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## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHICS AND LITERATURE IN LIGHT OF LEVINAS'S WORK**

The relationship between ethics and literature cannot be properly understood without consideration of the relevance of Lévinas's philosophy to 'ethical turn'. A term itself was introduced by Laurence Buell in 1999 to describe a new ethical approach to literary studies. In his essay *In Pursuit of Ethics* he turned to Lévinasian thought to provide grounding for a model of reading as personal encounter that engenders ethical responsibility. Buell regarded the nineties of the 20th century as a decade of ethical paradigm. He attempted to present the characteristics of ethical turn despite its diversity.

To begin with, the figure of historically-embedded author plays an important role in an ethically-engaged act of reading. Buell claims that according to this approach to literary studies, a literary work should be treated like an Other to whom we owe respect. The notion of responsibility on the part of the reader is of the utmost importance. Moreover, ethical criticism is concerned with the formal features of literary work. The narrative itself has ethical significance. Given that the acts, which are classified as ethical, can take place in the social background, not in isolation, the boundaries between the public and political sphere become blurred and not easy to define.

Lévinas's influence becomes evident if we take into account Derek Attridge's views. It was him who took over the notions: *responsibility* and *Other* from Lévinas's works in order to delineate the readers' relation to literary work. According to Attridge's account of an act of reading, which was delineated in *The Singularity of Literature*, we are called on to take responsibility for the act of reading which should be an innovative, eventlike relation. Reading is seen as a personal

encounter that engenders ethical responsibility and contributes to the subject being remade. In addition, Attridge emphasizes a significance of the category of 'response', which plays an important role in his analyses of an act of reading.

The first part of this essay is devoted to delineate Lévinas's ambiguous approach to arts and poetry. Following this, subsequent parts will focus on the concepts which are particularly important from the perspective of ethical criticism. Second part explores the distinction between *the Saying* and *the Said*. Afterwards, in order to provide us with a basis for a new interpretation of literary works, I shall discuss both the understanding of responsibility and the concept of language, which stem from Lévinas's thought. To illustrate my thesis, I intend to refer to literary works, i.e. William Wordsworth's and John Maxwell Coetzee's ones.

### **Lévinas's approach to arts and poetry**

There are some reservations concerning direct application of Lévinas's thought to the artistic discourse. Lévinas was suspicious of art for a couple of reasons. Similarly, deconstruction, understood as a theory based on Jacques Derrida's works, does not have an appeal to interpretation of literary works<sup>1</sup>. Regardless of this, the authors such as Derek Attridge and Joseph Hillis Miller, who were strongly inspired by either Lévinas's or Derrida's views, presented innovative modes of reading. According to Lévinas, art falls under double exclusion. From an ontological perspective, artwork does not give us knowledge of the Absolute. Contrary to this Hegelian view, Lévinas is inclined to think about art as being only a shadow of reality. It has only an illusory being and a secondary status. Another reason for excluding art is Lévinas's distrust of the idea of representation. He strongly associates an image with the consciousness of the absence of the object. The consciousness of the representation lies in realising that the object itself is not there. Aforementioned statement of an absence and representation is an underlying principle of the philosopher's phenomenology of images.

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<sup>1</sup> For further and comprehensive study on the relation between Levinas's and Derrida's thought see [Critchley 1999].

Apart from this, Lévinas's central idea of a face-to-face relationship is based on the assumption of presence. The living presence of a face is a guarantee of ethics. The face breaks through the form. If we challenge the idea of presence, we run the risk of confusing presence with its representation.

In addition to this, In *Reality and its Shadow* he voiced his concerns about art, which does not deal with the real world, but with its resemblance. As a result of this, she is essentially disengaged and does not contribute to changing of the actual world. Contemplating artwork consists in a refusal of responsibility, which is also one of the ideas crucial to understand Lévinas's philosophy. The experience of a work of art results in a crisis of subjectivity. It can be compared with the Kantian category of *sublime* due to the fact that the consequences of art are disturbance and restlessness. To illustrate his thesis, Lévinas takes rhythm and dream as examples. We participate in it without previous engagement or decision. According to Lévinas:

Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it. It is so not even despite itself, for in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity [Levinas 1948, 4].

Here arises the question if it is possible to reconcile two contrasting claims. According to the first, art is an experience of *il y a*. Lévinas was convinced that *il y a* consists in an anonymity and thus poses a threat to the 'hipostasis'. The second states that art (Lévinas talked mainly about literature in this context) opens to the other. Art deprives the ego of its power and initiative, and anticipates the obsession and trauma which are associated with the ethical relation, especially in works such as *Otherwise than being*.

