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Nemanja Mitrović

ETHICS AND LITERATURE: LEVINAS AND LITERARY CRITICISM

ABSTRACT

The question posed by this text is: can we use Levinasian ethics in the field of literary studies? In order to provide the answer, Levinas's attitude toward art will need to be analyzed. His work contains numerous scattered remarks about literature and other arts, but the most explicit statement on the relationship between art and ethics can be found in his essay "Reality and Its Shadow". Since Levinas's view on art in this essay is predominantly negative, it poses a significant problem for the application of his theory in the field of literary studies. In order to overcome this difficulty, I use Blanchot's reworking of Levinasian ethics, and open the possibility of a different relation between literature and ethics than the one originally suggested by Levinas.

KEYWORDS

Levinas, ethics, art, literature, Blanchot

Introduction

In the very first chapter of *The Location of Culture*, in a crucial place where he explains the aim of his project, Homi Bhabha invokes Levinas's famous text "Reality and Its Shadow" (Bhabha 1994: 13–16). He focuses on a portrait of Aila from Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* and claims that in it we can glimpse at that which Levinas described as the essential feature of art – a creation of an aesthetic image. Bhabha writes: "For Levinas, the 'art-magic' of the contemporary novel lies in its way of 'seeing inwardness from the outside' and it is this ethical-aesthetic positioning that returns us, finally, to the community of the unhomely [...]" (Bhabha 1994: 16)

However, the attempt to think about the relation between Levinas's ethics and art (especially relation to literature) would require a much more careful and nuanced reading of Levinas. In his text, Bhabha not only decontextualizes Levinas's claims from "Reality and Its Shadow" but also loses sight of Levinas's philosophical project which contains deep distrust toward art. This brings us

to the main topic of this work: is it possible to apply Levinas's ethics to literary criticism? Or, in Levinasian terms, is art capable of signifying transcendence?

In order to answer these fundamental questions, we need to examine Levinas's hostility toward art and the already mentioned deep distrust of the aesthetic realm. If ethics and literature are incommensurable and if art, in general, occupies a negative place within Levinas's project of ethics as first philosophy, how can we use Levinas's notions in the interpretation of literary artworks?¹

“Reality and Its Shadow” and Levinas's View on Literature

The work of Emmanuel Levinas does not offer a coherent and unambiguous aesthetic theory and understanding of art.² However, there are numerous and scattered references to various artworks in Levinas's oeuvre and several texts in *Proper Names* are devoted to interpretations of literary works (Levinas 1996). “Reality and Its Shadow” is an essay that directly speaks about the relationship between art and ethics and shows Levinas's deep hostility toward art.

Levinas begins this essay by seemingly agreeing with Heidegger: “An artist – even a painter, even a musician – tells. He tells of the ineffable” (Levinas 1989: 130). Art's power lies in its capability to tell us the truth about reality: art is capable of unveiling the essence of beings. After this supposed initial agreement with Heidegger, Levinas poses the following question: if art really unveils the essence of beings, how can we explain the existence of criticism? According to Levinas, the public is not satisfied by the unveiling provided by aesthetic enjoyment. Therefore, the existence of criticism proves that art is not (and that it cannot become) a form of knowledge. The very existence of criticism proves that something is wrong with art:

If art originally were neither language nor knowledge, if it were therefore situated outside of ‘being in the world’ which is coextensive with truth, criticism would be rehabilitated. It would represent the intervention of the understanding necessary for integrating the inhumanity and inversion of art into human life and into the mind. (Levinas 1989: 131)

Levinas also states that art is essentially disengaged: “a work would not belong to art if it did not have this formal structure of completion if at least in this way it were not disengaged” (Levinas 1989: 131). It is self-sufficient and complete in itself and therefore disengaged from the world. Literary criticism functions as a bridge between art and reality. As something self-sufficient and complete in itself art refuses a dialogue with reality and it cannot be the unveiling of truth. In “Reality and Its Shadow”, Levinas writes:

1 Homi Bhabha is not alone in attempting to join Levinasian ethics and literary criticism. For example, a similar and more elaborated project can be found in Andrew Gibson's *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* (Gibson 1999).

2 I wrote more extensively about this in *The (Im)Possibility of Literature as the Possibility of Ethics* (Mitrović 2017: 213–250).

Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. To put it in theological terms, which will enable us to delimit however roughly our ideas by comparison with contemporary notions: art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction. (Levinas 1989: 132)

Art is disengaged from the world because the basic procedure of art “consists in substituting for the object its image” (Levinas 1989: 132). Since the object is substituted by its image and not by its concept the relationship with the real object is neutralized. The best description of this artistic disengagement and disinterestedness is blindness to concepts.

Chapter 4 of *Existence and Existents* further explores the already mentioned disengagement. First, Levinas repeats his description of disengagement but also claims:

What is called the disinterestedness of art does not only refer to the neutralization of the possibilities of action. Exoticism modifies the contemplation itself. The “objects” are outside, but this outside does not relate to an “interior”; they are not already naturally “possessed”. A painting, a statue, a book are objects of our world, but through them the things represented are extracted from our world.

Even the most realistic art gives this character of alterity to the objects represented which are nonetheless part of our world. It presents them to us in their nakedness, that real nakedness which is not absence of clothing, but we might say the absence of forms, that is, the non-transmutation of our exteriority into inwardness, which forms realize. The forms and colors of a painting do not cover over but uncover the things in themselves, precisely because they preserve the exteriority of those things. (Levinas 1995: 52–53)

According to Levinas, the relationship between literature and the real world is never straightforward. He makes a covert reference to Mallarméan poetics by claiming that, in literature, a word “detaches itself from its objective meaning and reverts to the element of the sensible [...]” (Levinas 1995: 54). In literary work, a word acquires the power of ambiguity and the multiplicity of meanings. Precisely that loss of connection between a word and its objective meaning is the basis for what Levinas names the exoticism of art. He claims that the already mentioned materialization of words is a defining feature of literature. Or, more precisely, literature is a language that became its own image.

Images possess a power of fascination. They are capable to enchant us and “images impose themselves on us without our assuming them” (Levinas 1989: 132). In his fascination with images, the subject loses the connection with himself; he ceases to experience himself as himself. An artist is someone who is fascinated by images and he experiences the events in his life in the third person. For him, even the events from his own life look like the adventures from a book. An artist, even before he can be called an artist, is always already in the realm of the imaginary where he experiences himself as another and where

he cannot speak in the first person. Basic experience of literature is the experience of passage from *he (je)* to *it (il)*.

Is it possible to perceive this passage as a sign of alterity that comes from the inside? In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explicitly rejects this possibility and describes this passage that happens in literature as spurious or finite alterity. He writes:

The I is identical in its very alterations in yet another sense. The I that thinks hearkens to itself thinking or takes fright before its depths and is to itself an other. It thus discovers the famous naïvete of its thought, which thinks “straight on” as one’s “follows one’s nose” [...qui pense “devant elle”, comme on marche “devant soi”]. It hearkens to itself thinking and surprises itself being dogmatic, foreign to itself. But faced with this alterity the I is the same, merges with itself, is incapable of apostasy with regard to this surprising “self”. Hegelian phenomenology, where self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of objects thought and despite the opposition of self to self. “I distinguish myself from myself; and therein I am immediately aware that this factor distinguished from me is not distinguished. I, the selfsame being, thrust myself away from myself; but this which is distinguished, which is set up unlike me, is immediately on its being distinguished not distinction for me”. The Difference is not a difference; the I, as other, is not an “other”. [...] The alterity of the I that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same: the negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I. (Levinas 1979: 36–37)

In “Reality and Its Shadow”, Levinas insists upon the distinction between image and concept. In the concept, the object is comprehended and the relationship between the concept and the real object is maintained. On the other hand, the image neutralizes this relationship and creates an imaginary world of art that is entirely unreal. Of course, although unreal, it can resemble the real world, but this resemblance is not a product of a comparison between the object and its image. The thing is, at the same time, what it is and its own image; the thing is, simultaneously, something disclosed in truth and something that resembles itself (image of itself). Levinas writes:

Being is not – only itself, it escapes itself. Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness. The picturesque is always to some extent a caricature. Here is a familiar everyday thing, perfectly adapted to the hand which is accustomed to it, but its qualities, color, form, and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the ‘old garments’ of a soul which had withdrawn from that thing, like a ‘still life.’ And yet all this is the person and is the thing. There is then a duality in this person, this thing, a duality in its being. It is what it is and it is a stranger

to itself, and there is a relationship between these two moments. We will say the thing is itself and is its image. And that this relationship between the thing and its image is resemblance. (Levinas 1989: 135)

When we are looking at the image, we know that this is not a real thing. We are aware that an image represents the absent object and that this absence is a constitutive feature of the work of art. However, image is problematic for Levinas because it is not a simple absence. If we want to describe it in the most accurate way, the image would be a presence of absence. Precisely this presence sheltered in absence opens up that imaginary and neutral space in which the incessant murmur of *il y a* can be heard.

