas dismissed it. It is thus this very difference between the two that Derrida sought to highlight but also to exploit in his assertion of his proximity to Levinas’s thought.

In both Derrida’s address to the colloque and in the essay, “Literature in Secret” published only a year later, in a period in which Derrida was obsessed by themes of betrayal and forgiveness, he described moments in which Levinas used irony to solidify his connection to Derrida and in both cases Derrida then mobilized irony to betray those secrets. In the process Derrida articulated the ways in which literature itself could be conceived as a discourse of forgiveness, and established himself as Levinas’s advocate, friend, betrayer, heir and parasite.

“The Son is a parasite as Literature,” Derrida wrote in “Literature in Secret. ” The

\textsuperscript{15} See Derrida, \textit{Acts of Literature}, 48.
straightforward reference in the context of the essay was to Franz Kafka and his “Letter to my Father.” But there is another father/son narrative that resonates in this text, and throughout Derrida’s late corpus, the story of another betrayal between father and son, one which situates Derrida as the son, as the parasite, as the site of literature, even, and Levinas as the father.

The role of paternity was key to Levinas’s treatment of exteriority in his first magnum opus *Totality and Infinity* (1961), where it was considered under the theme of “fecundity,” a category that Levinas opposed to the project. Where the project “emanates from a solitary head to illuminate and to comprehend…dissolves into light and converts exteriority into idea,” fecundity, the son “comes to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects,” one “irreducible to the power over possibles.” 17 Levinas thus considered paternity as a relation that allows for a true futurity, one not mastered by the subject, not describable in terms of actualization. “Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other,” Levinas wrote, “is me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me.” 18 The relation with the son illustrates the capacity of the self for true transcendence, not a transcendence which would merely materialize the vision of the self, as in the work of art that I produce from my idea and thus would not be transcendent, but one in which the issue, the son, would be fully free of the issuer.

Derrida picked up on this theme from *Totality and Infinity* explicitly in the 1980 essay first published in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas* (1980), “En ce moment me voici.” According to Derrida, the conceptual distinction between the son and the work could not be maintained. Like the son, Derrida countered, the work too is and has a future, one that

18 Ibid., 277.
is not reducible to the “power over possibles,” one which cannot be protected from contamination, from *La difference*, a term whose feminine form was already a response to Levinas’s masculine description of paternity. In 1980 Derrida developed the implication of this *gendered* difference. He enacted the work’s independence by showing the way in which the differential function of language always escapes the intention of the author. Merely by replacing Levinas’s name with his initials, EL, its vocalization issues in the pronoun “Elle.” For Derrida this “reading otherwise” was the outgrowth of Levinas’s philosophy, the only Levinassian response to the gift of Levinas’s text, but it issued at the same time from the very working of textuality itself, was “the very process of the trace insofar as it makes a work in a making-work.”

For Derrida the relation of the Son to the Father was also already the very movement of “the work,” of textuality. In the text Derrida dramatizes this parallel by playing the role of the son/daughter and issuing a text whose betrayal, he suggests, was the only possible gesture of loyalty.

In 1992 *Gift of Death* marked a return to the theme of this parallel, a return to the relationship between textuality and paternity. The essay “Literature in Secret,” in which the comment, “The Son is a parasite as Literature,” appears was added as an addendum in 1999 to *Gift of Death*. While Levinas played a fairly central role in *Gift of Death*, his name is mentioned in “Literature in Secret,” only in the context of an anecdote. And the anecdote only calls attention to itself insofar as Derrida over signified his efforts not to draw attention to it.

It appears within brackets, and is prefaced with a disclaimer: “Although reporting this anecdote is not essential to what I am developing here…I remember how one day

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19 Derrida, “En ce moment me voici,” in *Psyché*, 179.
Levinas, in an aside, during a dissertation defense said to me, with a sort of sad humor and ironic protestation, ‘Nowadays, when one says “God,” one almost has to ask for forgiveness or excuse oneself: ‘God,’ if you’ll pardon the expression.’”

Derrida set up the comment so that it would be easy to dismiss, except that the phrase, “God, if you’ll pardon the expression,” is the essay’s epigram, under the title and after the subtitle, “an impossible filiation.” As an epigram it appears without quotes, disconnected from its context, an unattributed citation, a fragment. The essay “Literature in Secret” itself concerns the process by which a word spoken between two can become quotation, a citation and then a fragment. It considers what happens when a pledge or a secret is subject to representation. It argues that representation is always already a dissimulation and a betrayal of this relation. Explicitly at issue is the secret that stands between Abraham and Isaac in the Akeda, and the essay proposes that the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in the Hebrew Bible is already a betrayal of the pact between Abraham and God, as a recounting of what Abraham could not himself tell, what he could not tell Sarah or Isaac. It is the recounting of this story by a third party disseminated to anyone, for any reader.

This drift from covenant to narrative, from the second to the third person, Derrida argues, reveals the connection between modern fiction and the story of Abraham. Modern fiction is the inheritor of a biblical betrayal. Moreover it is something like a sequel, a repetition and reorientation of the religious fable. What separates it from the biblical testament is that it signifies as a request for pardon, a pardon for the betrayal of representation. By treating what it represents as fiction, literature refuses to offer up the

secret as something revealed. “Pardon de ne pas vouloir dire,” or “Pardon for not meaning (to say),” This fragment, according to Derrida, is the formula at the heart of modern literature.

The suspension of the “vouloir dire” in language had been a theme of Derrida’s since La Voix et le phénomène (1967). The “vouloir dire” or Bedeutung is for Derrida, via his reading of Husserl, that element of meaning that expresses the will of the speaker. Its absence correlates to the lack of an animating spirit, or “the process of death at work in the signs.”

Derrida’s argument in the text is to reverse the priority between Husserl’s two concepts of the sign: expression and indication. Expression for Husserl, a sign with vouloir dire, a sign which means, is primary and indication, a sign devoid of intention, but not thus void of signification, is secondary. A close reading of Logical Investigations I, particularly of Husserl’s description of self-presence reveals that expression is in fact secondary and an effect of indication, thus calling into question the sign’s capacity to ever act as a pure expression. Derrida proceeds through an analysis of the function of the “living voice” in Husserl. Here “fiction” is already implicated in the making of meaning, for in speaking to myself, through an internal voice, which should be the site of a pure presence, Husserl suggests that I must proceed by way of a fiction.

For in so far as I speak to myself I imagine that I use a sign, when in fact the very act of representation would be foreign to the perfect internal solitude of the self. Derrida argues that this necessary “fiction” around which “auto-affection” is imagined is indeed a fiction, but only in so far as he reverses the terms. The activity or movement of the self speaking to itself, which implies a self differing from itself is the only means by which self-presence

22 Derrida, Voice and Phenomenon, 34.
23 Ibid., 42.
can be thought. “But this pure difference, which constitutes the self-presence of the living present reintroduces into it originally all the impurity that we had believed we were able to exclude from it.”

The illusion is thus the pure interiority of a self-presence that doesn’t involve re-presentation, rather than the obverse. At the basis of the speaking subject, thus, there is already what Derrida called “archi-writing,” which “is at work in the origin of sense.” This dynamic would then implicate the very system of signification, its “meaning” making, which would now be characterized by what Derrida names “supplementarity”:

The structure of supplementarity is very complicated. Insofar as it is a supplement, the signifier does not first re-present merely the absent signified. It substitutes itself for another signifier, for another signifying order, which carries on another relation with the missing presence, another relation that is more valuable owing to the play of difference…In this way the indication is not only the substitute which supplements the absence or the invisibility of the indicated…The indicated also replaces another type of signifier, a signifier whose signified (the Bedeutung) is ideal.