Nevertheless, for Lévinas, an aesthetic experience has an ethical aspect. Despite his critique of the arts, he appreciated poetry as a mode of transcendence<sup>2</sup>. The poet is given an opportunity to «become a sign»

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth raising a question concerning an epic and a drama and the possibility of perceiving both of them as a mode of transcendence. In the course of my consideration, I will make an attempt to examine this issue.

and to look for the Other. Lévinas's critical approach to subjectivity in a strong sense admits the abandonment of the paradigm in which the poet is perceived as a genius who reveals the truth. Such a paradigm is typical to Romanticism, and is best exemplified by Schelling and his aesthetic theory of genius and creation. The French philosopher approaches the subject differently. Quoting Celan, he outlines the subtle process of desubstantialisation that the poet enacts on herself by virtue of "remaining dedicated to it [the poem — M.W.]" [Lévinas 1996, 43]. Exploring his conception of poetry should supply an insight into this problem.

A quick remark on Lévinas's way of justifying the aforementioned thesis is here in order. He turned to Paul Celan's work because of poet's approach to a poem. The author of regarded a poem as a dialogical phenomenon. It should be however highlighted that it is not the only way of seeing the role of poetry. In other words, there were artists who insisted on its exclusiveness. The Model Reader<sup>3</sup> of their poems should be well-educated and capable of identifying the cultural background and taking a hint. Such tendency was quite prominent in art of 19th century, especially in modernism. To be specific, Baudelaire's works demanded an activity on the part of the reader, who was to make an effort to interpret new means of expression and rejection of traditional values: both aesthetical and ethical.

The example of Baudelaire's works is not intended to falsify Lévinas's view. The aim of referring to the ideas of the artist in question is to state that Lévinas's conception of poetry should be seen as a normative ideal, not as a descriptive model. As a result, its appeal is confined to particular literary works. In another essay (*The poet's vision*) which is devoted to an analysis of Maurice Blanchot's poetry, Lévinas remarks that Blanchot thinks about poetry as a mode of responsiveness to what is singular and refractory to consciousness. Lévinas asked how any relationship with the alterity is possible without reducing alterity to something of mine. It is believed to be an issue which is crucial to Lévinas's thought. To argue my point concerning the limited appeal of Lévinas's thought, take William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as an example:

O Friend! one feeling was there which belonge'd

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term in Umberto Eco's sense.

To this great City; be exclusive right;  
How often in the overflowing Streets,  
Have I gone forward with the Crowd, and said  
Unto myself, the face of every one  
That passes by me is a mystery.

(...)

Abruptly to be smitten with the view  
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,  
Stood propp'd against a Wall, upon his Chest  
Wearing a written paper, to explain  
The story of the Man, and who he was.  
My mind did at this spectacle turn round  
As with the might of waters, and it seem'd  
To me that in this Label was a type,  
Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,  
Both of ourselves and the universe;  
And, on the shape of the unmoving man,  
His fixèd face and sightless eyes, I look'd

As if admonish'd from another world. [Wordsworth 1955, 391–392]

The scene of an encounter with a blind Beggar can be interpreted with reference to Lévinas's thought, as an event of the face addressing me, calling to me. Apart from this, the presented scene may well be intended to show the limits of the poet's conceptual structures and therefore, call him to responsibility [Haney 1999, 41]. It goes without saying that Wordsworth's poem may be viewed as an exemplification of Lévinas's account of poetry.

To sum up this account, there are striking similarities between the poetic and the ethical. Both poetry and ethics fall outside of the categories of cognition. Poetic thought allows one to think without conceptual specification of what is being thought. As far as ethics is concerned, it is based on the assumption that the relation is not the one of knowledge or power. Given that poetry and the ethical should not be associated with intentionality and propositions, they are on the other side of thematisation. Lévinas regards both of them as materializations of language. It however should be highlighted that this materiality is restricted to the sounds of words. Owing to his iconoclasm, Lévinas prefers sounds to visual signs of words. The poetry is an exposure, it reveals the corporeality of the subject. Provided that language is defined that way, we can say that "the face speaks".

