IN PROXIMITY

ON HILAN BENSUSAN'S *INDEXICALISM*

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers Hilan Bensusan's *Indexicalism* as a speculative realist take on the philosophy of Emanuel Levinas. I show how Bensusan extends Levinas' encounter with the Other to all perceptual encounters that a situated subject has with multiple other entities, including nonhuman ones. I then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Bensusan's admittedly paradoxical approach. I conclude by considering how Bensusan's account of the asymmetry between the subject and the multiple others who address it relates to Joseph Libertson's account of Levinas, and to the difficult configurations that Libertson explores in his novels written under the pseudonym of Joseph Glass.

KEYNOTES: Bensusan; Levinas; Joseph Libertson; Joseph Glass; Indexicalism; Proximity

I felt refreshed and enlivened by reading Hilan Bensusan's *Indexicalism*. A cousin of my ex-wife once said that, after a long period of disillusionment, Jonathan Larson's *Rent* had restored her faith in the theater. I want to say, in a somewhat similar way, that *Indexicalism* restored, after a long time, if not my *faith* in philosophy, than at the very least my enjoyment of it, and my commitment to it. *Indexicalism* is a stimulus to thought, and it led me both to return to things that I hadn't thought about in a long time, and to take up ideas that I had not considered before.

I should add a warning to this, however: I am not a philosopher. I am rather what you might call a *fictionalist*. David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan define *fictioning* as "the writing… of worlds or social bodies that mark out trajectories different to those engendered by the dominant organizations of life currently in existence" (Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019). This means, pragmatically, that I do not write about the world (or about what is the case), but rather about what might

be different.

This also means that I do not attempt to ground my speculative formulations in solid arguments. As Alfred North Whitehead once notoriously observed, "it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true" (Whitehead 1978, 259). I hope, at the very least, that my suggestions here are interesting, in the ways that they follow out from Bensusan's book. My aim is to push these suggestions as far and as hard as I can, shaking and rattling them, in order to see where they might lead me. If I am successful in doing this, my achievement will be akin to that of a good science fiction novel – rather than to that of a good philosophical treatise such as the book I am discussing.

I regard *Indexicalism* as a speculative realist take on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. But I also worry that this might be an overstatement. Bensusan in fact begins his book with a discussion of speculative realism. But he also questions whether speculation is an adequate framework for what he is trying to do. The book follows a speculative line that puts into question the grandiose claims in which speculation all too often indulges. For Bensusan worries, rightly, that "speculation proceeds through projecting more of the same, like a mirror, which cannot reveal anything but what is already there" (Bensusan 2021, 95).

Is there a way to pursue speculation without simply projecting onto the world what I already hope to find there? This is the real concern behind Kant's effort to reign in speculation. Kant is often ridiculed as a bureaucrat of the law, who seeks to impose rules and limits everywhere. But this approach is ungenerous and wrong. Kant sought to limit speculation because he did not want it to impose its visions everywhere, exterminating the mysterious otherness of things in themselves. Kant was right to have this worry, since such an internalization and erasure of difference is precisely what his inheritors – most notably Hegel – ended up doing. Bensusan's form of speculative realism – like Graham Harman's otherwise quite dissimilar form, and also, I hope, like the fictionalism that I pursue here – seeks to develop a mode of speculation that leaves things open, instead of obliterating everything in its path.

Bensusan's largest claim is that a "view from nowhere," or a "theory of everything," is never possible. All knowledges, and all experiences, are local and *situated*. Every experience that I have involves an encounter with something that impinges upon my own situation, but that is also located elsewhere, outside my

own situation, and irreducible to it. Subjective experience and objective knowledge alike can only exist at one or another particular place. Both knowledge and experience have a certain *aboutness* to them; they must involve particular references to particular other things in their vicinity.

