

## Chapter XIV

# THE INFINITE AND THE FINITE

### A) ABSOLUTE AND INFINITE

*ART. 1: The opposition between the infinite and the finite is the interval within which participation occurs.*

The nature of the interval is also expressed by the opposition between the finite and the infinite. This opposition portrays very well the essential character of participation, for the finite is contained within the infinite yet is incapable of equalling it. However we should not consider this opposition set and static; it is a living opposition which expresses the connection between the pure act and the participated act, between the I and the absolute. Thus one easily understands how the infinite is for the finite both a source and an ideal: it is a source when considered with respect to its creative efficacy, it is an ideal when considered not with respect to its impetus but with respect to the growth it lends the finite I, which cannot reach the end without the finite I being annihilated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Logicians might argue that infinity is no more than a non-terminating algorithm (e.g. “add 1 and do not stop”) which has no real counterpart. In any case it is unclear how infinity could ever generate finitude and number. Lavelle addresses these issues in what follows. In general “infinity” is for him a stand-in for the seamless One and “finitude” for the world of distinctions.

The strictest solidarity exists between the terms finite and infinite. It is mere wordplay to say that the "infinite" expresses no more than a negation of the limits confining us, wherein reside all the objects of our experience. For how is this experience possible? It is foolish to say the finite alone is given to us: this is precisely what we need to explain. The very possibility of the finite supposes a beyond in which both thought and desire are engaged. Whatever shows me my limits liberates me.<sup>2</sup>

As Descartes saw very well, their beyond is the supreme positivity, in light of which the finite always appears limited. However this argument seems purely logical and only half convinces us. For we almost always think that there is an ontological distance, impossible to cross, between the finite, which is always present and possessed, and the infinite, which is only ever virtual and imagined. That infinity is our dream. Yet such an argument is not without reply. For in what consists true being? It is neither within the bounds of our finite given existence nor in the indeterminacy of an infinity that will never be laid out for inspection or embraced. Being is in neither the finite nor the infinite: it is only in their rapport. It is precisely in the movement which prevents us from remaining closed within our own borders, which obliges us to think about and go beyond them. Here occurs the autonomous act of participation, and the opposition between the finite and the infinite is only its explanatory analysis. I am finite at each instant but I see myself as finite and in doing so I also see myself as infinite, i.e. as subjected to a development in which each step confines me to new boundaries, which I perceive only by surpassing them. I am therefore finite at each instant only in order to realise my participation in the absolute by way of a development that is infinite.<sup>3</sup> It need not be concluded from this that the development is no more than an idea (i.e. a possibility) and that reality consists solely of its various phases as the idea is actualised. What counts is the internal efficacy which carries and produces them. Here is the present reality which reconnects us with the absolute, the very principle that makes us be and of which our development in time represents only the conditions of appropriation.

*ART. 2: The pure act is above the opposition between the infinite and the finite, which allows us both to deny and to affirm their relevancy with respect to it.*

The act is above all oppositions but it must not be said that it contains them; for they are born only when participation begins; they do not reach the act itself; they arise only among particular modes of the act as soon as we try to attribute an absolute value to one or the another of them; they are resolved as soon as we

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of the author's central tenets: to the degree that I am aware of my limits I am already beyond them; in the measure that I am present to the manifold world I surpass it in the direction of unity.

<sup>3</sup> But just as whatever number added to another number never reaches infinity, whatever addition to the finite human being yields a finite human being. Lavelle himself insists that the individual never fully coincides with the Absolute.

regain consciousness of their relativity and look towards the principle that grounds, sustains and reconciles them as a hearth of various perspectives.

Of the Act itself, it should not be considered either finite or infinite. And it is doubtful whether either of these expressions makes sense where it is a question of an act and not a thing, and indeed of an act posited as perfectly one. Participation makes sense of these opposed terms; but the act itself escapes it. There is no operation that permits us to embrace it by circling round it as in the case of a thing; and there is nothing in its nature that is indeterminate or incomplete though it is wholly such to the particular being who begins to participate in it. And when we say that it is neither finite nor infinite it is not to show that it evades our thinking since we clearly and distinctly see why it can be neither one nor the other, though the two opposed terms find in it their principle and reason for being.