After the exploration of this relationship between art and images, Levinas attempts to describe the temporality of artwork. He claims that every artwork is essentially a statue because it freezes time:

Within the life, or rather the death, of a statue, an instant endures infinitely: eternally Laocoon will be caught up in the grip of serpents; the Mona Lisa will smile eternally. Eternally, the future announced in the strained muscles of Laocoon will be unable to become present. Eternally, the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden. An eternally suspended future floats around the congealed position of a statue like a future forever to come. The imminence of the future lasts before an instant stripped of the essential characteristic of the present, its evanescence. It will never have completed its task as a present, as though reality withdrew from its own reality and left it powerless. In this situation the present can assume nothing, can take on nothing, and thus is an impersonal and anonymous instant. (Levinas 1989: 138)

This is a crucial part of Levinas's essay where he explicitly states why art cannot be ethical. Temporality created by the work of art is the one of eternal present. Basic feature of this eternal present is radical passivity without even a possibility of agency. The most adequate name for this eternal present is *fate*. This is how Levinas describes the temporality of artwork:

In the instant of a statue, in its eternally suspended future the tragic simultaneity of necessity and liberty can come to pass: the power of freedom congeals into impotence. And here too we should compare art with dreams: the instant of a statue is a nightmare. It is not that an artwork reproduces a time that has stopped: in the general economy of being, art is the falling movement on the hither side of time, into fate. (Levinas 1989: 138–139)

Art stops the flow of time and revels in the eternal present that is immune to the future. It is disengaged from the world, foreign to any kind of initiative or agency, and therefore fundamentally irresponsible. Eternal present prevents the emergence and assumption of responsibility and fate excludes freedom. The time of artwork is a time of time's absence which is not our time and lies outside of time. Therefore, art is the evasion of responsibility and because of that Levinas claims: "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 1989: 142).

Since art is shown to be fundamentally irresponsible, the role of criticism consists in bringing the artwork back to the world.³ The role of criticism is precisely to save the art from itself. Levinas insists that even “the most lucid writer finds himself in the world bewitched by its images. He speaks in enigmas, by allusions, by suggestion, in equivocations, as though he moved in a world of shadows, as though he lacked the force to arouse realities, as though he could not go to them without wavering, as though, bloodless and awkward, he always committed himself further than he had decided to do, as though he spills half the water he is bringing us. The most forewarned, the most lucid writer nonetheless plays the fool. The interpretation of criticism speaks in full self-possession, frankly, through concepts, which are like the muscles of the mind” (Levinas 1989: 142–143).⁴

If we follow Levinas’s advice, literary criticism certainly cannot take the form of Homi Bhabha’s reading of *My Son’s Story*. The role of criticism in relation to art can only be a corrective one. Literary artwork can never signify an encounter with fundamental alterity. Applying Levinas’s work to literary criticism without taking into account his deep antipathy toward art can only

3 In his text, Levinas makes a clear distinction between *the eternal duration of the interval* (art) and *the eternity of a concept* (philosophy). The temporality of artwork is captivating in a sense that it cannot come to pass, one remains trapped in it forever. However, is philosophical interpretation something that reintroduces the initiative and responsibility into this dimension of evasion? The final part of Levinas’s essay that is entitled “For Philosophical Criticism” states that interpretation/philosophical exegesis saves art from itself. Criticism makes choices and by doing this “it reintroduces that world into the intelligible world in which it stands, and which is the true homeland of the mind” (Levinas 1989: 142). In his article, “Emmanuel Levinas: Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Art”, Hanoeh Ben-Pazi examines various hermeneutical approaches toward art and their relation to Levinas’s theory of interpretation (Ben-Pazi 2015: 588–600).