It would thus be fair to say that all discourse for Derrida is in fact compensating for an absence of “vouloir dire.” Thus to speak of the modern institution of literature is not to describe a dynamic of meaning that is any different from language in general but it is a means of inhabiting it differently. Literature says Pardon for not having a vouloir dire. How so? As a genre Fiction is characterized by its flaunting of any straightforward expression between the speaker and his “vouloir dire.” A fictional story recounts; it moves the relation between two to the plane of representation, where it becomes a relationship for a third. In this sense it inherits the biblical task of revealing the secret, yet

24 Ibid., 73
25 Ibid., 78-79.
alters it by presenting its material under new auspices.26 The circulation of literature 
opens up the relationship between two to anyone who can pick up and read. But it 
replaces the covenantal call with content whose status has itself been called into question 
by the fact of its context itself having been disrupted. What is key in “Literature in Secret” 
is that this is a kind of repetition whose function is to undermine the dynamic of election 
without covering over its own problematic status as representation. At the same time, 
Derrida argues, literature reinstates the secret but on new ground, not as the site of a 
covenantal election, a between-two which can in fact be betrayed, but rather through an 
exposure to interpretation, and resignification, to a slippage in meaning that ironically 
guards its own secrecy by disrupting the relation between agent and meaning, such that 
the presumed vertical relation of revelation is replaced by a horizontal drift. As we’ve 
seen, this quality is intrinsic to language itself. Thus what marks literature is its avowed 
parasitic position. It sucks the life out of the covenantal structure of the biblical 
testament but feeds off of its contractual ties.

According to Derrida’s interpretation, then, literature is irrevocably tied to the 
religious testaments of the Abrahamic communities that function within their context as 
the ciphers of belonging. If, as Paul Ricoeur and André LaCoque have argued, “it is in 
interpreting the Scriptures in question that the community in question interprets itself” 
thus founding a dynamic of “mutual election” between community and text, then 
literature as its heir and betrayer would echo this structure but destabilize the dynamic of

26 Derrida, Gift of Death, 148.
election at its heart by calling into question the very relations to the text that allow it to function canonically. 27 At stake in this shift is the function of the text’s ironic dimension.

III. The Ironic Dimension

As I have already noted Derrida was keen to highlight the irony at work in Levinas’s texts at the same time that he used irony in his own work. But did they each understand and use irony in the same way?

Irony is a touchy subject. Its definitions varied, its application and implications widely debated. It is invoked as an instrument of elitism and conservative communitarianism, the shield of the cultured insider, raised to ward off the riff raff, and keep outsiders at bay. But it has also been deemed a weapon of subversive political unrest, the skeptic’s sword, wielded to cut off both the believer and the rationalist at the knees. It can be a means of invoking intimacy but also a stance suggesting distance and indifference. It has been viewed as a propaedeutic, a signpost on the way to virtue,28 and a vice, the calling card of every rogue. The key to its potency as a trope, or the trope of tropes is the way in which it brings into play the social dimension of linguistic meaning.

In his 1974 book, The Rhetoric of Irony, Wayne Booth attempted to refine our conception of irony by distinguishing between literary indeterminacy of all sorts and what he calls stable irony. Booth argues that “in contrast to the general modifications of meaning that all words in any literary context give to all other words in that context,” a stable ironic utterance depends upon a tremendous level of understanding, trust and

27 See Ricoeur, LaCoque, Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies, XVI. Also Moshe Halbertal, People of the Book,
confidence between the speaker and the audience.\textsuperscript{29} For Booth, irony is “the key to the tightest bonds of friendship.”\textsuperscript{30} In fact, he suggests one cannot even claim that irony is at work without a highly tuned dynamic of understanding between speaker and audience. For a statement to have an ironic meaning, the speaker or writer must intend something other than what she states; the listener must be able to reject the literal meaning of the statement, either because it lacks an internal logic, is at odds with the situation or with what the listener or reader knows about the speaker or writer. The reader must also reject other explanatory possibilities about the writer or the situation of communication, such as the explanation that the speaker is stupid, deluded or misinformed. Without all of these features, argues Booth, what you have is not irony but misunderstanding. Irony is only activated in and through understanding; thus it is invoked as a kind of shared experience, a test, even, of a kind of social intimacy.

It follows from this definition that irony would be a tool of community maintenance and a means of community policing. The level of its success would serve as an indicator of social cohesiveness and shared values. Such an interpretation might lead one to believe that the political implications of irony are thus generally conservative, aimed toward maintaining the status quo. Linda Hutcheon in her book \textit{Irony’s Edge} notes that until the 1980’s almost every scholarly treatment of irony identified it as a “conservative force, used to ‘shore up the foundations of the established order.’”\textsuperscript{31} Of course the same dynamics might equally be used to produce coherence within alternative communities, communities whose very definition involves resisting a hegemonic order. As Hutcheon

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\textsuperscript{29} Wayne Booth, \textit{A Rhetoric of Irony}, 10. \\
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 14. \\
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maintains, “it is less that irony creates communities” than that preexistent “discursive communities […] provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony.”

I would add that like dye injected into the social body, irony can make visible certain connections and alliances which might otherwise function unseen. A the same time, however, it may also highlight differences and points of disagreement, for while irony is often used to activate a common bond, it is often also used at the expense of another. Satire, for example, one of irony’s most potent forms is just as much a tool of alienation as it is a means to shore up alliances.\footnote{Footnote on satire}

In the case of our two asides, we can risk assuming that Levinas was in fact attempting to cultivate the bond already established between himself and the young philosopher, twenty-five years his junior. In 1965, Derrida he had come to the colloque as Levinas’s guest, at least this is what he suggests in 1998. Benoit Peeters reports that they had met almost two years earlier when Derrida had begun attending Levinas’s Tuesday night class at the Sorbonne. Derrida had come to the class, according to Peeters, with his own strategic motivations. Sometime in 1962, when Derrida was an assistant in general philosophy and logic at the Sorbonne, he had read Levinas’s Totality and Infinity on Paul Ricoeur’s recommendation. In the summer of 1963 he drafted the first version of Violence and Metaphysics. It was the first essay devoted to Levinas’s magnum opus, which had been published in 1961. In the months leading up to the essay’s publication Derrida began attending Levinas’s class, and Peeters reports, “regularly going up to talk to him at the end.” His intention, according to Peeters, was to prepare Levinas for what
was coming. For the essay, though full of admiration for Levinas, ultimately makes some very powerful and cutting critiques. Levinas, as Derrida must have known by then, had a reputation for his prickly nature. But as he must also have known, Derrida was doing Levinas a great service, for as the first scholarly work devoted explicitly to Levinas it was “of decisive importance in raising Levinas’s thought to the forefront of the philosophical scene.” Once the two began talking, often after Levinas’s lectures, Derrida commenced sending Levinas his own essays. In the letter accompanying these essays he remarked already on the peculiar nature of the two philosophers’ proximity: “I feel, as always…as close to your thought and as far from it as it is possible to be; which is contradictory only in terms of what you call ‘formal logic.’” The comment itself reflected both Derrida’s scholarly position but also the very nature of the ethical relation to the Other (autrui) that was the theme of Totality and Infinity. Only after these other essays did Derrida send him the first part of “Violence and Metaphysics.” Levinas’s response to Derrida’s article was warm and gracious, even as it recognized the extent of the critique involved. Already the role of irony was a touchstone between them. Levinas wrote: “I must tell you of my great admiration for the intellectual power deployed in these pages, so generous even when they are ironic and severe.”