## **The concept of language**

Poetry exemplifies a dimension of language which is described as *le Dire sans le Dit*. This distinction: le Dire (The Saying) and le Dit (The Said) is particularly important from an ethical point of view. According to Robert Eaglestone, it underlies ethical criticism. The Saying is a metaphor and it cannot be grasped or conceptualized. In *Otherwise than Being* Lévinas expressed his ideas:

Saying is not a game. Antecedent to the verbal signs that it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification. The original or pre-original saying (...) does not move into a language, in which saying and the said are correlative of one another, and the saying is subordinated to its theme. [Lévinas 1998, 5–6]

In an attempt to justify the ethical aspect of saying, Lévinas rejects the possibility of understanding the Saying in terms of a game or amusement. Language is made up of the saying and the Said. In light of linguistics, they are correlative of one another. Despite the fact that saying takes place in language, the Saying is irreducible to language and cannot be subsumed to the Said. In contrast to the Said, the Saying does not convey any message. To illustrate Lévinas's point, take as an example an ordinary conversation about weather. The Said is a speech content whilst the Saying can be described as a speech event. It involves the interlocutor in the conversation and can contribute to a pregnant silence, which is also a mode of communication.

To a certain degree, we may draw a parallel to Austin's distinction between constatives and performatives. The comparison is based on the fact that the Saying is described as a speech event and cannot be perceived as either true or false. Within Lévinas's theory, The Saying has an impact on both: the speaker and the receiver. In turn, Austin advocated a view which accepts communication as the communication of an intentional meaning – speech acts may have multiple functions, depending on the kind of influence the speaker wants to have on the receiver, who is to react in a certain way. We should not, however, overlook the difference between two views. While Lévinas's was inclined to think that the language is composed of both:

the Saying and the Said and applied this distinction to poetry, Austin's theory of speech acts was not intended to interpret literary works. What is more, Austin made a few adjustments to his theory, which lead to the rejection of constatives/performatives distinction. Before continuing, let us take a brief look at the distinction in light of deconstruction. This will help us understand Derek Attridge's concepts, especially an eventlike relation with literary work. Despite Derrida's critique of Austinian Speech Act Theory, constative/performative distinction plays an important role in his and Paul de Man's works. It should be however clarified that de Man understood the notions differently. According to him, the constative function should not be dissolved by force of the performative function. De Man sets these functions against each other.

Regardless of the aforementioned similarities to Austin's concepts, Lévinas's The Said/The Saying distinction has its irreducible ethical aspect. Regardless of any previous engagement, a subject influenced by the Saying, is in a relation of proximity with the other. This idea is crucial to understand Lévinas's concept of language, as it was significant in the course of development of philosopher's ideas. In this context, it is enough to mention an early essay *The Language and Proximity*, which belongs to Lévinas's early works. Bernard Waldenfels was convinced that for Lévinas, the Saying means speaking to the Other before and beyond saying something. According to him, the Saying involves proposing, responding and giving. Levinas's intuitions runs counter to traditional version of communication system, which included the speaker and the hearer, both of whom are able to understand each other thanks to 'tacit consent' and conventional character of signs. This schema was accompanied by an assumption that the speaker and the hearer are equal. They share characteristics with respect to mental abilities. This view was prominent in 18th century, due to the fact that it was embedded in Locke's account of communication. Contrary to this belief, Lévinas regards the speaker as someone who lost his central place and becomes involved in an 'intrigue of responsibility'. [Waldenfels 2005, 90]

In conclusion, the Saying, with its genuinely ethical aspect, is prior to the language, it underlies it. The ethical relation stems from the Saying. The distinction between the Saying and the Said has also a temporal aspect. To put it in Lévinas's terms, the Saying is a diachrony

which goes beyond the synchrony of the Said, speech content. Opposing synchrony and diachrony, Lévinas wanted to stress an unavoidable delay connected to face-to-face encounter. Ethical relation was founded in the past, which was never present. As a result, I am always late for face-to-face encounter. Diachrony reflects Lévinas's account of ethics far more precisely than synchrony does. The synchrony puts the relation at risk of totalisation. The same occurs to application of these terms to discourse.

To support this thesis, Lévinas presents arguments for uncovering the ethical in language. They were refined and modified throughout the course of development of his philosophy. The key argument from *Totality and Infinity* revolves around the fact that:

Signification is the Infinite, but infinity does not present itself to a transcendental thought, nor even to a meaningful activity, but presents itself in the Other; the Other faces me and puts me in question and *oblige*s me by his essence qua infinity. That "something" we call signification arises in being with language because the essence of language is the relation with the Other. [Levinas 1969, 207]

There are two aspects of revealing the ethical in language. To begin with, Lévinas argues that the signification cannot be constituted in a transcendental operation performed by an isolated consciousness. The thought is already embedded in the system of signs and in the tongue of population or civilisation. He however remarks that nowadays it is a prevailing view. Lévinas's analysis goes even further. The being of signification is based on putting into question its constitutive freedom. The signification is made manifest in the face, which brings about the first signification. The face-to-face relation founds language. For this reason, every recourse to words is dependent on this primordial relation. Society and universal values all eventually boil down to this exclusiveness of face-to-face.