The basic categories of Being are therefore – in grammatical terms – **indexicals**: words like *now*, *then*, *this*, *that*, *here*, *there*, and *beyond*. These are words that *point*, and that therefore have different referents and different implications in different contexts. There is no way that I can unify all these references and make them cohere. There is also no way that I can abstract all these references away, in order to be left with an autopoietic, self-referential system like those that Saussure posited for language, Varela for biological organisms, or Luhmann for social organization. In Levinasian terms, all these totalizing strategies fail, and I am left instead face-to-face with an infinitude to whose demands I can never adequately reply.

Such an approach leads us to what Bensusan calls a *paradoxico-metaphysics*: the metaphysical assertion that the universal characteristic of Being is that it is not capable of being assigned any universal characteristic. It is universally the case that nothing can be universally the case, because everything is situated and referential, and therefore everything is limited. This means that the world is fundamentally dissymmetrical.

The best analogy that I can think of for this comes from Christopher Priest's 1974 science fiction novel *The Inverted World*. In this novel, the city that is the protagonist's actual location in space and time – his inertial frame of reference – is at the asymptote of a pseudosphere: an "optimum" point of maximum density from which the rest of the world stretches away with negative curvature. As things get further and further away from the protagonist's own "standing location," they are more and more harshly distorted by relativistic effects. In the novel, this singularity stands in stark contrast with the familiar Earth whose curvature is positive rather than negative, with a sufficiently gentle slope that Euclidean-Newtonian categories apply over short distances. But the dissymmetrical world of Levinas and Bensusan is one in which *every* "standing location" is a singularity of the sort depicted in Priest's novel. This incompatibility of inertial reference frames leads to the paradox of impossible generalization that Bensusan describes.

Most philosophers would reject Bensusan's paradoxico-metaphysics, on the

ground that it involves a performative contradiction, and thereby disqualifies itself. You are not supposed to say that 'everything is relative', for instance: because such a statement is itself an absolute one, and therefore contradicts its own claim for relativism. Bensusan is entirely right to reject the blackmail of such a call to order, and instead to embrace the paradoxicality of his own assertions. Indeed, I take it as a general rule of thumb (not an absolute law, but a heuristic) that, if you make a general metaphysical statement *without* falling into some sort of performative contradiction, this is a good sign that you are cheating somewhere. You are most likely ignoring aberrant cases, or presuming to explain them away.

With the help of Levinas, this can be restated in less provocative terms. To expunge the perils of performative contradiction is to reduce the Saying to the Said – Bensusan invokes this Levinasian formulation several times in the course of *Indexicalism*. For Levinas, the act of Saying "is not exhausted" by the meaning of what is said (Levinas 1974, 144). There is always something more in the Saying, something not contained in the statement's content. This is the source of performative contradiction. For Levinas, the Saying "imprints its trace" (Levinas 1974, 46) on what is said – and thereby diverts and discomposes it . Or to use the terminology that Bensusan borrows from Derrida, everything that is said harbors a *supplement* that cannot itself be said, but that affects and changes whoever speaks and listens. Transmission gives us more than just a message.

This is why the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* was wrong to proclaim that "what we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 1974, proposition 7). In fact, there is nothing else to talk about: we can *only* discuss that which we cannot rightly speak about. This applies as much to a chat about which flavor of ice cream you like the best as it does to abstruse philosophical disputation. Wittgenstein himself implicitly admits the necessity of not remaining silent in his later work, and notably in the *Philosophical Investigations*. We find a similar dynamic in Derrida's career. In his early essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics" (published in *Writing and Difference*), Derrida argues, in effect, that Levinas is right about everything – except that *one cannot say* what Levinas is trying to say, for the very workings of language, and of metaphysics, forbid it. We should not be surprised that, in his later work, Derrida increasingly emulates Levinas, recapitulating his lessons on ethics, and returning to this paradox from the other

side. Like Wittgenstein, Derrida ultimately finds himself writing incessantly about what he has demonstrated that you cannot write about.