It is clear that from the beginning the context of their relation was primarily philosophical. Nonetheless, both were far from being fully established within the French philosophical community. Levinas did not receive a regular teaching position until the 1964-1965 school year, at the Université de Poitiers as a chargé d’enseignement and

33 Benoit Peeters, Derrida, 139.
34 Stéphane Mosès, “Au Coeur d’un chiasme” in Derrida, La Tradition de la Philosophie, 111.
35 Letter from Emmanuel Levinas to Derrida, 22 October 1964. Peeters, 140.
Derrida was in his last year as an assistant at the Sorbonne. But the commonality of their respective ties to Judaism was not absent from the relationship. From Derrida’s first letters to Levinas, we know that Edmond Jabés, the Egyptian Jewish poet, whose *Book of Questions* was peopled by rabbis and treated the analogy between the Jews as people of the book and literature, was central to their first conversations. But we also know that for Levinas, Derrida’s Jewish background tied him to Levinas’s other professional role within the Jewish community, as the director of the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale and as a member of the colloque, which was funded by the World Jewish Congress. Soon after Derrida began attending his course, Jacques Lazarus, a delegate for the French Section of the World Jewish Congress, wrote to Derrida’s father, Aimé Derrida, to tell him that he had had the chance to tell Levinas about his son and his own work on Husserl.

Thus, if as Derrida suggested in 1998, it was at the bequest of Levinas that he attended the colloque in 1965, we can imagine the aside shared with Derrida as an acknowledgement, on the one hand, of Derrida’s own ambivalence in relation to the French Jewish community and on the other as an expression of solidarity which positioned Levinas at a level of distance from the colloque in a comment marked by its detachment from the contemporary situation. The result was an expression of solidarity that, on the one hand, recognized Levinas’s position within the community, but on the other hand conveyed his capacity to see it with Derrida from a position on the margins. Ironically this meant sharing for a moment in Derrida’s own skepticism concerning Levinas’s own project. At the moment that Levinas made this joke he created a scenario

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36 Peeters, 139.
37 Ibid.
in which the participants of the colloque were its object by accepting the terms of Levinas’s philosophical project.

Arguably the most scathing critique of “Violence and Metaphysics” is that with which it closes, namely that any claim to introduce a Hebrew propheticism into the Greek logos as an interruption is always destined to turn down the path toward Christianity:

The history in which the Greek logos is produced cannot be a happy accident providing grounds for understanding to those who understand eschatological prophecy, and to those who do not understand it at all. It cannot be outside and accidental for any thought. The Greek miracle is not this or that, such and such astonishing success; it is the impossibility for any thought ever to treat its sages as ‘sages of the outside,’ according to the expression of Saint John Chrysostom. I having proferred the *epekeina tes ousias*, in having recognized from its second word (for example, in the *Sophist*) that alterity had to circulate at the origins of meaning, in welcoming alterity in general into the heart of the logos, the Greek thought of Being forever has protected itself against every absolutely surprising convocation.  

When Levinas thus described André Neher’s biblical interpretation and his own Talmudic reading in Protestant and Catholic terms, he was on the one hand noting that like the Catholic tradition, he approached scripture through an apparatus and like the Lutheran tradition, Néher operated with the motto of *sola scriptura*. But on the other hand he was granting Derrida’s own terms, that any attempt to introduce an exterior voice into the Greek logos is inevitably domesticated.

But of course as is the nature with irony, its capacity to redouble itself can never be dismissed, not even by Booth, who concedes in a footnote to his description of stable irony, “Irony in itself opens up doubts as soon as its possibility enters our heads, and there is no inherent reason for discontinuing the process of doubt at any point short of infinity…It is not irony but the desire to understand irony that brings such a chain to a

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stop.” Thus a further reading beckons, one that suggests that Levinas’s ultimate rebuttal to Derrida’s critique in “Violence and Metaphysics” was in fact to invite him to the colloque, as a fellow Jewish philosopher, to confront him with the fact of Jewish intellectuals working out a response to the Greek tradition. Could Derrida participate in this meeting and still uphold his conviction that “Jewgreek is greekjew”? Was the irony then that indeed Levinas meant exactly the opposite of what he said, thus submitting Derrida himself to another moment of forced conscription, one which would force him to concede?

Conversely the other anecdote Derrida tells in “Litterature au secret” concerns a moment during a dissertation defense, we can assume, at a later date, though none is given. Here the context is itself academic, institutional, philosophical. The irony in the comment, “Nowadays, when one says ‘God,’ one almost has to ask for forgiveness or excuse oneself: ‘Dieu,’passez-moi l’expression...” is less contextual, for it plays on the idea that speaking God’s name is to take it in vain, but suggests instead that within the philosophical context, to introduce God into the picture is to introduce an inadmissible theological dimension. In this scenario, the fact that Derrida was the audience for this ironic comment, one whose irony is unmistakable, would replicate the experience of being on the margins of a community, but this time the community was philosophical. Levinas and Derrida, on the margins, shared in a skepticism concerning its secularity.

_Dieu_ was clearly a word that resonated for Levinas and between Levinas and Derrida, as is evident in the eulogy Derrida gave for Levinas, in 1996. It opens:

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39 Booth, 59.

40 Derrida, _Writing and Difference_ 153. Quoted from Joyce’s _Ulysses_, 622.
I knew that my voice would tremble at the moment of saying it, and especially saying it aloud, right there, before him, so close to him, pronouncing this word of *adieu*, this word à Dieu, which, in a certain sense, I get from him, a word that he will have taught me to think or pronounce otherwise.41

It is surprising in some ways that Derrida didn’t tell the anecdote from ‘Literature in Secret’ in the eulogy published in *Adieu*. It was the first place in which he told the story of the colloque, referring once again to Levinas’ irony, though he did not develop its implications there. But reading the two together, the anecdote from “Literature in Secret” and the opening comments from *Adieu*, is revealing. For together they give new resonance to what it meant for Derrida to have pronounced the words à-Dieu which Levinas taught him “to think or pronounce otherwise.” Levinas’s comment at the dissertation defense was the occasion, willed and unwilled for him to speak the word God “aloud, right there before him.” In the context of the eulogy it is clear that Derrida is expressing a debt of gratitude, one which he says at the close of the eulogy was “without regret.” But it is also difficult to disregard Derrida’s use of the phrase “Ma voix tremblerait.” For while it is clear in that context—controlling one’s emotion is a typical concern of the speaker at a eulogy--trembling is also a theme to which Derrida devoted considerable attention in *Gift of Death* (1992) where it was thematized as that which seems to call into question any act of etiology, any act of saying or pronouncing the word *Dieu*. “I tremble before what exceeds my seeing or and my knowing [mon voir et mon savoir] although it concerns the innermost parts of me…In as much as it tends to undo both seeing and knowing, trembling is indeed an experience of secrecy or of mystery…”42

One criticism that Derrida was willing to make openly of Levinas was not sensitive enough to the undecideability of what he disclosed through his phenomenology of the ethical encounter. He did not say “Dieu, passez-moi l’expression.” He used irony not as a means of destabilization, but as a rhetorical tactic which seemed aimed at solidifying alliances and marking out distinctions in political and theological positions.  

While the topic of Levinas’s relation to irony is merely mentioned in Derrida’s 1980 essay, “En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici,” Derrida described there both the importance of the interruption of thematization in Levinas’s work as well as Levinas’s attempts to maintain a kind of textual purity:  

Apparently, he likes the tear [déchirure] but he detests contamination. Yet what holds his writing in suspense is that one must welcome contamination, the risk of contamination, in enchaining the tears and regularly mending and resuming them within the philosophical text or tissue of a récit. This mending resumption [reprise] is even the condition on which what is beyond essence may keep its chance against the enveloping seam of the thematic or dialectical. The tear must be saved, and to do so one must play off seam against seam. The risk of contamination must be regularly accepted (in a series) in order for the noncontamination of the other by the rule of the same to still have a chance.  