In *Otherwise than Being* Lévinas attempted to escape the ontological language. Strongly influenced by Derrida, he refrained from using the word: 'essence'. As it was mentioned before, this word was used in *Totality and Infinity* to define the language. He turned to terms such as responsibility and substitution, all of which are enacted in



language. Substitution ends up in saying, in giving of signs. Despite-me, for-another is signification *par excellence*. Language is no longer only a tool for expressing my unique response to the other. It becomes a condition of ethics itself and any case of responsibility. To sum up, while in *Totality and Infinity* the source of the ethical was a face-to-face relation, in *Otherwise than Being* the ethical is made manifest in language.

According to Lévinas, every discourse reveals proximity and the saying to some extent. Absolute difference is presented in language. The language relates to the interlocutor who is physically present and speaking. The language can be described as an amphibology, owing to the fact that may be interpreted twofold: the language consists of the immanent said and the transcendent saying which questions the Said. There is no pure saying nor pure said. In fact, they are interconnected. Literary art, in particular, must be composed of the interaction of the saying and the said. Any attempt to translate the Saying into the Said is bound to be a failure. For instance, the choice of metaphors and an interrogative style of *Otherwise than Being* articulate performatively the concept of interruption of traditional discourse. As a consequence, it contributes to looking for the traces of the Saying. To put it another way, it becomes evident that the Saying/the Said distinction goes beyond the view which considered form and content as distinct aspects of a work of art and attempted to analyse them separately. Lévinas's stylistic choices are consistent with the prevailing tendency in the field of theory of literature in 20th century. Russian Formalism emphasised that form and content are inextricably connected. Neither form nor content can be grasped and understood properly when they are considered as independent from each other.

## **Responsibility**

Robert Eaglestone believed that another aspect of the Saying, which was indicated by Levinas, is strongly connected to the questions: 'Why does the other concern me'? What is Hecuba to me? Am I my brother's keeper?' Each of them belongs to a different kind of discourse:

Heidegger's works, Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* and the story of Cain and Abel. These questions would be meaningless and out of place supposing literature was reducible to the said. If it was the case, nobody would feel motivated to shoulder the responsibility for the other. Apart from Hecuba, Lévinas relates to Job and many characters from works of Dostojewski and Shakespeare with the intention of using them as examples. For instance, the history of Job reflects the responsibility which surpasses his previous deeds and involvement. Lévinas appeals to literary works as to authorities on responsibility. To exemplify this tendency, I can indicate the quote from Dostojewski: 'We are all responsible for everyone else — but I am more responsible than all the others'. Philosopher repeats this continuously. This quotation plays an important role in expressing his views concerning responsibility.

What is more, on the grounds that The Saying can be described as speech event, it is also consistent with Attridge's view of literature. He tried to define it in terms of singularity and creativity. The work of literature is influenced by both: the culture in which the writer was born and his idiolect. Therefore it should be interpreted as a form of otherness. Besides, Attridge regarded an act of reading as an event which opens new possibilities of meaning. Interpreting a work of art according to fixed rules imposed by a methodology pose a threat to the otherness embodied in it. On balance, Attridge proposed innovative mode of reading which the breaks limits of conventional uses. Attridge's reference to Lévinas's thought leads to a conclusion that although his concept of language underlies ethical criticism, one ought to have some reservations about applying his philosophy to literature tout court. In order to shed a new light on the aforementioned problem and reconcile the presented accounts of an act of reading which seem contradictory, it is vital to present Derek Attridge's conception. He rejects the prevailing and reductive view that the distinctive ethical demand made by literary work is to be defined either by its characters and plot or by its depiction of virtues and vices. All of this can be found in other types of writing, i.e. journalists or historical.

Attridge remarks: 'Literature, for all the force which it is capable of exercising, can achieve nothing without readers — responsible readers' [Attridge 2004, 131]. Attridge acknowledges that the choices that the reader makes are of the utmost importance. The author of *The Singularity of Literature* believes that being a responsible reader consist

in enacting an eventlike relation with literary work. His account is strongly influenced by Lévinas's concept of the Saying understood as a Speech Event. The process of reading is described in terms of innovation, singularity and creation. As a consequence, it makes a demand on the reader, who should be capable of working against mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same. In practice, it involves changing our familiar modes of interpreting and refiguration of the ways we feel and think. The responsible reader rejects interpreting literary work in an instrumental and conventional way. He keeps at distance possible uses of artwork in question, such as moral lesson, historical evidence or a path to truth. When reading this way, readers should cherish the unpredictability and be prepared to be challenged by literary work, also by its formal innovations.