4 “Reality and Its Shadow” is usually read as a response to Sartre’s theory of *committed literature*. However, various key terms and statements about art that can be found in Levinas’s essay are clear references to Heidegger. For Heidegger, especially in the second phase of his work (e.g. *On the Way to Language*), art has a privilege position in relation to truth/disclosure of Being. For Levinas, this relation is non-existent. Levinas’s understanding of temporality of artwork can be perceived as a subtle critique of some main points of Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology. Levinas describes the impersonal and eternal duration of the interval that is a main characteristic of artwork as a *time of dying* (Levinas 1989: 140–141). The anonymity and impersonality of dying mentioned in this essay are in clear opposition with Heidegger’s understanding of Being-toward Death in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1996: 219–246). Also, for Levinas, *the meanwhile* is not only the temporality of artwork but also a feature of *there is (il y a)* (Levinas 1995: 57–64). *Il y a* is not only a French translation of German *es gibt* that Heidegger mentions in “Letter on ‘Humanism’” (Heidegger 1998: 254–257) but one of the main points of disagreement between Levinas and Heidegger which Levinas uses to deconstruct the whole project of fundamental ontology. The problem of Levinas’s critique of Heidegger’s understanding of art is very nuanced and therefore a topic for a separate essay.

result in gross oversimplification of his philosophical project. However, a more nuanced approach does not exclude the possibility of thinking art with the help of Levinasian ethics.⁵

Levinas and Literary Criticism: A Possibility?

Levinas's work contains numerous literary references to Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Proust, Blanchot, Poe, etc. What is the status of these references? According to Robert Eaglestone, they are not an integral part of Levinas's philosophical argument; only convenient examples (Eaglestone 1997: 120). However, is it possible to use at least one of these references to construct a counter-argument? Namely, to argue that art is capable to provide an ethical encounter in the Levinasian sense? In order to attempt this, I will use Maurice Blanchot's reading of Duras's short story *The Malady of Death*.⁶ This reading does not only shows us how Blanchot reformulated some of Levinas's key notions but also provides a reading of a literary work with the help of these reformulated notions.⁷

5 Robert Eaglestone, in his book *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*, devotes two chapters to Levinas's relationship with art. In the first one, "'Cold Splendour': Levinas's Suspicion of Art", he explores Levinas's negative understanding of art in texts that were written before *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Eaglestone 1997: 98–128). In the other one, "'What is Hecuba to me': Language Beyond Being and the Task of Criticism", he claims that Levinas's thought in *Otherwise than Being* can become a foundation for a different ethics of art and criticism (Eaglestone 1997: 129–171). Jill Robbins, in her *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*, offers an intriguing thesis that the temporality of *the meanwhile* (temporality of artwork) is actually a temporality of an ethical encounter. In both cases, we are dealing with meta-criticism and with attempts of deconstructing Levinas from within. Both Robbins and Eaglestone are reading literary works that Levinas already read and try to offer a new perspective on these readings and artworks. Robbins refers to Blanchot but only via Levinas's texts gathered in "On Maurice Blanchot" (Levinas 1996: 127–169). None of them takes into account Blanchot's reworking of Levinas that happens in *The Infinite Conversation*, *The Writing of the Disaster*, and *The Unavowable Community*.

6 Blanchot's reading of Duras's story, "The Community of Lovers", comprises the second part of his work entitled *The Unavowable Community*. However, early in 1983, the first version of Blanchot's reading of *The Malady of Death* was published in the journal *Le Nouveau Commerce*.

7 Of course, one needs to point out that Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* consists of two parts: "The Negative Community" and "The Community of Lovers". "The Negative Community" is a direct response to Jean-Luc Nancy's "The Inoperative Community". Discussion between Blanchot and Nancy revolves around two different readings of Bataille's work (and around two different understandings of Bataille's *Acéphale* project). Nancy reads Bataille through the lens of Heidegger and his understanding of *Mitsein* while Blanchot does that with the help of Levinas. More precisely, in his reading, Blanchot uses his reinterpretation of Levinas that he already formulated in *The Infinite Conversation*, *The Step not Beyond*, and *The Writing of the Disaster*. It is a well-known fact that Levinas and Blanchot met during their student days and remained friends until the end of their lives. One of the few photos of Blanchot that is available

Told in the form of a second-person address, *The Malady of Death* is a story about a man who has never known love and who has never been with a woman. He hires the services of an unnamed young woman (who is not a prostitute) to spend several days with him. What does he want? Duras writes:

You say you want to try, try it, try to know, to get used to that body, this breasts, that scent. To beauty, to the risk of having children implicit in that body, to that hairless unmuscular body, that face, that naked skin and the life it contains.