In the textual dynamics described here we can see both how and why irony would have been such an important rhetorical tool for Levinas as well as why it would serve as a means by which Derrida would himself “contaminate” Levinas’s texts. As Derrida argues in “En ce moment,” in order for the relation with the “Other” to inflect Levinas’s text, Levinas requires a means of rending, or interrupting the thematic flow of discourse. In order to signal that communication is always buttressed by what Levinas calls “Le dire,” the saying, the text must bear the marks of the ethical relation. Irony would be one

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43 See “A Word of Welcome,” and my treatment of it in The Figural Jew...
means of inflecting the text with that relation. For, in order for irony to function, a
meaning must appear that both crosses and supports the discursive plane. Or as Derrida
puts it,”one must play off seam against seam.” However such an endeavor can only take
place at the risk of contamination, that risk of an ironic subversion of one’s irony is one
of the stakes of the game. Yet in Levinas’s case the tension between these two, the
necessity of risk and the fear of contamination leaves behind a sardonic aftertaste.

In his eulogy for Levinas Derrida referred to his irony as a kind of trademark:
“the gentle irony, so familiar to us.” But was it in fact so gentle? Others have attested
to the contrary. Henri Atlan, for example, described Levinas in an interview for Cahiers
d’Etudes Lévinassienes as “very ‘harif’ (sharp or hot), very acerbic in his critique of
everything and everyone and very ironic.” Perhaps Derrida comment was itself ironic?

Levinas’s irony appears consistently in essays that he wrote specifically for a
Jewish audience. These texts, either originally given at the colloque or similar events or
published in Jewish (and occasionally Catholic) journals had a clearly defined intended
audience. Often they had a strongly critical edge. Some were clearly caustic in tone,
especially if the target was Martin Heidegger, whom Levinas had introduced with fanfare
to French audiences in the 1930’s, only to become one of his most vocal and vicious
critics after Heidegger’s infamous 1935 rectorate address. An ironic tone appears in the
rhetorical questions that Levinas used to parrot (and then debunk) derogatory depictions
of Judaism and when he parodied a position he found pedestrian or indulgent. Often his
irony seems to be a means of demanding more of his listener or reader. For example the

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44 Derrida, Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas, 25; 12.
essay “The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel,” published in *Evidences*, A postwar French Jewish Journal, Levinas begins,

“The idea that Israel has a religious privilege is one that exasperates everyone. Some see it as unjustifiable pride, while to others it looks like an intolerable mystification which in the name of a sublime destiny, robs us of earthly joys. To live like every other people on earth, with police and cinemas and cafés and newspapers—what glorious destiny!”

The passage concludes with an explanation point, the ultimate sarcastic signifier. The sarcasm is one means to undermine the perspective that Levinas wants to discredit.

We can associate this kind of irony with the Kierkegaardian/Socratic tradition and even view it as a kind of pedagogical tool. For Kierkegaard the essence of irony is as a feature of the subject not as a verbal trope. Its primary aspect is as a force of negation, as the “infinite absolute negativity…it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not.” As a pedagogical dynamic, it functions to unmask the discrepancy between the real and the ideal, by negating the surface reality and in the process baiting the student, luring him toward this negation as well but without offering the assurance or security that he can align himself with the ideal. The ideal itself remains out of reach.

In one of the more vivid passages of *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard describes the ironist as “the vampire who has sucked the blood of the lover and while doing so has fanned him cool, lulled him to sleep, and tormented him with troubled dreams.” Irony seems thus to have a three step process, which ends not in resolution but in desire. It invalidates the present reality, replacing it with the “fleeting but indescribable instant of understanding,” which is then “immediately superseded by the anxiety of

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misunderstanding.” One wants to be aligned with the teacher and the teacher’s vision, fears being associated with the object of the teacher’s ironic gaze, strives to stand with the teacher on the side of rectitude, only to realize that the assumption of mastery that such a move would commence is the object of irony. This technique has the effect on the one hand of catching the reader sympathizing with the Zeitgeist, but then of reinscribing her into the circle so that after having been corrected, she can inhabit as well the ironic voice that distances her from “popular” opinion. However the hearer can never be sure that she successfully occupies that position.

For Levinas, according to this dynamic, the Jewish perspective would thus serves as an interruption and an agitation to the common culture, but would be effective as interruption only insofar as the reader is realigned in the process with the teacher’s perspective. While this may inevitably fail, the result is a desire to find one’s way to the ideal. This effect is clearest perhaps in Levinas’s ironic rendition of Heidegger in “Heidegger, Gagarin and us”:

“We must urgently defend against this century’s technology. Man will lose his identity and become a cog in a vast machine…no one will exist for himself [pour soi]…..

“There is some truth in this declamation,” Levinas continues, only to further denounce this position later in the essay as attributable to the “pagan recesses of our Western souls.”

The reader must thus reject the position associated with Heidegger and come to accuse as well “the pagan recesses” that nonetheless have been attributed to all of us (Levinas included).

In A Case for Irony, Jonathan Lear argues that this type of pedagogical function is important for modern human life to excavate the gap between pretense and aspiration. “When irony hits its mark, the person who is its target has an uncanny experience that the
demands of an ideal, value, or identity to which he himself is already committed dramatically transcend the received social understandings.”  

This for Lear is something that one can deploy in oneself or cultivate in another as a means of striving for human excellence.  

Lear wants to hold onto the firm distinction between “real” irony and a derivative irony, which would lead to “an expression of detachment and lack of commitment rather than an expression of earnestness and commitment.”

But such a view assumes that one can master one’s irony, that irony itself isn’t a means by which the ideal must become unfixed, if in fact it is irony and if in fact it inaugurates a moment of uncanniness. For if one is so sure that one’s ideal is worthy of commitment, is the ideal worth striving for, doesn’t one risk becoming like Euthyphro in Plato’s dialogue, the one who assumes he is the one supposed to know?

As Paul De Man suggests, from its Greek origins the set up of the *alazon* and the *eiron* resists any assertion of stability. For the minute one thinks one knows, the minute one plays “the smart guy,” he is sure to be shown up as “the dumb guy,” the *alazon*, the target of the *eiron*. One can trace this dynamic back to the *Euthyphro*, in which the target is Euthyphro’s certainty that he knows what piety is. If we assume that Socrates has the answer and is merely concealing it from Euthyphro then the very dynamic for which he faults Euthyphro, assuming that he has wisdom and everyone else around him is a fool, is one for which Socrates would also be guilty. Or, if we place ourselves on the side of Socrates as the one who knows and we laugh along with him when he says of

48 Loc 431 of 2861.  
49 Loc 556 of 2861.  
Euthyphro, “You say I make [words] walk. But in fact it is you who are a good deal more skillful than Daedalus, for you make them walk in circles,” then we are in danger of being the Alazon and thus the butt of the text’s joke, the outsider rather than the snugly and smugly complicit insider.  

Thus, according to De Man, even Wayne Booth is in danger of being the Alazon—a charge De Man knows he can’t levy without putting himself in danger of the same assignation. The point is that the ironic status of a discourse is intrinsically undecideable. As even Booth admits, “Any work can be revised, turning the three little pigs into the villians, the wolf into a tragic hero.” For Booth, however, cultivating such instability is permitted but ultimately worthless, especially in comparison to the “rigorously controlled” process he describes under the rubric of “stable irony.”