It is indeed true to say that the opposition between the finite and the infinite is no more than a manifestation of the interval separating us from the Absolute, i.e. the condition of participation; also that only in connection with us must the Absolute be regarded an infinity, and even that, sticking to the most familiar sense of the words, we could, by denying it the two terms, show that both accord with it in a negative fashion so to speak. Rightly we should say that man is an infinite creature, i.e. never finished, never finite. In this sense it would be legitimate to affirm (always using the words in their strict sense and considering the Absolute in itself rather than in the forms of participation that render it possible) that to itself it is its own end, that it is perfectly finite.

Admittedly however this application of the term "finite" presents a kind of paradox. And the reason is easily seen. The word "finite" always evokes for us a series of operations that we have performed one after the other and that could at a certain moment find completion. Yet the nature of participation is precisely never to be complete; otherwise it would cease to be participation. Consequently the Absolute is not finite in the sense that we might one day arrive at it after an extensive enumeration; it is finite only in another sense, where it is the first principle to which nothing is lacking since it is the source of all that can be, i.e. it is the infinitude of participation. Hence one need not doubt that this absolute constitutes a veritable present infinity, as Descartes would have it. And this twofold argument proves it: we clearly and distinctly see both our power to pursue the operation of our thinking without letup as well as the impossibility of holding this power save as a sign of our imperfection, which is incapable of sufficing itself without an active perfection which inwardly determines the desire always to go further.

The Absolute permits all beings to grow but does not receive any increase itself: consequently it reposes in itself, and the term "eternal" applies to it more

than to the term "infinite" since these two terms oppose one another as movement and repose.<sup>4</sup>

ART. 3: *The expression "present infinity" serves to mark a kind of privilege of the infinite over the finite and evokes the perfect self-sufficiency of the pure act in that it sustains all possible forms of participation.*

If we consider the being of the All, this being can be defined only as perfect self-sufficiency. This perfect self-sufficiency can doubtless be considered a current infinity. It is the self-sufficiency of an act that can be conceived only as in operation or actual. And with regard to all particular forms of participation its infinitude expresses nothing more than the character through which it constantly produces or, if you will, provides, so that in the opposition between the finite and infinite the infinite takes a kind of priority and privilege.

Now in our certitude that the All is infinitely participable resides our true security. From this All we can never be separated, and when we think we lose it, it is we who have lost ourselves. Yet it gathers together what remains. For no one eludes being, even the one who refuses consent to it. However within this All nothing is present except in a supereminent fashion and nothing becomes ours except through the participation allowed us, such that it presents itself to us as an infinity that will never fail. Hence it alone sustains rather than dissipates us. The participated act is not embarked on an endless path each step of which remains equally distant from the goal toward which it leads. For this path is laid out within being, and if it has no end it is because it gives us possession of the goal at every point and not only at the end.

Doubtless one could claim that progress toward an infinity that forever escapes us is not illusory, alleging that though it never reaches the end toward which it tends then at least it never loses what it leaves, which is ever carried along inwardly and constantly increases in substance. This is indeed what one sees in the *Creative Evolution* of M. Bergson. But we will not give way to such a seeming. For we do not think that the creative act resides in time except through particular forms of participation, nor do we incline toward the image of a being that swells in the course of time owing to all the acquisitions it has successively realised.<sup>5</sup> Our interior progress is a stripping-away rather than an enrichment: it imparts to our intention the character of purity and nakedness so to speak. The I no longer seeks to retain or possess. It does not dream of monopolising or draining the activity upon which it draws, which subsists without it and to which its participation adds nothing. Within this participation it puts the participable above the participated and union with the Being in which it participates above the current content of participation.

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<sup>4</sup> In order of appearance the terms should be reversed.

<sup>5</sup> Yet Lavelle's discussion of soul-creation in *Of the Human Soul* implies an accumulation in that the particulars of experience get distilled into a growing presence that is ever more distinct yet free of detail.