You say you want to try, for several days perhaps.

Perhaps for several weeks.

Perhaps even for your whole life.

Try what? she asks.

Loving, you answer. (Duras 1986: 2–3)

Therefore, he wants to spend several days with her not only to satisfy his need for knowledge, but also to feel love. The role of a woman is to be completely subjugated and to fulfil his every desire. One possible interpretation of this story consists in reading it as a critique of male dominance that prevails in our society. This dominance actually hides the inherent impotence and Duras's story can be interpreted as a critique of our usual understanding of love relationships and testimony that true community is impossible in our contemporary society.

However, what is the meaning of *the malady of death* and why did the unnamed woman accept to spend this time with a man?

You ask her why she accepted the deal and the paid nights.

She answers in a voice still drowsy, almost inaudible: Because as soon as you spoke to me I saw you were suffering from the malady of death...

You ask: Why is the malady of death fatal? She answers: Because whoever has it doesn't know he's a carrier, of death. And also because he's like to die without any life to die to, and without even knowing that's what he's doing. (Duras 1986: 18–19)

to the general public shows him in the company of Levinas. However, a close reading of their works enables us to track their dialogue and mutual influences. For example, in order to describe *il y a* in *Existence and Existents*, Levinas refers to Blanchot's novel *Thomas l'Obscur*. In turn, Blanchot reworks Levinas's notion of *il y a* in his famous essay "Literature and the Right to Death". Various essays in Blanchot's *Infinite Conversation* can be perceived as a direct response to Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. Blanchot's understanding of *le neutre* in this work and in *The Step Not Beyond* is a direct reference to Levinas's negative description of this notion in *Totality and Infinity*. *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* can be seen as Levinas's answer to Blanchot's critique in *The Infinite Conversation* and to the one from Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics". Blanchot's fragmentary work *The Writing of the Disaster* can be read as his answer to *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*.

Is it possible to describe the malady of death as the inability to love; as some inherent lack of feeling of love? How are love and death connected in the malady of death? One way to approach this question is with the help of Denis de Rougemont's examination of the legend about Tristan and Isolde in his book *Love in the Western World*. De Rougemont writes that Tristan and Isolde feel a certain desire that they cannot understand which is stronger than a simple desire for happiness. Obstacles that they encounter are not insurmountable but they use them, first, to break off their relationship and, second, to start searching for each other with renewed vigour. Each separation happens in the name of love and each goodbye actually fuels their love and transforms it into something much more important not only than their happiness but than their life itself. De Rougemont claims that this is the case of *love toward love*: Tristan and Isolde do not love each other but love the idea of love and what binds them together is some external force that they can neither control nor comprehend. Is Duras saying something similar in her work?

You ask how loving can happen – the emotion of loving. She answers: Perhaps a sudden lapse in the logic of the universe. She says: Through a mistake, for instance. She says: Never through an act of will. You ask: could the emotion of loving come from other things too? You beg her to say. She says: It can come from anything, from the flight of the night bird, from a sleep, from a dream of sleep, from the approach of death, from a word, from a crime, of itself, from oneself, often without knowing how. (Duras 1986: 49–50)

Can we use Tristan's words to describe this malady of death which, like some kind of obstacle, separates the unnamed protagonists of Duras's story?

Old tune so full of sadness
 That sing'st thy sad complaint.
 Through evening breezes came that strain,
 as once my father's death I learned in childhood;
 through morning twilight, sadder sounding,
 as to me my mother's fate was told.
 He who begot me died, she dying gave me birth.
 The olden ditty's mournful plaint,
 E'en so to them its numbers came,
 that strain that asked, that asks me still.
 what fate for me was chosen.
 when there my mother bore me,
 what fate for me?
 The olden ditty once more tells me:

'tis yearning and dying!...