The use of irony for destabilizing purposes has been closely associated with both De Man and Derrida and was key to their relationship to one another as well as to the debate over the status of deconstruction itself, whether its ironic dimension declassifies it as philosophy. As we’ll see in the coming chapters, for De Man, literature’s capacity to reflect on its own irony did free it from politics, while for Derrida just the opposite was the case. Nonetheless, the charge of irony served as a means of dismissing deconstruction as apolitical and unsuited to the pursuit of genuine philosophical inquiry. Both Richard Rorty and Hayden White in the 1970’s and 1980’s asserted as much in their critiques of

Derrida. Derrida proceeds to show how ... “seeing through” is impossible,” writes White. “But this disjunction of meaning from Being reveals the favored trope under which Derrida’s philosophizing (or antiphilosophizing) takes place. This trope is catachresis, the ironic trope par excellence.” For White this was a kind of philosophical sickness, the triumph of absurdist theory. For Rorty, it was a matter of choosing the private over the public, a literary narcissism which culminates in an endless hall of mirrors over philosophy, which Rorty suggests, not without some irony himself “is supposed to be made of sterner stuff and to stay out in the open.” While Rorty does not ultimately accept the distinction between philosophy as the public, serious and political discourse, and literature as the private, frivolous and apolitical domain, arguing himself for the role of literature as a means toward inculcating empathy and constructive self-doubt, both thinkers’ response to Derridean irony maps onto a standard narrative, in which irony would be a philosophical tool only in so far as it could be understood in Lear’s terms as a propaedeutic, guiding both its target and its audience toward virtue. The peril associated with unstable irony is its supposed lack of orientation.

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56 Rorty, 133. See also Simon Critchley’s essay “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” in Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity (London, Verso, 1999). Critchley opposes Rorty’s claim that deconstruction is apolitical by arguing that it is in so far as Derrida is loyal to a Levinas’s ethics and produces a politics out of a dedication to the idea of infinite responsibility to the other that he gains his political cogency. I differ from Critchley here by arguing that it is only by betraying Levinas, in and through his destabilizing irony—that for which Rorty would disqualify Derrida as political—that his work gains its political force.
57 For Derrida’s response to Rorty, see Deconstruction and Pragmatism, 81-82.
that a destabilizing irony implies a postmodern renunciation of public moral standards.\textsuperscript{58}

Thus between our two forms of irony, one stable, the other destabilizing we might seem to have two fairly poor options. One in which the ironist depends on the stability of her meaning and uses it to establish a space of cohesion but risks being misunderstood or having her interlocutor use her own irony against her. Another in which one grants the instability of irony and embraces its destabilizing powers and thus reduces communication to play, and thus irrelevance. One could argue that Levinas’s irony could be faulted for the former and Derrida for the later. But the later is only problematic if we assume that the act of destabilization is ultimately one that necessarily dissolves into free play and thus reduces discourse to nonsense. If the former irony is also a means of policing cultural boundaries and enforcing a communitarian ethic, might not its destabilization serve an emancipatory purpose?

If the target of irony is indeed the Alazon, the one who thinks he has not only the answers but also the right to decide who is on the side of virtue and who is not, then the very fact of irony’s destabilizing quality when understood as such would make it a propaedeutic of another sort, one which operates counter to a will to domination, counter to a will of discrimination and counter, indeed, to the logic of election, that concept so central to both Levinas’s philosophical and Jewish writings, the tie in fact that seems to bind the two forms of writing together.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{58} This fear which we can associate with Habermas’s critique of the postmodern (See “Modernity versus Postmodernity”) is described in relation to irony by Rorty in Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, 67.

Levinas himself participated in the presumption that Derrida’s work ultimately devolves into the less serious aesthetic realm. It was the source of his strongest words against Derrida, and a site of difference, which ultimately, he suggested, led to a parting of ways. Derrida on the other hand would insist on both his debt to Levinas and his gratitude. While at the same time revealing through his readings of Levinas that the dichotomy between stable irony and unstable irony cannot hold. What Levinas understood as a chiasmus, a crossing of the two thinkers, Derrida rethought in terms which imply further imbrication. As Derrida said at the colloque, he was “close to Emmanuel Levinas, near him, perhaps together with him … turned toward him.” But it was in fact the very turn of literature that made this proximity a very knowing betrayal, one aimed to dislocate the communitarian tendencies of both Levinas specifically and “religion” generally.

IV. The Chiasmus

Although Levinas could certainly be counted among the Twentieth Century French philosophers critiquing the tradition of western metaphysics, and arguing against “totality which dominates Western philosophy,” his critique was never at the expense of truth, but only in favor of an alternate source. What was lamentable for Levinas about Derrida’s philosophical project was its relentless drive toward subversion. In his 1973 essay on Derrida’s La Voix et le Phénomène, “Tout autrement,” he delineated between his own critical project and Derrida’s.

The desertion of presence, carried out to the point of desertion of the true, to the point of meanings that are no longer held to respond to the summons of Knowledge. Truth is no longer at the level of eternal or omnitemporal truth—but this is a relativism beyond historicism’s wildest dreams. An exile or casting adrift of Knowledge beyond skepticism,

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60 Levinas. Totality and Infinity, 21.
which remained enamored of truth, even if it did not feel itself capable of embracing it. Henceforth meanings do not converge on truth. Truth is not the main thing.\footnote{Levinas, “Jacques Derrida: Wholly otherwise,” \textit{Proper Names}, 57-58.}

Once again we meet with the sarcastic exclamation point, used to reveal the absurdity of the position just outlined. How indeed could truth not be the main thing? Levinas demanded in “Tout Autrement.” This essay continues the tradition between the two of working out a relation of proximity and critique. Like Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” it is simultaneously lauditory and scathing. It declares the radicality of Derrida’s departure from the tradition, and then just as Derrida resituated Levinas within the philosophical tradition, Levinas resituates Derrida. Does Derrida represent a new Copernican revolution, akin to Kant’s, Levinas asks? “Is it a new break in the history of philosophy. It would also show its continuity. This history of philosophy is probably nothing but a growing awareness of the difficulty of thinking.”

That said, Levinas recognized Derrida’s accomplishment, declaring his “deconstruction” of Husserl devastating. “At the outset, everything is in place; after a few pages or paragraphs of formidable calling into question, nothing is left inhabitable for thought.”\footnote{Levinas, \textit{Proper Names}, 36}

But there was a double edge to this high compliment. For mustn’t a thought be inhabitable if it is to represent a way forward? Even more ambivalent is the comment, “This is, all philosophical significance aside, a purely literary effect, a new frission, Derrida’s poetry.” Even as it continued to serve Levinas as a source for philosophical reflection in the postwar era, as an end Literature was suspect.\footnote{See “The Other in Proust,” \textit{Proper Names}. This essay which will be discussed further in chapter 3 is itself a product of reflections which Levinas recorded in his}

\footnote{Levinas, \textit{Proper Names}, 36}
\footnote{See “The Other in Proust,” \textit{Proper Names}. This essay which will be discussed further in chapter 3 is itself a product of reflections which Levinas recorded in his}
scent of a morbid frivolity. Eighteen years earlier in an essay on Blanchot, Levinas had
distanced himself from the literary vision as a response to philosophy’s ills in similar
terms. “The literary sphere into which Blanchot leads us…far from elucidating the world,
exposes the desolate, lightless substratum underlying it, and restores to our sojourn its
exotic essence, and to the wonders of our architecture, their function as makeshift desert
shelters…” This world, he continued, “is not nihilistic. But, in it, justice does not
condition truth.” 64 He went further with Derrida, comparing his deconstruction to the
1940 exodus, an event that preoccupied Levinas throughout the war, appearing repeatedly
in his journals as a moment that signified “not only the end of illusion, but the end of
meaning, when meaning itself appeared as an illusion. 65 Derrida’s own deconstruction
of Husserl is like a military invasion, unforeseeable and ruinous: “everything is torn
down [déconstruit] and left desolate: the houses closed up or abandoned with their doors
open or emptied of their inhabitants…”

The implications are clear. Levinas didn’t contest the validity of Derrida’s
deconstruction, but he did wonder whether the metaphysics of presence, the edifice that
Derrida tore down, hadn’t been the intellectual foundation for civilization. Literature or
poetry then would be akin to playing kick the can among the ruins.

