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Levinas and the Faces of Art

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ABSTRACT: Does art have ethical possibilities? Can literature disclose our responsibility for other people? This short text aims to unfold some nuances of responsible and irresponsible art as they appear in Emmanuel Levinas's sparse remarks on aesthetics. We examine some common ways of conceiving Levinas's thoughts in literary studies, followed by a closer discussion of his ideas on the possibilities of art in "Reality and Its Shadow" and his late interviews on Vasily Grossman and Sacha Sosno.

KEYWORDS: Emmanuel Levinas, ethics, aesthetics, Vasily Grossman, Sacha Sosno, philosophy of literature, literary criticism

1. Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas's existential philosophy is a meditation on the *constitutive* role of morality in human life, a reminder of what ultimately gives existence its meaning. The starting point of ethics, in his view, takes place in the encounter with the vulnerable and exposed face of the Other, in its appeal that urges the self to infinite responsibility. The encounter with the Other and its Otherness is the condition for responsibility, for meaning and morality.

If ethics begins with the face-to-face encounter, how can we hear the appeal of the face in art and literature? The question of Levinas's view of art and literature is disputed (for some different views, see Robbins 1999; Hofmeyr 2007; Bruns 2015; Fagenblat and Cools 2021). Levinas's philosophy does not directly focus on the philosophy of art or literature. For example, he never asks the question of what literature is, nor does he examine its concepts. However, he sometimes refers to writers such as Proust, Celan, Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. Still, the remarks about art and literature are vanishingly few in Levinas's oeuvre. To speak of a coherent view of art or literature would, therefore, be doing his thoughts injustice. However, some of Levinas's thoughts overlap with the philosophy of literature, and it is not a coincidence that Levinas is often used in readings that aim to extract an ethics from works of art and fiction. In the following essay, we will review some common ways

of conceiving Levinas's thoughts in literary studies, after which we discuss more closely Levinas's ideas on the possibilities of art in "Reality and Its Shadow" and in his late interviews on Vasily Grossman and Sacha Sosno.

2. Literature review

Extracting ethics from aesthetics is not a new discipline in the humanities. On the contrary, ethical readings have, for the greater part of literary history, been the very form of the interpretation of literary works. The approach was challenged when literary theory made its entrance in the 20th century. At the end of the 80s, however, literary studies returned to ethics and the Other: responsibility and otherness became standard concepts for research. (See, for example, Miller 1987; Booth 1988; Siebers 1988; Nussbaum 1990. An early champion of ethical readings of literature against the claims of new criticism and structuralism is Murdoch 1997 and Murdoch 2003. For a good overview of the ethical turn in literary studies, see Eskin 2004.) Using Levinas in this context is, however, not entirely unproblematic. If one wants to follow Levinas's central line of thought, it means that one must renounce the possibility of doing a so-called empathetic reading, that is, the attempt as a reader to enter into feelings and thoughts of the characters in the work and thus supposedly broaden the understanding of oneself and others. For Levinas, this would mean the self's reduction of the Other to the Same, replacing the Other with an extension of oneself. (See, for example, Levinas 2012, 102–103. For a related critique of the problems of empathetic identification as associated with *Einfühlung* and *Verstehen* see Stein 1989, 15–16, and Scheler 2017, 9–18.) If the encounter with the Other means the exit of the self from its self-absorption—the recognition of the Other as an Other, someone absolutely foreign—then ethics is not a question of identification but instead a question of difference. On the part of the reader, what is required is a responsive attention that counteracts the tendency to identify, it counteracts a reading that assumes similarity. Instead, one would have to face the very foreignness that puts one's own identity at stake.

Jill Robbins's book *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999), stands out in the field of the Levinas research that examines the relation between ethics and aesthetics. In the study, she challenges partly the distinction between an ethical and a rhetorical language, and partly Levinas's distinction between poetry and philosophy. The title itself alludes to the possibilities of literature to uncover alterity. Robbins does underline that a literary text does not carry alterity in the same way as another human being, but at the same time, she adds that her "goal is to explore the ways in which reading alters—or interrupts—the very economy of the same that the other interrupts" (1999, xxiv). In this way, literature can open a passage or a window towards the Other.