I have already said that *Indexicalism* strikes me as a speculative realist revision of Levinas. What I mean by this is that Bensusan dehumanizes and deanthropocentrizes Levinas, just as other speculative realist thinkers dehumanize and deanthropocentrize previous thinkers. Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology, for instance, entirely endorses Kant's distinction between noumena (things in themselves) and phenomena; only Harman rejects Kant's claim that this is uniquely a dilemma for human beings. Instead, Harman sees noumena "as the ungraspable terms of *every* relation, including those between fire and cotton or raindrops and tar" (Harman 2018, 261).

Bensusan similarly extends Levinas' philosophy beyond the human. Levinas seems to say that only a human being can have a Face and be an Other, because (supposedly) only human beings can speak and respond. Derrida famously, and painstakingly, questions why Levinas seems unwilling to approach nonhuman animals (such as cats and snakes) similarly as Others. Bensusan, however, cuts right through this entire disputation, proposing a "cosmological" stance, according to which any entity whatsoever, whether human or not, whether living or not, is a "transcending Other" in relation to any other (Bensusan 2021, 80 and 156). Every entity is situated in a particular "standing location"; and whatever other entity it encounters transcends this location. Even the simplest act of perception is already more than itself, "an affair of traces and supplements" (164).

In other words, Levinas' idea of exteriority – or of the infinity that is prior to Being and otherwise than Being – is not just a matter of the (human) Other, or of encountering a human Face. Rather, for Bensusan, the idea of infinity applies indiscriminately to all experience whatsoever. Simply by being located or situated – as I cannot avoid being – I am interpellated by the Other, and obliged by the Other. Or rather, for Bensusan: I am not interpellated by "the Other", so much as I am addressed pluralistically by many others. I am invested, not by one particular interlocutor, but rather by an indefinite number of them. Bensusan calls this the *Great Outdoors*, adapting a phrase from Ray Brassier's English translation of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*. (In French, Meillassoux's phrase is "le Grand Dehors"). The result of this is that Bensusan gets rid of the capital "O" of "the Other" (or, in French, the capital "A" of "l'Autre"), and writes

instead of "the metaphysics of the others" (with a small "o"). I am not interpellated by the Face of the Other who is "stranger, widow, and orphan" as Levinas claims (Levinas 1961, 244), so much as I am confronted by anything and everything around me – by all the (small "o") others.

Bensusan writes that Levinas' approach "is a blueprint that can be revised to focus on the very fabric of exteriority by way of alterity" (Bensusan 2021, 80). I applaud this speculative realist extension of Levinas's thought. But at the same time, I am not sure that Bensusan follows through on all the consequences that may result from this extension. For Bensusan, I encounter otherness in every act of perception, and indeed already in the very fact of having a sensorium. As a devotee of Whitehead, I am not perturbed by the way that this approach incorporates what Bensusan calls "Whitehead's pan-perceptualism": the idea that every entity, living or not, "is capable of feeling, or rather capable of being affected" (Bensusan 2121, 135), even if I prefer David Ray Griffin's coinage *pan-experientialism* for this assertion (Griffin 1997). In broadening perception in this manner, Bensusan rejects the traditional empiricism that sees perception as merely the inert reception of atomistic impressions. Instead, Bensusan defines perception in Levinasian-Derridian terms, as a process in which "interiority is open to supplements and can therefore be resituated by being affected by what is beyond"(Bensusan 2021, 124).

However, Bensusan's extension of the ethical encounter from Levinas' singular capital "O" Other to the generalized pluralism of "the others" has consequences that he doesn't entirely address. I am thinking here especially of Levinas' account, in *Totality and Infinity*, of what he calls "enjoyment" (*jouissance*) or "living from…". When Levinas writes of "the primordial positivity of enjoyment, perfectly innocent," that "suffices to itself from the first" (Levinas 1961, 145), he is delineating a vastly different sort of experience from that of the ethical encounter with the Other. For Levinas, "the other metaphysically desired is not 'other' like the bread I eat… I can 'feed' on these realities and to a great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them." In contrast, Levinas writes, "metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*" (33).