Yearning now calls.

for death's repose. (de Rougemont 1983: 49–50)

This interpretation contains a paradoxical moment: yes, death is perceived as the ultimate obstacle but also as a shared goal of Tristan and Isolde. Therefore, on the one hand, the malady of death prevents the fusion of two lovers (it is described as the impossibility of loving or, in de Rougemont's terms, as egotistical love toward love). On the other hand, it causes the relationship of a man and an unnamed woman to begin. A woman accepts a deal offered to her only when she notices that a man suffers from the malady of death and "dying for a loved one" is the ultimate proof of love. The malady of death possesses ambivalent nature; it can be described, at the same time, both as the possibility and the impossibility of love. Can we claim that the malady of death testifies about the undecidability of *The Malady of Death*?

In Duras's work, a young woman proclaims that a man suffers from the malady of death. This sickness is his fate. It is not the actual death that will arrive at some point but death as the abandonment of life that was never really present. However, how can we describe the presence of a young woman? She accepts the deal and every day she is with a man, "present" in a strange way. Yes, she is there but almost always sleeps; she is present as absent. This strange presence reminds Maurice Blanchot of Proust's Albertine:

To be sure, at times one thinks of Proust's Albertine to whom the narrator – scrutinising her slumber – was closest when she was asleep, because then the distance preserving her from the lies and vulgarity of life, permitted an ideal communication – only ideal, it is true, and thus reduced to the vain beauty, the pointless purity of the idea.

But unlike Albertine, and yet perhaps also like her, if one thinks of Proust's not unveiled fate, this young woman is forever separate because of her suspect closeness with which she offers herself, her difference which is that of another species, of another type, or that of the absolutely other. (Blanchot 1988: 38)

Blanchot's obvious reference to *Remembrance of Things Past* hides another important reference. It is the one to Levinas's essay "The Other in Proust". In the context of this work, Levinas's essay is important because it presents a completely different view on art than the one elaborated in "Reality and Its Shadow". According to Levinas, the mystery in Proust's work is the mystery of total alterity.⁸ This alterity is revealed in two ways. Firstly, through the fig-

8 Jill Robbins claims that Levinas's distrust toward art is present even in "The Other in Proust". It only seems that the work of art is capable of teaching us about radical alterity. Robbins writes: "Teaching is an ethical relation, a paradigm of the ethical relation in Totality and Infinity – and this teaching that Proust's work is said to accomplish involves no less than an (impossible) break with Parmenides, philosopher of the unity of being which suppresses the beyond, namely, a break with the governing conceptuality

ure of Albertine whose only reality lies in her eternal evanescence. Even as a prisoner, she has always already disappeared because she possesses a dimension of secrecy that can never be resolved or exhausted. Even when she dies and various shreds of evidence come to light, her mystery remains. Secondly, in this essay Levinas allows the possibility that was previously explicitly excluded. Namely, a possibility of alterity that will come from the inside and not from the outside:

Proustian reflection, dominated by a separation between the *I* and its state, imparts its own accent to the inner life by a kind of refraction. It is as if I were constantly accompanied by another self, in unparalleled friendship, but also in a cold strangeness that life attempts to overcome...

It is not the inner event that counts but the way in which the *I* grasps it and is overcome by it, as if encountering it in someone else. It is this way of taking hold of the event that constitutes the event itself. Hence the life of the psyche takes on an imitable vibrancy. Behind the moving forces of the soul, it is the quiver in which the *I* grasps itself, the dialogue with the other within the self, the soul of the soul. (Levinas 1996: 102)

The narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past* does not love Albertine and man does not love the unnamed woman. They never loved each other if we understand love as a desire toward fusion and ideal unity. However, that non-love is a relation without relation and, as such, a relation with something that remains eternally ungraspable and incomprehensible; a relationship with something that we can never possess: presence of absence.

While the unnamed woman sleeps, a man is constantly doing something: he comes and goes, tells her about things that are happening outside, and narrates about the sea and about his childhood. But is this tireless activity actually a search for love and an attempt at loving? The search for love that man finds only by never finding it. This is how the story ends:

She'd never come back.

The evening after she goes, you tell the story of the affair in a bar. At first, you tell it as if it were possible to do so, then you give up. Then you tell it laughing, as if it were impossible for it to have happened or possible for you to have invented it.