Though the word “infinity” always marks a disproportion between the pure act and the act of participation, and though it reveals the career that opens before our freedom, it is nonetheless useful to go on employing it to qualify the unity of the Act on which all the particular forms of participation depend. That is why one can speak of a present infinity. But this amounts to neither the sum of an indefinite series of terms nor the rule that generates them; it is the pure efficacy upon which individual beings continually draw to constitute their peculiar natures through acts of freedom. And by positing present infinity we mean only that these particular beings do not depend solely on one another but also on the entirety of the invisible and supremely fecund unity that founds both their autonomy and their mutual solidarity. Thus with respect to participated beings, the infinity of the present One is expressed in three ways:

1. as the intensive totality of Being which, instead of excluding, calls for the extensive multiplicity of particular forms, each of them evoking infinity as soon as it envisages its rapport with it, either in order to give itself limitless development or in order to pluralise forms of existence that realise along with it the totality of participation, albeit without ever achieving it;

2. as the power that we always attribute to Being, which is never idle and which, far from being confined to certain limits that would constitute its particular existence, we regard as self-sufficient, not only because it gives itself existence but because it simultaneously gives existence to all that exists. Whatever is powerful is powerful in order to give existence to what is not;

3. as the sort of equality that pertains to all finite beings, not only by comparison with it but because they are all insusceptible of possessing anything by themselves and because they derive from it their true being, i.e. their freedom, which is nothing if not the power to give oneself all.

## B) THE POWER AND THE IMPOTENCE OF FREEDOM

*ART. 4: The opposition between the infinite and the finite expresses the action of a forever-reborn freedom, which is nonetheless always engaged in determinations.*

The thesis that the opposition between the infinite and the finite represents the rapport between the absolute act and the participated act finds confirmation in the analysis of freedom, which is in a sense the key to participation. Firstly, freedom is indeed a present absolute that grants us a place in unconditioned being through the employment of our initiative. How is that possible since it seems engaged in a world of determinations? Left to itself such a world is ruled by a rigid determinism; but freedom cannot allow itself to be captured by that, it must surpass it while remaining linked to it. None of its operations can be fully explained by a cause it obeys or an end that attracts it. In the inspiration it

receives, in the efficacy it disposes, freedom must always reside beyond whatever we can represent to ourselves and whatever we can want. It can never be reduced to a given; it transcends them all. It can only be explained if, rather than taking its origin from some determination that precedes it, it breaks the chain of determinations by returning to the principle on which they all simultaneously depend (which is confirmed by the experience of freedom, which puts all in question and becomes once again a first beginning of all that is) and if it does not allow itself to be imprisoned in any finite particular but rather preserves a surplus of power by means of which it surpasses everything. Also, the infinite field that opens before creative freedom and prevents it from being exhausted in any object is only an expression of the superabundant and ever-present source from which it borrows an inexhaustible efficacy. This explains why freedom is not idle and is ever revived. Because freedom is participated it both evinces its subordination to the pure act and the independence of its own operation, which occurs in limited actions appearing as successive stages in an unlimited progress.

*ART. 5: Infinity expresses the unity of being; and finite determinations, rather than leaving us eternally separate from it, establish our sojourn within it and allow us to dispose it.*

Unity is identical with the infinity that is manifest to us as soon as participation comes into play.

No separation between unity and infinity can be shown. Both are wanted for the One not to be abstract and void, which would oblige us to consider it not as the summit of being but as its abolition, and for the infinite to bear witness to its seamless character and the impossibility of considering any of its parts other than in relation to all the rest. But we can say that participation springs from the ideal disjunction between the One and infinity, or alternatively that infinity is revealed to us in the guise of the One as soon as participation begins.

If the indivisible and unbroken act finds in us only a participated activity we understand that in fulfilling itself this activity makes appear, through its very limitation, a collection of particular determinations, which become multiplied in the measure participation becomes more extensive and more nearly perfect. Thus infinity is revealed to us not through the effort we make to expand our experience, thereby ever distancing us more and more from its origin, but through a return to this origin, which requires the Absolute to spread to infinity in order to measure both the distance that separates us from it and the unbreakable solidarity that we nonetheless maintain with it.

The role of infinity is thus to continually bring us back, along with our limits and the constant possibility of overcoming them. It fills us with both humility and hope. But it is not an end that draws away when approached since we are situated within infinity. It sustains us; it is the source of our security; it renders

possible all our movements, imparting to them both their ease and their fullness. There is no in-itself infinity that might be separated from us by an insurmountable wall; rather, infinity is the way in which the absolute is delivered to us, provided we agree to accomplish a constantly new initiative, to which reality continually responds.