Bensusan knowingly loses this contrast when he expands Levinas' account of the human Other, or of metaphysical desire, by seeing its tensions and obligations

already at work in any and all experience – any and all subjectivity or interiority – whatsoever. Bensusan explicitly says, in opposition to Levinas' distinction, that "fruition and interruption do not belong to separate spheres of sensibility," and that there is "no principled way to distinguish between them" (Bensusan 2021, 157). There is no such thing as simple enjoyment in such circumstances. This is arguably a move that Levinas himself ought to have made. This extension beyond the human is absolutely necessary in our current time of planetary emergency due to anthropogenic climate change. The irony of what has been called the Anthropocene is precisely that, in such circumstances, we cannot afford to be anthropocentric any longer. We are affecting nonhuman others in indefensible ways, whose outcomes we cannot predict – aside from knowing that, in one form or another, these changes can and will redound back upon ourselves.

Moreover, it is crucial to remind ourselves that – with the exception of photosynthesizing plants – a living thing's "primordial positivity of enjoyment" is obligatorily predatory. This life – my own life – is destructive of other life. When it comes to human and animal organisms, the *jouissance* of "living from…" is never "innocent." When I "feed" on "the bread I eat," I am already engaged in something more extreme. I am a devourer. When I witness the mortality of the Other, Levinas writes, "it is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving" (Levinas 1974, 91). Bensusan implicitly extends this guilt to the simple act of sustaining myself. Even in the most primordial enjoyment, I already find myself in the condition of "infinite responsibility towards what is exterior" (Bensusan 2021, 50) – a responsibility to whose demands I am never equal. Bensusan describes perception as a call, and an opening, to practices of *hospitality*. But it actually strikes me as something much more painful, disturbing, and even sinister: "to have sensoria open to the world is to be vulnerable to incitements and to lures. Perception is where I am hostage to the others" (153).

The key term here, I think, is *proximity*, which takes on increasing importance in the latter pages of Bensusan's book. The word *proximity* connotes nearness without identity. What is proximate is close to me; it can be almost too close, suffocatingly close. "I cannot dispense with what is in my proximity," Bensusan says. (Bensusan 2021, 53). And yet I also cannot assimilate this proximity to myself. It remains irreducibly different from me, and not subject to my whims. As Bensusan wonderfully puts it at one point, "proximity does not come from any

substantive description of my position; it is defined by what can knock at my door" (168). I cannot even categorize the proximate properly, for "proximity is indifferent to thematisation and often runs counter to it" (55).

In other words, whatever is proximate refuses intelligibility or categorization. It is like something that is too close to my eye for me to be able to view it properly. I think of that moment, during my yearly appointment with the ophthalmologist, when I am given the *tonometry* test: an apparatus actually touches and presses against my cornea, in order to record my intraocular pressure. If that pressure is too high, then I am in danger of losing my sight altogether. The eyes generally see objects at a distance; but here that relationship is inverted, and the object pushes back against the eye. This is proximity.

Bensusan says both that proximity "has to do with responsibility"; and that it also "has to do with vulnerability to surroundings" (Bensusan 2021, 55). Responsibility means that I am accountable to the Other who addresses me, making a demand that I can refuse, and indeed that I cannot fulfill – but that I also cannot ignore. Vulnerability means that, even as I refuse this demand, the sheer fact of the Other's proximity – its more-than-presence – affects me nonetheless. I am powerless before it. This combination of responsibility and vulnerability makes for a strange, suffocating tension: the sort of condition that is dramatized in many Edgar Allan Poe stories. My selfhood is bound to – and indeed is entirely dependent upon – something that *situates* it, but that also forever eludes it. Bensusan states this condition, without acknowledging its full horror, when he writes that "interiorities are situated, tied to engagements; they are never hovering everywhere. They are always somewhere" (55).