The first part of Robbins's study contains a close reading of Levinas's view of language in works such as *Totality and Infinity* (2012) and *The Trace of the Other*

(1986). Robbins summarizes Levinas's critique of Western metaphysics, on how the Same always tends to draw the Other into its own self-understanding and thereby exclude the possibility of encountering the Other as an Other. She describes how one should best understand Levinas's view of literature:

There is an incommensurability between the more originary level of Levinas's ethical discourse and the discourse of literary criticism. This means that an extrinsic approach to the topic will lead nowhere, for it is not a matter in any case of applying Levinas's philosophy to the interpretation of literary texts. An intrinsic approach to the topic is required, one that will take into account both what Levinas says about literature and how he says it ... (Robbins 1999, 39)

Robbins's remarks are primarily aimed at scholars who hope to be able to easily apply Levinas's philosophy to art and fiction. One could partly agree with her to the extent that it is necessary to critically examine what Levinas says about art and fiction in relation to his philosophy. In the second part, she attempts to examine Levinas's view of art and literature in general—in relation to Levinas's own readings of authors such as Rimbaud, Agnon, Blanchot and Celan. While Robbins creditably is reading lesser-known texts by Levinas on aesthetic matters, her study lacks an analysis of Levinas's late work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (2010) and its operational distinction between the Saying and the Said. Robbins writes that we should not "presuppose that we know what the Saying is" but for her this is the end of argument, not the starting point (1999, xxiii). To some extent, this is understandable: it is difficult to write about Levinas without the risk of thematizing the concepts which, even for the author, always falls victim to thematization. The Saying is no exception here. It is, after all, quite possible to—after examining central concepts in Levinas's philosophy, such as the Saying—to use Levinas's terminology to extract an ethics from art and art criticism, without ignoring the incommensurability between discourse of ethics and the discourse of aesthetics.

A relatively new contribution to the research on Levinas's relationship to literature is the anthology *Levinas and Literature: New Directions* (Fagenblat and Cools 2021). The anthology is a comment on the philosophical discussion about Levinas that arose with the publication of his collected works, *Oeuvres Complètes* (which were published in 2009, 2011, 2013). The edition contains, for example, fragments of two novels Levinas began writing during his time in prison during the war and continued to work on right up until the 60s (Fagenblat 2021, ix). Michael Fagenblat writes in his introduction that Levinas's forgotten fiction fragments shed new light on the question of the philosopher's relationship to literature. Fagenblat proposes a reading that questions the possibilities of literature to show the Other in a moral sense, but whose possibilities, paradoxically, are precisely to be found in this impossibility. Fagenblat writes: "It is as if literature affords a way of tracing the sense of goodness under the conditions of its absence" (2021, x). He continues: "Far from

presenting the Other, then, as does the psychological novel, the literature that interests Levinas explores the implications of a world deprived of the sense of the Other, a world verging toward the abyss of indeterminate, meaningless existence” (2021, x). For Fagenblat, literature offers the possibility of functioning as “a *pharmakon*, at once poison and medicine, descent into egoism and senselessness, but also orientation toward the Other” (2021, xii–xiii). Levinas’s conflicting approach is also the unifying link for the majority of the anthology’s authors, regardless of whether they examine Levinas’s own literary attempts or study literature through a Levinasian lens.

3. Irresponsible Art—“A Dimension of Evasion”

Is Levinas’s critique of literature and art as conflicting as the critics make it out to be (see Cohen 2016)? In his later works, especially in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas develops an almost iconoclastic attitude to the written representation’s ability to show the Other (2010, 89). This temperament is already present in the early essay, “Reality and Its Shadow” (1987), but then mainly as a way of showing some particular shortcomings of art—and by extension the shortcomings of the aesthetic discourse—in relation to our responsibility in a world with other people. The essay, written as a response to Jean-Paul Sartre’s thesis about engaged literature, is short but dense. Levinas criticizes the idea that literature could be used as a tool to change the world (Sartre 1949). Literature, according to Levinas, cannot reveal anything about reality because it is neither true nor untrue. Art escapes all claims of truth—it is just a shadow of reality. Levinas is clearly influenced by Plato (see, for example, Book X of *The Republic II*, 1942). Both suspect that the representation of reality in art, the mimetic image, can cloud our relationship with reality as such (Plato 1942, 605b–c). While Plato suspects that art leads us away from the good, Levinas is worried that we are taking the shadow-world of art as a truth: that we engage in it so strongly that we risk forgetting the Other. Thus, in “Reality and Its Shadow,” Levinas’s discussion of art results in a question about how the responsiveness of art should be evaluated. He believes that this can only be done in a life where our responsibility for our fellow human beings binds us ethically: “art, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion” (Levinas 1987, 12).