Infinity is always described as the mark of our servitude because we will never succeed in conquering it. It does enslave us in that it prevents us from ever being content with what we have and obliges us to fall short of what we are seeking. Accordingly it takes away being instead of giving it to us. The consciousness that incessantly goes out of itself in order to reach beyond itself no longer finds a resting place either within or outside itself. Yet this same infinity liberates us if we consider it not with respect to what it refuses us but with respect to what it promises and offers us. Its role is to repeatedly reawaken our soul's zest and to constantly give it a fresh field of play. Hence it is the finite possession that enchains one if one stops with it; and the free act that needs infinity in order to move.

It would be a grave error, a form of nihilism and ontological suicide to think that by nullifying particular determinations one best arrives at the essence of spirit within the act that makes spirit such as it is. Saying "yes" to an infinity one thinks one cannot attain is sometimes the most subtle way of saying "no" to all the forms of being in our reach. We cannot accept taking life as the never-ending pursuit of an object defined from the start as out of reach, making us curse whatever in us brings us to long for what can never be. It wrenches us from being rather than sets us within it. It forbids the growth promised to us since no growth is possible where nothing is ever possessed.

Only the presence of infinity, which is not in front of us like a target but as that in which we find refuge, can render us unconcerned about the particular determinations that escape us. We might fail to reach them but we cannot lose the common source that engenders them and upon which they depend. Infinity shows us that being cannot be evaded. However we should not cling to its indeterminacy in order to escape the experience we are given, the task we have to accomplish; only by submitting to being does this experience, this task acquire its rightful value and absolute significance.

*ART. 6: The rapport between the infinite and the finite is realised through number, time and space, through the relation between identity and diversity, which testifies to both our power and our impotence.*

It is noteworthy that the idea of infinity always links the idea of our power with that of our impotence, of what we lack and of what we can acquire; it is thus a characteristic of participation.

But it is also noteworthy that the idea is realised only in the abstract and through the intermediary of quantity. It is inseparable from the idea of repetition.

We succeed in grasping it only through the idea of an operation we can suspend and resume, and this in such a fashion that it is in a privileged way connected to number, which can always be increased by a new unit. Number therefore witnesses to the flawlessness of the pure act which is always a first beginning where participation is concerned; we can always break and resume contact with it. But infinity appears only if we consider all these participated acts as forming an homogenous series in which they become alike and joined together, alternatively as an abstract or possible series in which there is nothing actual that is susceptible of being repeated; for it is upon the same concrete absolute that each of these acts draws, and the finished form it takes when realised is correspondingly concrete.

There exists an extremely close relation between time and number, which seem mutually conditioned since time already implies a multiplicity of moments that we can count only in time. However time lends a character of continuity to the succession of these moments, which testifies to the unity of the act that participation allows us to dispose; conversely number wrenches them apart and introduces into time a discontinuity of eternity.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover the disproportion between the finite and the infinite obliges us to associate the idea of infinity more directly with time than with space. For infinite time is inseparable from the idea of a process conceived as having no endpoint; whether back in the past or ahead in the future we go on without any difficulty, engaging thought in a time where we are absent. And here we distinctly discern how infinity is linked with a mental act that constitutes, by degrees and unilinearly, an incomplete series of finite objects that it gives itself one after another. Thus infinity attests, so it seems, to the real power of the mind when we consider its operation, and its apparent impotence when we consider a real object that it vainly believes itself to equal.

For that reason infinite space—precisely because it is formed from simultaneous parts that we must, at least ideally, grasp all at once—makes sense to us only when we somehow join it to infinite time by imagining a distance that endlessly extends beyond the ever-limited horizon before our eyes. This verifies with striking clarity that the peculiarity of participation, as its analytical character already sufficiently shows, is always to situate us midway between an infinitely large that we are unable to encompass and an infinitely small that we are unable to lay hold of.

There is more: it is impossible to think of infinity independently of diversity. Now the reverse of diversity is identity. But infinity is precisely diversity gathered together in the identity of a single act of thought. And it can be said that, within this infinity, identity is in fact an expression of the Act that, wherever it comes into play, introduces its undivided unity, while diversity pertains to the imperfect modes of participation, which however cannot be separated from the

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<sup>6</sup> I am uncertain of what Lavelle means by this.