The concept of proximity comes, of course, from Levinas. And Levinas overtly conceives proximity in anthropocentric terms; he writes that "its absolute and proper meaning presupposes 'humanity.'" And yet, Levinas also insists that proximity is irreducible to consciousness, and therefore also to any sort of phenomenology:

> Proximity is not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest… Proximity does not resolve into the consciousness a being would have of another being that it would judge to be near inasmuch as the other would be under one's eyes or within one's reach, and inasmuch as it would be possible for one to take hold of that being, hold on to it or converse with it, in the reciprocity of handshakes, caresses, struggle, collaboration, commerce, conversation. (Levinas

1974, 82)

This astonishing passage is a crux of Levinas' philosophy. On the one hand, Levinas insists on centering "humanity", which also means insisting upon "ethics as first philosophy," and telling us that, without willing it, we are "caught up in fraternity" (*sic*; Levinas, alas, never questions his inveterate privileging of masculinity – Levinas 1974, 83). At the same time, Levinas demolishes, not only any resort to phenomenology, but also any sense of reciprocity, or of community, or indeed of the common gestures that are crucial to human beings living together. (Just read that scornful list again: "handshakes, caresses, struggle, collaboration, commerce, conversation"). In cleansing Levinas' thought of its human exceptionalism, Bensusan is responding to an inhuman ferocity, and a suffocating intensity, that already lurk within Levinas' texts.

This ferocity and intensity are excavated, before Bensusan, by Joseph Libertson in his important (and largely neglected) 1982 book *Proximity*. I lack the space, and indeed the ability, to do justice to this extraordinary text. But I would like to at least point out the direction in which it moves. Libertson is concerned with the way that Western thought typically recuperates its own failures. Mainstream Western philosophy overtly recognizes an "element" of "alterity" that "escapes the power of comprehension, and even the possibility of manifestation." But this "escape" is nearly always recuperated, precisely through the subterfuge of attributing it to a higher power. In Libertson's sarcastic summary:

> Alterity escapes the power of comprehension, on the basis of its power to escape this power. That which escapes the effectivity of consciousness, escapes on the basis of its own effectivity…. The inadequation of comprehension and exteriority may function as the vicissitude of a larger adequation. (Libertson 1982, 1)

In Kant's theory of the sublime, in Hegel's dialectic, and in Heidegger's hermeneutics of Being, every failure of comprehension and every rupture of the presumed totality is recuperated and restored on a meta-level. My power is most immediately negated, but it is ultimately maintained in the form of a higher power. Libertson does not deny the "perennial and uneliminable" pull of this movement of recuperation in "the economy of thought" (Libertson 1982, 2). But he also insists that such a restoration "does not exhaust this economy"; it "is not the only experience of thought" (2). There is always also *another* movement of

thought: one that can only be evoked paradoxically – and indeed oxymoronically – through what he calls the "virulent anti-intellectualism" of Levinas (2).

This *other* movement has to do with the way that, as Libertson says, proximity "concerns or weighs upon subjectivity" without being graspable by, or recuperable into, that subjectivity (Libertson 1982, 2). What is next to me leaks into me, adulterates and alters me, without my having the ability to grasp it intellectually, or thematize it phenomenologically. Moreover, this "altering incumbence of exteriority" is not itself "a power or effectivity" of any sort (2). Libertson describes it rather as something like a seeping and "compromising contamination" (8), that unfolds in "a dimension of inadequation, inaccessibility, and inextrication" (7). This means that "the Other, in its very transcendence, remains 'here below', remains in a rapport with interiority" (7).

We can also understand this movement as a sort of *haunting*. A ghost is someone who has departed from this life, but who compulsively sticks around because it has nowhere else to go. It cannot touch or move material things; it has no power to take action in the world. But this ghost still both terrorizes me and allures me. It incessantly approaches me, but without ever arriving; and it incessantly withdraws from me, but without ever disappearing. As Libertson puts it, "the Other's retreat inspires or invests the desire which pursues it" (Libertson 1982, 7). This is the "metaphysical desire" of which Levinas writes. I am helpless before it or alongside it.