He goes on:

Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. Magic, recognized everywhere as the devil’s part, enjoys an incomprehensible tolerance in poetry. Revenge is gotten on wickedness by producing its caricature, which is to take from it its reality without annihilating it; evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak. It is as though ridicule killed, as though everything really can end

in songs. We find an appeasement when, beyond the invitations to comprehend and act, we throw ourselves into the rhythm of a reality which solicits only its admission into a book or a painting. Myth takes the place of mystery. The world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city. From this point of view, the value of the beautiful is relative. There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague. (Levinas 1987, 12; compare with Plato 1942, 606a–607a)

In this light, art invites irresponsibility. Whatever art's playful possibilities show, it will thus uncompromisingly clash with the reality of the Other for whom we are unconditionally responsible, and it is in her presence that we see art's irresponsibility. Letting art show the Other would be a form of idolatry, since the representation binds the essence of the Other in an image or in a caricature of something we view from a distance. Our responsibility is then broken by the light that the image casts on us. Where we thought the image shows the depth of the Other, the responsibility for her as our fellow being and neighbor has already been broken (see also Levinas 2010, 122–123).

4. Art as a Reminder of our Infinite Responsibility

In other parts of his works, however, Levinas is more positive about the possibilities of art. In a discussion of the Russian-Jewish writer Vasily Grossman's book *Life and Fate* (2006), Levinas believes that Grossman's collective novel, anchored in a real historical context, sheds light on how the face of the Other's is directed towards us and what our responsibility towards her looks like. In this light, according to Levinas, art can have the ethical potential that he has previously rejected. How can this be understood? One way to understand this paradoxical stance is that, according to Levinas, a narrative representation cannot show the face of another, while he believes that art has the potential to illuminate what our responsibility for the other looks like.

Levinas gives clues as to how it is possible to see the face in art, to hear its appeal in literature. In interviews conducted during the 80s and 90s, he mentions Grossman's *Life and Fate* on several occasions. In Grossman, Levinas sees a kinship with the idea of an ethics beyond essence and ontology. Grossman succeeds, according to Levinas, in describing the vulnerability and exposure of the face in such a way that the reader can hear its call for infinite responsibility.

The face does not mean exclusively the concrete face. In *Alterity and Transcendence* (1999), Levinas writes:

Face that thus is not exclusively the face of man. In Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (Part Three, Chapter 23), there is mention of a visit to the Lubyanka in Moscow by the families or wives or relatives of political prisoners, to get news of them. A line is formed in front of the windows, in which they can only see each other's backs. A woman waits for her turn: "Never had she thought the human back could be so expressive and transmit states of mind so penetratingly. The people who approached the window had a special way of stretching the neck and back; the raised shoulders had shoulder-blades tensed as if by springs, and they seemed to shout, to cry, to sob." Face as the extreme precariousness of the other. (Levinas 1999, 140; see Grossman 2006, 667)

The bent necks and backs of the people are vicarious faces, whose screams, cries and sobs carry an ethical demand that shines through the text. In this sense, art *is* a face because the work of art engages us in a way that mobilizes agency and responsibility. The performance seizes us and tears us into the world with the Other again. In fact, I am reminded of this. This is not a question of aesthetic contemplation but a question of how I am already responsible for the Other. In the interview book *Is it Righteous to Be?* (2001), Levinas's reading of Grossman deepens:

Grossman isn't saying that the nape is a face, but that all the weakness, all the mortality, all the naked and disarmed mortality of the other can be read from it. He doesn't say it that way, but the face can assume meaning on what is the "opposite" of the face! The face, then, is not the color of the eyes, the shape of the nose, the ruddiness of the cheeks, etc. (Levinas 2001, 208)

The key words are not "weakness" or "mortality" but simply: "can be read from it." The face of the Other is, in its vulnerability and exposure, *readable*.

Levinas returns to Grossman in a 1990 interview with Françoise Armengaud, in a conversation about the faceless sculptures of the artist Sacha Sosno:

Without mouth, eyes or nose, the arm or the hand by Rodin is already a face. But the napes of the necks of those people waiting in line at the entrance gate of the Lubyanka prison in Moscow, in order to transmit letters and packages to parents or friends—arrested by the GPU, according to Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*—napes which still express anguish, anxiety and tears to those who see them in the waiting line, are—though otherwise—obliterated faces. Can Sosno's obliteration, by means of a square placed over the face, by its brutal negation, have the same signification, the same profundity? (Levinas 2019, 35)

Levinas speaks of obliterated faces. Faces that are present through their absence, that attract attention by disappearing and become visible in their disappearance.

The face is not an object among others in the world, is nothing that can be examined, visually perceived or touched. It is neither a representation nor an image nor anything that exists in the world of ideas. The face precedes language and thought, philosophy. The face hides an infinity that only shows itself as a trace (see 1986). The question is not: what is the face? Rather, what role does it play for Levinas, what significance does the face have for ethics in general?

If a work of art succeeds in showing a human appearing as human in its vulnerability and exposure, then it is a face.

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