In contrast, Levinas had already constructed a way forward, spied an alternate
means to retain transcendence and thus truth while still critiquing the autonomous and

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64 Ibid., 139. For more on the relationship between Levinas and Blanchot, see The
Figural Jew, chapter 4.

65 Levinas, Carnets de Captivité, 132.
transparent subject. Like Derrida, Levinas also found in Husserl’s analysis of the sign, in the distinction between *expression* [Ausdruck] and *indication* [Anzeichen] a means for rethinking the metaphysics of presence. Already in 1964, in the essay “Meaning and Sense,” Levinas, building off his discussion of signification in *Totality and Infinity*, mobilized Husserl’s distinction to rethink the notion of expression. For Levinas the function of expression, which “hitherto was taken either to serve as means of communication or to transform the world in view of our needs” was now rethought as “a relationship with him to whom I express the expression and whose presence is already required for my cultural gesture of expression to be produced.” Expression found its locus of meaning not in what was said but in the act of speaking to another.

The new locus of truth was the Other, not as one present to me, not as the site of a will I can decipher, but as a trace. In the concept of the trace, Husserl’s two types of signs--expression [Ausdruck] and indication [Anzeichen], converge. For if the meaning of the expression is the Other, the face of the other also communicates as trace, which like Husserl’s conception of an indication signifies without pointing to the willed intention of the speaker. The face of the other overflows my intention and points beyond itself to an absence. As trace, the face can be compared to “the fingerprints left by someone who wanted to wipe away his traces and carry out a perfect crime. He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. For he has passed absolutely.”

In “Meaning and Sense” Levinas developed this idea in a theological direction.

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66 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 40
67 Ibid, 52. Levinas is also addressing here Merleau-Ponty's *Signs* (1960).
68 Ibid., 62.
through the notion of *Illeity*, such that the Other in his transcendence points toward “the God who passed” of Exodus 33. From an analysis of signification, the same source from which Derrida derived his conception of literature, Levinas derived a conception of religion.

Taking up in “Tout Autrement” the passage in *La Voix et le phenomène* that states, “In fact, in real communicative, etc. discourse, expression yields its place to indication, because...the sense intended by another and, in a general way, the lived-experience of another are not and can never be present in person,” Levinas demanded “whence the sign from which the presence that is lacking to itself is made, or the inassemblable diachrony from which creatureliness is made?” His answer, “It does not begin as a said.” but comes from the Other. “What appears truly in deconstructive analysis as a lacking to self is not *the surplus*...but the *better* of proximity, an excellence, an elevation, the ethics of before being, or the Good beyond Being, to quote and ancient author.”

Thus in “Tout Autrement,” Levinas offered his own answer to the question of the nature of the two thinker’s proximity. They cross paths. Levinas refers to this as a Chiasmus, a point of meeting at the site of their critique of the metaphysics of presence. But even this description we must read with a view to its irony. For the consequences of both their critique would have to entail the impossibility of the coincidence of meeting. For Levinas this impossibility of co-existence points beyond, to the transcendence of an absent God. For Derrida it incites a movement of deferment, but one that is not devoid of ethical and political implications.

One of the most striking moments in *Voice and Phenomenon* is Derrida’s analysis

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69 Ibid., 61
of Husserl’s treatment of the first-person pronoun I. Derrida points out that particularly problematic for Husserl’s prioritization of expression is the pronoun I. Despite the fact that it is supposed to indicate the site of the will, as an “essentially occasional” expression, one which must be reoriented “each time to the occasion, to the person who is speaking, or his situation,” it marks a site for Husserl in which indication penetrates. Furthermore, to maintain its status as sign, the pronoun must stand in for a missing object of discourse. But if in this case, that missing object is indeed myself as speaker, must I not then refer to my own absence? Thus concludes Derrida, “writing is not able to come as added onto speech because as soon as speech awakens, writing has doubled it by animating it.”

This element of discourse pointed Derrida toward a principle of hospitality, such that language’s repeatability must welcome what comes, whether in the form of death or the appearance of the stranger. From here it is not difficult to glimpse Derrida’s path toward literature as a discourse that dislocates its relation to fact in order to welcome its occupation by anyone who “picks up and reads.” But this is also a site that allows us to see in Levinas the importance of recognizing what he calls in Otherwise than being, “le Dire,” “the saying.”

One can almost conclude that Levinas was addressing Derrida when he wrote in the opening pages of Otherwise than Being,

Saying is precisely not a game. Anterior to the verbal signs that it conjugates, anterior to linguistic systems and to semantic glimmerings—a forward preceding languages [avant-propos des langues]—it is proximity of the one to the other, the commitment of approach, the one for the other…

He concedes that “the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology is the price that manifestation demands.” The functioning of signs thus

70 Derrida, Voice and Phenomenon, 83.
demands that the pronoun “I” refers indeed to the absence of the speaker, but he insists, Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, “this outside of being, this ex-ception to being, as though being’s other were an event of being.” The act of speaking allows us to manifest the face to face relation in the act of speaking, to haunt the place of absence signified by the speaking “I” in a scandal that is the animating force of one person speaking to another.

This is not a dynamic that Derrida wished to deny, in fact he insisted, particularly in Adieu on his deep respect for it.\textsuperscript{71} At the same time his reading of Levinas illustrates that this dynamic always gives way to a speaking for another, or in the place of an other, a dynamic which Derrida himself named “hospitality,” a word which for Derrida in the French already contains the undecideability and interchangeability of the hôte, both the guest and the host. Derrida dramatized this element of language in the text, written a year after the author’s death, by announcing his own intrusion into Levinas’s discourse. Again and again we find phrases such as, “Levinas never puts it this way”\textsuperscript{72} or “Levinas would probably not say it in this way, but could it not be argued that…”\textsuperscript{73} or “Though Levinas never puts it in these terms, I will risk…”\textsuperscript{74} What Derrida aimed to illustrate in these pages was that the “third arrives without waiting.”\textsuperscript{75} Picking up on the term Illeity which Levinas used to signal the absent God, the transcendence which returns Truth to philosophy after the metaphysics of presence, Derrida exploited the ambiguity of the pronoun to suggest that this third person is always the other other, the absent other, the

\textsuperscript{71} See the opening pages of "A Word of Welcome" particularly p. 18.
\textsuperscript{72} Derrida, Adieu, 34
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 24
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 33
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 29.
anyone towards which my discourse always points. What for Levinas was avowedly the scandal of the “the saying” is also a perjury. Derrida had already shown in *Voice and Phenomenon*, the “I” is always a perjury; every oath is already corrupted by the fact that I announce my own duplicity the moment that I speak. The implication for Levinas’s thought was to expose that the face-to-face, even if granted as the scandalous return of expression into language, could never be purified of the drift of indication, of the third person who must be inferred by the occasional quality of language itself, that third person who can always take up and read.

**V. The last word**

What we have shown so far in this opening chapter is that the proximity between Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Levinas of which Derrida spoke at the 1998 Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs was both biographical and philosophical and that this manifested itself in a pointed use of irony on both their parts but for different purposes. Philosophically Derrida and Levinas reached their closest proximity in their respective critiques of Husserl’s analysis of signification in *Logical Investigations I*. In many ways this site was a crossroads, sending Derrida toward literary discourse and Levinas toward ethics and ultimately religion. But for Derrida religion and literature could not themselves be separated.