Such is the proximity to which Bensusan points us, although he does not draw out its consequences in the way that Libertson does. Indexicalism starts out with the act of pointing at something: "because of my *standing location*," Bensusan writes, "I can deal with what is external to me by pointing" (Bensusan 2021, 14). But I cannot expect the others to just point back at me; the relation that I establish with the act of pointing is non-reciprocal and dissymmetrical. At most, in Bensusan's formulation, the others may respond by *interrupting* me. In this way, they divert the very train of thought that led me to point to them in the first place. In Bensusan's own words, "what is external is what makes it possible for my action to depart from my agenda and my aims… it is my course of action that is interrupted by something that transcends me" (31).

Such are the consequences of Bensusan's admirable effort to deanthropocentrize Levinas' thought. Levinas relocates human exceptionalism

on the side of the Other, instead of on the side of the self. This is a mutation of epochal importance. But Levinas still does not go so far as to question human exceptionalism *per se*. This is what Bensusan so beautifully does: like other speculative realists, he puts human exceptionalism itself into question. He thereby gives us what might well be called (to twist a phrase from Derrida) a *Levinasianism without reserve.*

I have already noted how Bensusan removes the possibility of simple enjoyment on the hither side of the Levinasian encounter with the Other. But I think that he equally removes the special urgency of the singular ethical call that Levinas situates on the far side of this encounter. Levinas says that the Face of the Other "summons me to my obligations and judges me" (Levinas 1961, 215). But in Bensusan's account, I am not addressed only by the "widow, orphan, or stranger," but equally by every existent, even the blade of grass that I am just about to step on. Does this still allow for what Levinas calls the "primordial face to face" (206)? What responsibilities do the voices of the others, with their multiple appeals, summon me to? Can this framework accommodate what Timothy Morton calls *hyperobjects*? These are things or processes – like global warming and nuclear radiation – that are too "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" for us to apprehend them. (Morton 2013, 2) And yet they are certainly in my proximity, affecting me in profound ways.

My concern here is that Bensusan reduces the genuine difficulties of this situation, when he so beautifully describes communication with the others, in proximity, as an "ongoing conversation":

> The image of perception as a conversation models receptivity on the complexities of hospitality where, say, intuitions and concepts exist in a multilayered interplay in which senses are like an *agora* where multiple voices can be heard speaking. Senses are more like a negotiating chamber than a *camera obscura*, more like a gathering than a border control. If the senses speak, then they speak in a conversation – not like the words of a report, but like the talk of guests and hosts. (Bensusan 2021, 170)

I am certainly in accord with Bensusan when he values this "metaphysics of the others" as a sort of "cosmic, unending conversation" (Bensusan 2021, 113) – in opposition to the "colonial enterprise" of mainstream Western philosophy (172, 187). We need something like Bensusan's pluralistic conversation, in order to oppose the worldwide extractivist regime under which we live – an order that relentlessly "turns what exists into existence-for-the-market" (189). To his credit,

Bensusan does not overstate his case for process and plurality; he includes "hostile responses" alongside "welcoming" ones in this "ongoing perceptual conversation" (171), and he admits that the process sometimes "involves conflicts that can be insurmountable" (172). But I still worry that these concessions are not enough. Proximity *also* involves a suffocating compulsion, and a vertiginous sense of unwanted complicity, as well as – at the very same time – a sense of evasiveness, of something continually slipping away. This dense affective dimension is missing from Bensusan's idealization of "a conversation in which interlocutors bring in different accounts while appealing, interrupting and asking for responses" (83). Bensusan's vision of cosmic conversation – much like Richard Rorty's exhortation that we "continue the conversation" of philosophy (Rorty 1979, 391), or Robert Brandom's notion, following Wilfrid Sellars, of "the game of giving and asking for reasons" (Brandom 1994, *passim*) – seems to neglect what Libertson, following and paraphrasing Levinas, calls "a communicational alterity whose inaccessibility is also its incumbence or weight" (Libertson 1982, 3).