The next day, suddenly, perhaps you'd notice her absence in the room. The next day, you'd perhaps feel a desire to see her there again, in the strangeness of your solitude, as a stranger herself.

of philosophy in the West. Levinas says that Proust teaches the ethical – *if poetry can teach* – but we know that he knows that it cannot, or we know that he has grave doubt about this possibility, because magic and ethics are incompatible, or in the terms of *Totality and Infinity*, poetic rapture interferes with the straightforwardness of ethical discourse. In short, in the Proust essay, Levinas seems to want to have it both ways. Poetry does and does not give access to the ethical” (Robbins 1999: 82).

Perhaps you'd look for her outside your room, on the beaches, outside cafés, in the streets. But you wouldn't be able to find her, because in the light of day you can't recognize anyone. You wouldn't recognize her. All you know of her is her sleeping body beneath her shut or half-shut eyes. The penetration of one body by another – that you can't recognize, ever. You couldn't ever.

When you wept it was just over yourself and not because of the marvelous impossibility of reaching her through the difference that separates you.

*

All you remember of the whole affair are certain words she said in her sleep, the ones that tell you what's wrong with you: the malady of death. Soon you give up, don't look for her anymore, either in the town or at night or in the daytime.

Even so you have managed to live that love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it happened. (Duras 1986: 53–55)

In his *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot writes how one character in Duras's story searches for a love that is refused to him while the other is made for love and allows to be loved (but only under contract) without even offering a glimpse of hope that she can pass from passivity into a limitless passion. Two characters in *The Malady of Death* are essentially unequal and maybe we can claim that this inequality or dissymmetry of an ethical relation is the mystery behind Duras's and Proust's work?

How is dissymmetry connected with the malady of death? The malady of death is something that draws two lovers toward each other while keeping them eternally apart. It can be understood in these two opposite ways because its carrier is only a man but the unnamed woman as well:

You look at the malady of your life, the malady of death. It's on her, on her sleeping body, that you look at it. You look at the different places on the body, at the face, the breasts, the mingled site of the sex.

You realize it's here, in her, that the malady of death is fomenting, that it's this shape stretched out before you that decrees the malady of death. (Duras 1986: 32–34).

Therefore, the malady of death signifies a relation that goes from one to the other (and from the other toward one). However, this relation is not reciprocal but dissymmetrical.

In order to illuminate this notion of *dissymmetry*, we have to turn to *Totality and Infinity*. The possibility of a relation between the Same and the Other is the main problem of Levinas's ethics. He is interested in a possibility of an ethical encounter where Other will not be subsumed under the Same; in a possibility of a relation that does not destroy Other's fundamental alterity but which preserves it. Levinasian ethics grants a special privilege to language and considers language as a nontotalizing relation with the other. Since language

is essentially conversation and since the essence of language is a relation with the other, this also means that a face is faced (*as present*) in language.

In language, the Other speaks to me and shows itself as the Other but this is not a dialogue of two equals. Language establishes a relation without relation that cannot be reduced to subject-object relation. The revelation of the Other happens in language because language presupposes response and plurality. Language enables a relation with the Other's transcendence. Precisely this transcendence of Other's fundamental alterity implies that in ethical relations exists an interruption that prevents the formation of totality. Therefore, ethical relation is always *asymmetrical*:

The presence of the face coming from beyond the world, but committing me to human fraternity, does not overwhelm me as a numinous essence arousing fear and trembling. To be in relationship while absolving oneself from this relation is to speak. The Other does not only *appear* in his face, as a phenomenon subject to the action and domination of a freedom; infinitely distant from the very relation he enters, he presents himself there from the first as an absolute. The I disengages itself from the relationship, but does so within relationship with a being absolutely separated. The face with which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face. To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated. (Levinas 1979: 215)

What is the meaning of this essential inequality? The Other can be on a higher or on a lower level than me but always Other, Distant, and Stranger never someone similar to me (another myself).

In his essay "The Relation of the Third Kind", Blanchot reformulates Levinas's asymmetrical relation into a relation of the one to the Other that is doubly dissymmetrical. This relation is characterised by the strangeness and this strangeness is neither separation nor distance but interruption. It does not relate me to another myself and it cannot be described in terms of power. It is a relation with something that is radically out of my reach; a relation of impossibility, strangeness, and a presence of absence. In his work, Blanchot reconfigures Levinas's *asymmetry* into *double dissymmetry*. This reconfiguration enables a possibility of ethics of writing/literature:

(1) Language, the experience of language – writing – is what leads us to sense a relation entirely other, a relation of the third kind. We will have to ask ourselves in what manner we enter into this experience, assuming that it does not repel us, and ask ourselves if it does not speak to us as the enigma of all speech.