While the biographical and historical dimensions as well as the philosophical and political implications of each thinker’s trajectories will be worked out in the coming chapters, what remains to be done here is to show that Derrida imposed upon the image of the chiasmus, a further relation, a parasitic subversion which refuses to allow either Levinas or his religion to have the last word.
One can take this quite literally in the case of the 1980 essay “En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici.” This text, composed for a volume dedicated to Levinas, ends with a strange dialogue, itself a gesture toward investing the text with the dimension of the saying. Its very last word would appear to be a command, “Bois [drink].” It ends thus with a direct address, an act of service, a gesture for the other. However, it is unclear who the speakers are or what they are referencing. Even the pronouns are ambiguous. And the command itself could be read otherwise, as a noun and thus “bois” translated as wood. The dialogue begins with the lines:

--Here at this very moment I roll up the body of our interlaced voices faulty consonants vowels accents in this manuscript—I must put it in the earth for you—come bend down our gestures will have had the in consolation slowness suitable to the gift as if it were necessary to delay the endless falling due of a repetition—it is our mute infant a girl perhaps of an incest stillborn to an incest promised one will never know

Earlier in the essay Derrida discusses Levinas’s “The Name of God according to some Talmudic Texts,” in which he describes the practice of burying a manuscript with a faulty spelling of God’s name. “Bois,” the last word could indeed indicate the wood pulp of the page, of the manuscript.

Simon Critchley imagines the scene in much more concrete terms as a scene interposed on the essay: “a woman and a man leaning over the grave; the man, the older of the two, plunges his hands into the earth and takes his still born daughter in his arms: Bois [drink].”

Alternately, I would presume given its context within the essay, that Derrida is here addressing Levinas, what they have created together: the trace, an act of incest, given that Derrida positions himself as the son and the feminine lover. As John Llewelyn

76 Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction, 141.
points out in his reading of the passage, what the text dramatizes most clearly is the author’s absence, that no one will assist me in getting to the last word. But this is also a gift and a responsibility for the reader, for whom it is left with its ambiguous pronouns, to be taken up and read, by another, by Critchley, Llewelyn or me, reinvested with an alternative narrative, one in which the drift of indication disallows the last word.

In the position of the name of God, whose burial Levinas described in his Talmudic reading, and which Derrida cites in the essay, Derrida places the trace, la trace, about which we can imagine him saying to Levinas in the dialogue that concludes the text, “She does not speak the unnamed one yet you hear her better than me, before me.”

For Derrida then, Levinas’s work always demanded by its very principle, commentary, distortion, the parasitism of the other reader, of Derrida who performed the role of son implied by Levinas’s notion of paternity. This point can be argued on multiple levels: 1) Every text, by the principle of textuality demands to be read, in such a way that it its “vouloir dire” is always already compromised. Irony, in some sense, is always already at work. 2) Levinas’s philosophy, his notion of the trace implies the concept of hospitality, and indeed requires it by the rigor of its own concepts 3) Derrida’s notion of literature as the “pardon for not meaning to say,” is the inheritor of a biblical covenant, whose central concept is election, a principle which it both betrays and in so doing asks for forgiveness for its constitutional betrayal. Finally, for Derrida it was this dynamic between the two thinkers which allowed him to relate to his own Judaism. By exploiting the fissures within Levinas’s philosophy he was able to disrupt its

77 See John Llewelyn’s reading of the dialogue in Appositions of Jacques Derrida. Llewelyn reads it as a poem, modeled on the Song of Songs, also discussed by Derrida in the essay, a kind of liturgical gesture whose function is to “question viva voce every fisible anatomic atom.” (162-163).
communitarian tendencies and use it as a site to work out a political vision predicated on its ruins.

VI. **All the rest is literature**

Eighteen years after “En ce moment meme,” in 1998 Derrida once again considered the relationship between the name of God and Levinas’s ethics by quoting one of Levinas’s Talmudic readings, this one given in 1963, also at the colloque, on the tractate *Yoma*.

The respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the eternal form a strange equivalence. And all the rest is a dead letter. All the rest is literature…The image of God is better honored in the right given to the stranger than in symbols. Universalism…bursts the letter apart, for it lay, explosive, within the letter.\(^78\)

Derrida did not quote this passage in order to discuss the role of literature in Levinas’s texts but rather to argue that Levinas saw the connection between Jewish universalism and respect for the other. He quoted it in the service of suggesting that there was a germ in Levinas’s philosophy for understanding the very resistance to community inscription that Derrida felt so profoundly, particularly in Algeria in the 1940’s. He quoted it in the service of counseling for a kind of Vigilance against all the risks of the “living together” of the Jews, be they of a symbiotic type (naturalized, birth, blood, soil, nation) or conventional (state juridical, in the modern sense): a certain communitarianism, a certain Zionism, a certain nationalism and all that can follow as to the motifs of filiation through blood, appropriation of the place and the motif of election.\(^79\)

That such a sentiment was far from Levinas’s own stated concerns--Levinas who had devoted much of his energy in the postwar period toward cultivating Jewish communitarianism, lauding the return by Jewish youth to studying Judaism’s great books,

\(^{78}\) Levinas, *Quatre Lectures talmudique*, p. 61

\(^{79}\) “Avowing,” 29
arguing for the spiritual exigencies of Zionism—did not seem to trouble Derrida. For the point of Derrida misreading should now be clear: If indeed, “all the rest is literature” this is the space that Derrida chose to inhabit and, in the meantime, he jostled the stable structures of meaning upon which Levinas depended, transforming Levinas’s work thus into literature. His own essay feeds off of Levinas as a “parasitism” or “vampirism” a process which Derrida describes at length in “Literature in Secret,” as a procedure that Kafka himself performs on his father by way of the “Letter to my father.” “It is therefore in the name of the name of the father—a name that is paralyzed, parasited, vampirized by what the son produces that almost amounts to literature.”

It is striking in fact that Derrida subtitled his essay at the colloque, “a lesson” when Levinas himself repeatedly referred to his Talmudic readings as “Les leçons Talmudique.” Derrida only omitted the canonical referent in his own text, severing the context and thus ironizing the form. In fact insofar as there was some kind of scriptural referent here it was Levinas’s own readings that occupied the canonical position.

By quoting Levinas’s reading from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yoma, Derrida himself seemed to be imitating and ironizing a rabbinic motif. For like the rabbis who often quote only a fragment of a prooftext, leaving sometimes the most significant element of it implicit, Derrida too began his citation of Levinas with an important omission. Levinas’s paragraph begins, “To punish children for the faults of their parents

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81 Given that the majority of the text is itself on Kierkegaard, one has to wonder whether Derrida had Kierkegaard’s own image of the Vampire from *The Concept of Irony* (261) in mind here. Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 185; *Gift of Death*, 139,
is less dreadful than to tolerate impunity when the stranger is injured.”\textsuperscript{82} The child according to Levinas’s reading of the Talmud passage can be held accountable for the sin of the parent. Or as Derrida no doubt read this line, the child can and will be reinscribed into the tribe to the point of suffering.

Derrida saw himself in the context of both the colloque and the Jewish community more broadly as the child who was held accountable against his will, an Isaac figure. This is a point he emphasized throughout his presentation at the colloque. He refers to himself repeatedly as “the Jewish child,” and as “the child of whom I speak.”\textsuperscript{83}

But even as he resisted his reinscription into the community on one level, I want to emphasize that on another level there is a point upon which Levinas and Derrida agreed: Responsibility precedes accountability. If this is the centerpiece of Levinassian ethics, then Derrida was its most adamant supporter. And it is out of his loyalty to this Levinassian principle, in fact that he called Levinas’s communitarian allegiances into question.