Act in which they participate. Once again we constate that infinity does not pertain directly to the Act but only indirectly and with respect to particular things, which it constantly multiplies and which have their source in it.

Infinity exists only in order to testify to the connection between every act of participation and the totality of Being, which merits the name "infinity" only relative to participation, and in order to express its internal law. The Pure Act is an absolute that is changed into an infinite power only after participation has begun; this infinity marks the actual surpassing of every participated act; it is the infinity of the possible participation that is always open to us.

### C) CONCRETE RECONCILIATION<sup>7</sup>

*ART. 7: The unity of the finite and the infinite is achieved through just measure.*

The infinite doubtless stands for the interval separating the pure act from the participated act, and therefore the condition of participation itself. But that is no reason for considering participation in an exclusively limiting or negative sense. For on the one hand the infinity that renders it lacking is nonetheless somehow present, like an open career before it, and on the other hand participation cannot be considered solely under the aspect of a quantity that can be indefinitely increased. For in the very way our inward élan is held back and circumscribed is a positive and qualitative affirmation of how we draw near the totality of the real, how we inscribe ourselves in it and take possession of it, i.e. of how we choose precisely what we are, instead of losing ourselves, so that we continually grow, in an indeterminacy without limits. In a sense our true progress consists less in expanding ourselves than in converging on our proper unity.

This analysis shows rather well the close connection between the finite and the infinite. In reality one does not pass from the finite to the infinite through an extensive operation, or from the infinite to the finite through a limiting operation. They oppose one another in an experience that obliges us first to actualise one in order to render the other a pure power. But they come together only in the perfection of the finite, when the presence of the infinite appears and is realised. Then far from opposing the finite to the infinite by saying the finite is surpassed and negated, it must be said that the infinite is the finite affirmed, not only (as might be thought) in its extrinsic relation to other finites but in its intrinsic value and specific perfection as finite. The unanalysable perfection of the finite here witnesses, not to the infinity that lies beyond it, but to the infinity that remains present to it. In the moment when nothing can be added to the finite as such it encloses the infinite, it can be apprehended by an intuition whose richness confounds the entire inventory of concepts. It can be said that this accord

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<sup>7</sup> I take this section as the heart of the chapter.

between the finite and the infinite is expressed by the idea of just measure. The just measure we ask for is, in every given circumstance, the absolute placed in our reach. And it might be said that the infinite is for us much less a matter of what surpasses us, or of a possession that must be sought, than of what dissolves and ruins us, of what fills us and consequently exactly augments our capacity in every moment. It can also be said that too much is often less than the least, and that an excess of goods prevents us from recognising the only goods that suit us and that we are capable of enjoying. The one for whom infinity has become present is less often the one who tries ever to surpass himself than the one who is able to know himself, to take his own measure.

The end of philosophy is not to put off our encounter with Being until a future that grows more and more distant, or even until the near future; it is to enable us to realise that encounter immediately, i.e. always, or again in all that we behold. True infinity is not revealed to me in desire or in a dream but in the just initiative by which I greet whatever is currently given me with an exact simplicity. And the humblest gesture expresses it, if it knows its place and occasions no dissonance. There is a conception of infinity that is only restlessness of the soul, that keeps us from repose and constantly draws us away on a frantic aimless course, but there is another understanding that lifts a blade of grass or a gesture of the hand to the level of the absolute.

Our participation in the pure act is expressed in the positive perfection of each particular work and not in the effort we make to constantly surpass ourselves through a flight toward the infinite, in which contact with and possession of the real forever escapes us. Thus infinity ought not to turn us away from what we have just attained and make us depart what we have in order to look for what we have not, which we can reach only if we already have it; it consists in the movement by which we constantly grow towards and penetrate the inexhaustible possession we have, though it can be taken up and set aside precisely because it stands before us as a totality always on offer. Because it always exactly matches the capacity of our soul, because it allows no place for restlessness, regret or desire, it effects in each instant a just proportion between what we are given and what we are able to receive.