I am thinking here – to cite another set of texts entirely – of the science fiction writer Stanisław Lem, whose writings are often concerned with incommensurabilities and failures of communication. In novels like *Solaris* and *His Master's Voice*, Lem envisions contact, of a sort, between human beings and extrasolar aliens whose messages the human recipients are unable to understand. The activities of translation and interpretation go on interminably, but without ever leading to any sort of conversation. We are vulnerable to – and radically affected by – Sayings that seem to be addressed to us; but we are altogether unable to extract any sort of Said from these messages, let alone respond to them. Indeed, we may well be radically mistaken from the get-go, when we imagine that these apparent messages place us under some sort of obligation – or even have meaning for us at all. Lem's novels work as crystalline demonstrations of the futility of endeavoring to reduce the Other to the Same, even by classifying whatever escapes our grasp as the expression of (in Libertson's words) "a higher power and a higher truth" (Libertson 1982, 1).

Joseph Libertson himself explores what might be called the pragmatics of proximity in two crime thriller novels that he published under the pseudonym of Joseph Glass: *Eyes* (1997) and *Blood* (2000). The heroine of both novels, Susan Shader, is a psychoanalyst who also has psychic powers. She uses her "second

sight" in order to help the Chicago police track down serial killers. These killers perform gruesome rituals with the bodies of their victims: one cuts out their eyes, and another drinks their blood. Susan is deeply distressed to find herself in psychic connection with these men (and they tend to be men, rather than women). Susan complains that her paranormal ability is "more like a curse than a gift" (Glass 2000, loc. 4077). Every time she is touched by the thoughts and impressions of others, she comes down with an enormous headache. And in both novels, the intermittence and inscrutability of these transmissions lead her into mistakes that derail the criminal investigation, and put others into danger. As she says at one point, these "psychic feelings" are vague, fleeting, and unrepeatable; this means that "they cannot be used to produce scientific conviction" (loc. 505). Susan's over-sensitivity is both physically and mentally draining, and all too easily susceptible to misinterpretation:

> She struggled to clarify what was going through her mind. It was exhausting, for no message reaches a psychic unalloyed. The surface tension of the mind is so great that messages can only penetrate it at the price of a certain violence. Once a hole is punched, disparate signals from other sources rush in like detritus sucked into a vacuum. Some of these come from the past, others from the future. All have to compete for space with the psychic's own unconscious thoughts and feelings. And if there are resistances within the psychic to certain painful thoughts or themes, the psychic material may be distorted by those resistances, just as though it were a dream thought or an unconscious thought. (loc. 854)

I want to say that this is what proximity actually *feels like*. But such an account can only be made in the mode of what, at the start of this essay, I called *fictioning*. This passage of description appears in a novel; it would be out of place, and unconvincing, in a philosophical treatise like Libertson's *Proximity* or Bensusan's *Indexicalism*. Libertson, writing as Glass, gives us a quasi-phenomenological account of something that, strictly speaking, is irreducible to any phenomenology. Susan's actual experience is something that – as in the examples from Wittgenstein and Derrida that I mentioned earlier – may be talked about and talked around endlessly, precisely because it cannot ever be pinned down properly in words and concepts. Another way to put this is to say that Susan's actual experience – however unpleasurable, and indeed excruciating, it is – is an *aesthetic* one, in the precise Kantian sense that it is something that we can *argue about* endlessly, but that we cannot *dispute* (Kant 2000, § 56, 5:388, 214).

The account of proximity dramatized in *Eyes* and *Blood* is not incongruent with what Bensusan tells us in *Indexicalism*. For we read, in the course of Bensusan's book, that "interruption precedes speculation" (Bensusan 2021, 167), and that "experience is the very name of alterity, and the Other is precisely the unit of content of a perceptual experience" (176), and finally that "the supplementary nature of perception makes the very project of intelligence extraction ultimately impossible" (176). All these formulations are more or less adequate to the tenor of Susan Shader's experience. I welcome Bensusan's call for "a *xenophilic* turn in epistemology." But I fear that he underestimates the difficulties involved. Susan Shader feels these difficulties to a hyperbolic extent, but they touch all of us, more or less:

> She wished she could silence her psychic gift for the duration, but she knew that was impossible. The countless voices she heard, the faces she saw, were a permanent part of her world. They offered neither final truth nor peace of mind. (Libertson 1997)

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