At the same time, however, Derrida insisted on the violence of inscription, on the violence of the very act of election. Derrida’s point thus seems to be that without disavowing inscription one can occupy it differently, by mobilizing the element of betrayal that is already as proper to the covenantal relation as the act of inscription. For Derrida that is exactly the role of literature: “inheritor and traitor,” as he writes in “Literature in Secret,” parodying the very form of covenant or contract, as every act of literature does according to Derrida:

> Be it understood that literature surely inherits from a holy history within which

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{82} Quatre Lectures talmudique, 60-61.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} Derrida, “Avouer—L'impossible,” 186, 195, 198, 199
\end{itemize}
the Abrahamic moment remains the essential secret (and who would deny that literature remains a religious remainder [reste un reste de religion], a link and a relay for what is sacrosanct in a society without God?), but it also denies this history, this appurtenance, this heritage. It denies that affiliation. It betrays it in the double sense of the word: it is unfaithful to it, it breaks with it at the moment of manifesting its “truth” and of unveiling its secret. To know its own filiation: impossibile possibility. This “truth” rests on the condition of a denial whose possibility was already implied by the binding of Isaac.\footnote{Derrida, Gift of Death, 157.}

Derrida doesn’t reference the role of irony in this description of literature’s religious legacy, perhaps because the notion of irony has multiple trajectories—Socratic, Romantic, Kierkegaardian—some of which he treats in his work. Even in these brief references however and in their multiplicity it is possible to locate a parallel between his claims for what literature does to the covenant and what irony does to its context.

Irony, in particular Socratic irony, consists in not saying anything, in not stating any knowledge, but it means doing that in order to interrogate, to have someone or something speak or think. \textit{Eironeia} dissimulates, it is the act of questioning by feigning ignorance by pretending.\footnote{Ibid., 77.}

There is an affinity to the role of literature here: the disjunction from knowledge. Socratic irony however would imply that one is still the subject who knows, whose silence has depth and content, a secret that can be revealed. Derrida compares this irony to what Kierkegaard says about Abraham’s irony when Isaac asks who will provide the lamb for the burnt offering: “His response to Isaac is in the form of irony, for it is always irony when I say something and still do not say anything.” But Abraham’s irony, Derrida suggests is “metarhetorical.” His is the silence of one who does not know. Nonetheless “his nonknowledge doesn’t in any way suspend his own decision, which remains resolute.” With the shift from Socratic irony to “metarhetorical” or “Abrahamic” irony, Derrida moved irony from a site of knowledge to nonknowledge. In the process he
situated irony as the condition par excellence of the subject faced with undecideability:

Such, in fact, is the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, its conclusion or explication. It structurally breaches knowledge and is thus destined to nonmanifestation; a decision is, in the end, always secret.\textsuperscript{86}

With this description he also tied himself to Hegel’s description of irony in \textit{The Philosophy of Right}, touched on briefly in \textit{Glas}. Hegel’s description of ironic consciousness, however, is tied to the subject’s capacity to \textit{transcend} the law, to “Virtuosity, Genius.” Derrida, in contrast, associated the aporetic decision rather with an anarchic irony, which he linked to Antigone, or “‘the eternal irony’ of the woman.”\textsuperscript{87}

It was in response to Rorty’s accusation that Derrida’s work devolves into literature that Derrida was in fact clearest both about the status of irony for his work and the role of literature. At the center of this discussion is the status of the quasi-transcendental, the locution that Derrida applied, following Gasché, to his fundamental concepts, such as trace, difference, archi-writing.” Derrida used these concepts to account for the conditions of possibility of experience and yet Derrida did not assign them transcendental status because they are neither originary nor can they ever be isolated, but only register in their effects. “When I say that quasi-transcendentality is at once ironic and serious, I am being sincere,” he said.\textsuperscript{88} And while such a statement in its irony certainly belied its expressed intention, it is clear that Derrida resisted treating irony as Rorty does, as a means of disinvolving oneself from the political and philosophical stakes of one’s claims. Rather it was a means of taking up one’s responsibility.

\textsuperscript{86} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 79.
\textsuperscript{87} Derrida, \textit{Glas}, 190.
\textsuperscript{88} Deconstruction and Pragmatism, 83.
[I]t is in order to avoid empiricism, positivism and psychologism that it is endlessly necessary to renew transcendental questioning. But such questioning must be renewed in taking account of the possibility of fiction, of accidentality, and contingency, thereby ensuring that this new form of transcendental questioning only mimics the phantom of classical transcendental seriousness without renouncing that which, within this phantom constitutes an essential heritage.

This description maps on to the relation we have been tracing between Derrida and Levinas. It is out of a sense of devotion to the principle of election at the heart of Levinas’s philosophy that Derrida mimicked it, ironized it and betrayed it. In this passage, fiction is named as a possibility along the lines of accidentality and contingency. But additionally as an “institution of recent invention” it represents an analogous procedure to irony for relating to the quasi-transcendental. In the final pages of “Literature in Secret” Derrida describes literature as “a passive-and-active commitment not-to-be-able-to-mean-say,” thus echoing his description of Abrahamic irony. Similarly literature is not the romantic freedom from commitment or obedience before the law but a bondage to an aporetic reality.

*Gift of Death* is a text in which Derrida read Levinas and Kierkegaard against each other in order to expose the aporia at the heart of the ethical relation, but also at the heart of any and every site of election. Can one respond to the demand of election or inscription—one cannot but respond, Derrida insisted—and be faithful to the metarhetorical irony of Abraham’s response to Isaac? For Derrida this was indeed the promise of literature and the obligation that Derrida took up as a means of expressing his fidelity to Levinas.

“What would literature have to do with the testamentary secret of this “pardon for

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89 *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 84.
not meaning (to say)…” with the inheritance of this promise and this betrayal, with the forswearing that haunts this oath?” Derrida asked in “Literature in Secret.” Rephrased in ethical terms, this question asks, “how can one respond to the illeity that haunts every face-to-face relation?” Derrida’s description of literature as “a link to and relay for what is sacrosanct in a society without God,” which nonetheless “betrays it in the double sense of the word” is equally a description of Derrida’s own relation to Levinas: a betrayal, that is equally an act of fidelity.

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This chapter is neither the first word nor the last on Levinas and Derrida and their relation to each other, to religion or to literature. In what follows I consider how and why the categories of religion and literature came to hold their respective values for Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida but also I consider the political implications of their choices. In the next chapter we will trace out the relations between philosophy, religion and literature on the French scene in the years leading up to Levinas and Derrida’s first encounter in 1963. In the process we will consider how Levinas’s model of religion came about by pitting it against literature which had already emerged on the French intellectual scene as a competing interruptive discourse. Chapter three returns to Levinas and Derrida’s first encounter in order to show how Derrida’s intervention into this conversation makes Levinas and his own return to Judaism as “un difficile liberté” a foil against which Derrida constructs a conception of freedom for which literature is source and model. In chapter four I show the political implications of the modern institution of literature for Derrida and the ways in which for him it was thought
consistently in relation to both religion and philosophy. In the final chapter, I map out the theoretical implications of this narrative, arguing that in the story of these two thinkers’ negotiations, we find the means for constructing a method that develops the field of Religion and Literature so that these terms relate beyond apposition. We will return here to the notion of the ironic dimension to argue that literature, as philosophy’s rival inheritor of the west’s religious legacy defines itself by cultivating the very indeterminacies that modern philosophy would--theoretically at least--seek to shed. Against the view that this dimension excludes literature from the public sphere, we will argue to the contrary that especially insofar as irony involves the social dimensions of language, the field of religion and literature as a field which studies and maps these relations would be intrinsically political.