This raises the question: how to read responsibly a particular literary work? In my opinion, a responsible act of reading Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians* takes notice of the political context which reflects the situation in South Africa in 1970s and 1980s. While a responsible reader is aware of this context, she does not limit her interpretation to it. She may also pay attention to motives which are similar to those present in Conrad's *The Heart of darkness*. Apart from this, the reader can reflect on an alienation effect revealed in language by a description of sunglasses which is made by the magistrate — a man who has never seen such object:

I have never seen anything like this: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. [Coetzee 1999, 4]

The motif of blindness occurs in many episodes of the history. It is particularly connected to moral issues. Not only the motif emphasises the diversity of protagonists' perspectives when it comes to cognition, but also the differences between the magistrate and Colonel. At first, the magistrate is not aware of mechanisms which influence the political situation of the Empire, but throughout the development of the plot his awareness raises. The magistrate slowly understands imperialists' outlook and recognizes his affinities to the torturers of the barbarians.

The protagonists should be perceived as an embodiments of contrasting attitudes to values and morality, which sometimes intervene with each other:

As though touched by his murderous current he [Colonel Joll] reluctantly turns his face towards me. Then he sidles across the seat until he is looking at me through the glass. His face is naked, washed clean, perhaps by the blue moonlight, perhaps by physical exhaustion. I stare at his pale high temples. (...) He looks out at me. The black lenses are gone. Must he too suppress an urge to reach out, claw me, blind me with splinters? I have a lesson for him that I have long meditated. I mouth the words and watch him read them on my lips: The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves, I say. I nod and nod, driving the message home. Not on others. [Coetzee 1999, 195]

In the quoted passage, it strikes me that the face of Colonel Joll is naked, he does not have his sunglasses. The symbolic aspect of the scene boils down to the fact that now he is able to confront with the widely divergent opinion. Although the protagonists seem to reach at least partial agreement, it does not necessarily mean that we will modify and rethink his deeds and moral principles. Taking into account the ambiguous morality of the magistrate and the Colonel, responsible act of reading may also challenge the urge to think about ethics in terms of binary oppositions.

In my essay I attempted to the relation between ethics and literature in the context of Lévinas's thought. My interpretation was based on his main works *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being* and essays concerning arts and poetry: *Reality and its Shadow*, *The poet's vision*. Although his theory cannot be have a direct appeal to literature, Lévinas influenced many thinkers associated with ethical criticism, i.e. Jacques Derrida, Derek Attridge and Robert Eaglestone.

Taking the above considerations into account, the relation between literature and ethics becomes apparent. If we consider literature as a form of relating to the other, Lévinas's philosophy offers innovative interpretive solutions. In his view, the ethical shares characteristics with poetry. Not only the distinction between the Said and the Saying, but also his concept of language, both underlie ethical criticism. As it was mentioned before, literary language is an opening to

the ethical saying. Thanks to the Saying, an agent is able to take responsibility. The concept of Saying seems to be promising from the perspective of ethical criticism. This orientation focuses on the responsibility on the part of those who take part in the act of reading. With reference to Derek Attridge's analyses, Lévinas's notion of poetry can be regarded as a metonymy of literature tout court. Consequently, it has a wider appeal and allows to interpret not only poems but also great epic novels in light of Lévinas's concepts.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHICS AND LITERATURE IN LIGHT OF LEVINAS'S WORK**

In my paper I intend to uncover the relationship between ethics and literature. The aforementioned issue is connected to 'ethical turn' — new orientation in literary studies, which was introduced in the nineties of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In order to uncover its source of inspiration, I refer to Lévinas's works, such as *Reality and its Shadow*, *The poet's vision*, *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being*. I advocate the view that not only Lévinas's concept of language, but also his account of poetry and responsibility underlie ethical criticism. Therefore, they are regarded as crucial to understand this new approach to literary studies. To illustrate my thesis, I attempt to interpret literary works, i.e. Wordsworth's and Coetzee's in light of Lévinas's concepts.

**KEYWORDS:** ethical criticism, Lévinas, poetry, responsibility, language, ethics, theory of literature