In saying "Sufficient to each day the troubles thereof"<sup>8</sup> we accept that each day the absolute becomes present to us. Those who are content with little are too often unjustly scorned. For it happens that this little with which they are content grows to the measure of their souls, while a little soul finds the greatest things always too small.

Perfection consists less in feeling satisfied with certain limits imposed on us by nature than in mapping the contours of these limits so as to create a line of contact with the total being, a surface of communication that becomes more subtle and more sensitive as it is better defined.

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<sup>8</sup> Matt 6.34.

ART. 8: *Artistic creation is a special instance in which one finds a present infinity in finite perfection.*

This presence of the infinite in the finite, to which it lends the character of perfection, is attested by all forms of artistic creation, above all by poetic language. Here expression is unique and indeed can never be otherwise; at the same time its meaning is multiple; one can never succeed in limiting or exhausting it. Thus art seeks to take hold of the infinite within the finite. And doubtless it could be asserted that the operations accomplished by art are finite while by contrast what is sensed evokes an infinite resonance in us. But this observation is instructive, for the finitude of our operations is the finitude of participation while the sensible they evoke is the response they receive from the All, which always surpasses them. And what is most remarkable is that this sensible, which is so much more suggestive and evocative than the operation that seizes it, possesses a character that is more firm and distinct.

Thus, in the work of art as elsewhere, there is a present infinity that refers not to the surpassing of the finite but to its perfection. And finite perfection is that justice in proportion, that rigorous adaptation to circumstances, that force that grants an exact fidelity to oneself, that affirmed and accepted spiritual truth that is my truth: a truth rendered my own, found and loved, cut to my measure, which reveals the world to me and the place I have in it, making it appear to me always identical and always new, giving me the force and joy to invent, which is the secret of the creative act.

It is in aesthetic joy, and perhaps in all true joy, that one best grasps the meeting-point of the finite and the infinite, which allows us to understand our disagreement with all those who see the entirety of being as engaged in an indefinite progress throughout the course of duration. In addition to the fact that this progress is itself an ideal—which, if it entailed no regression would be mechanically imposed on us and would abolish our freedom, which cleaves to the absolute only because it makes possible in every instant not only a return to the past but a return to zero—one easily realises that there are moments in our life that it would be impossible and even impious of us to want surpassed, moments that we wish only to maintain and renew, whose simple memory fills our emptiest and most impoverished moments with hope. Aesthetic joy is a contemplative joy that embraces a present possession, circumscribed, wholly given, whose perfection is inseparable from its accomplished or, so to speak, finished character. The miracle of art places in our reach—within the sensible realm and by way of a suite of gestures encased within a work presently before our eyes—a reality that fulfils desire, restores and never exhausts it. That is why we can consider the artwork an infinity that is given. But it is also the reason that in some fashion it grants us the presence of the Absolute. It admirably represents our rapports with it. For it too is entirely present; there is nothing in it that is

denied; it is not for us a distant principle from which we have been long separated nor a sought-after ideal we are unable to attain. However the ideal is not merely a presence always on offer before us like the artwork; it is a presence in which we inscribe ourselves, in which we perform all our acts, and which always receives them. Infinity represents not an endpoint beyond the reach of an endless journey but, rather, all the paths open to us in an ever-present reality, in which we can never escape ourselves and which reveals to us all its riches in response to the solicitations of thinking and willing.

Under the pretext that Being is everywhere present no one can imagine that a first glance suffices to possess it: in that way one grasps only the appearance or the concept, not being in its very essence, i.e. at the point where it is born. It does not allow itself to be taken by rough hands: it shows itself to us only there, where we are capable of accomplishing a very pure act, which grants an intense emotion because it is both a genesis and a light. It is admirable that being, which is one, shies away as long as its unity remains abstract but reveals itself through the act that permits us to seize the absolute of difference; and that being, which is infinite and at the same time one, escapes us if we pursue it by way of a vague aspiration – and delivered to us the moment it is “intimised”<sup>9</sup>, i.e. in the moment it exactly fills the capacity of our finite consciousness: it is for us the All when it becomes *our*<sup>10</sup> all.

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<sup>9</sup> A word coined by Lavelle, here meaning “made intimate”.

<sup>10</sup> My italics.