(2) *In this relation that we are isolating in a manner that is not necessarily abstract, the one is never comprehended by the other, does not form with him an ensemble, a duality, or a possible unity; the one is foreign to the other, without this strangeness privileging either one of them. We call this relation neutral, indicating already in this manner that it cannot be recaptured, either when one affirms or when one negates, demanding of language in this way not an indecision between these two modes, but rather a possibility of saying that would say without saying being and without denying it either. And herein we characterise, perhaps, one of the essential traits of the “literary” act: the very fact of writing.*

(3) *The neutral relation, a relation without relation, can be indicated in yet another manner: the relation of the one to the other is doubly dissymmetrical. We have recognised this several times. We know – at least we sense – that the absence between the one and the other is such that the relations, if they could be unfolded, would be those of a non-isomorphic field in which point A would be distant from point B by a distance other than point B’s distance from point A; a distance excluding reciprocity and presenting a curvature whose irregularity extends to the point of discontinuity. (Blanchot 1993: 73)*

Blanchot insists that the relation between the Same and the Other is actually doubled by another relation without relation that goes from Other toward the Same. Or, to put it differently, the Same “I”, for the Other, is nothing else but the Other: the Other’s Other. Blanchot’s relation without relation always goes simultaneously into two different directions but this doubling is by no means reciprocity. By reworking Levinas’s *asymmetry* into *double dissymmetry* Blanchot does not only want to reconnect ethics and writing but also to remove himself from the religious aspect of Levinas’s thought and transfer ethical transcendence into the social and political realm. Blanchot’s double dissymmetry is the answer to Other’s radical namelessness and not to his closeness to God. This relation without relation produces a surplus that points to the other side of language; a surplus that effaces all possible determinations and names of the Other. His reworking of Levinas connects ethics and literature because double dissymmetry becomes the experience of the presence of absence.

“Even so you have managed to live that love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it happened” (Duras 1986: 53–55) – this is how the story ends. One day the unnamed woman simply disappears. However, this ending is not a testimony to a failure of love. Bearing in mind that ethical relation excludes possession, the ending of Duras’s story speaks about the fulfilment that only happens as a perceived loss. A man did not lose something that he once possessed but something foreign to any possession because the I and the other do not live in the same temporality. They can never be contemporaneous. Even when it seems that they are connected in a love that binds them together, they are apart in the intimacy that makes them foreign to one another. They remain infinitely absent and inaccessible to each other and, as such, in an eternal relation without relation with each other.

Levinas’s attitude toward art in “Reality and Its Shadow” and in his other works makes a direct application of his theory and notions in the field of

literary studies practically impossible. In this text, I attempted to open a path toward a productive relationship between Levinasian ethics and literature with the analysis of Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*. More precisely, I suggested that this relationship becomes possible only by Blanchot's reworking of Levinas's key notions. In this essay, the focus was on Blanchot reinterpretation of Levinas's *asymmetry* which, in his work, becomes double *dissymmetry*. The possibility of a completely new relationship between literature and ethics is opened up if we notice a constant dialogue between Blanchot and Levinas that is present throughout their works.

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Nemanja Mitrović

Etika i književnost: Levinas i književna kritika

Apstrakt

Ovaj tekst postavlja sledeće pitanje: možemo li koristiti Levinasovu etiku u polju studija književnosti? Prvi korak u odgovoru na pomenuto pitanje biće analiza odnosa Emanulela Levinasa prema umetnosti. Njegovo celokupno delo sadrži mnogobrojne reference na književna i druga umetnička dela, ali najeksplicitnije teze o odnosu između umetnosti i etike nalaze se u njegovom eseju „Realnost i njena senka“. Levinasov pogled na književnost i umetnost je u ovom eseju u potpunosti negativan i zato automatska primena njegove teorije u studijama književnosti predstavlja ozbiljan problem. Kako bi prevazišli ovaj problem i otvorili mogućnost za jedan drugačiji odnos između etike i književnosti ovaj rad će predstaviti reinterpretaciju Levinasove etike od strane Morisa Blanšoa.

Ključne reči: Levinas, etika, umetnost, književnost, Blanšo.