

THE ETHICS OF
POSTMODERNITY

Current Trends in
Continental Thought

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Northwestern University Press
Evanston, Illinois

Northwestern University Press
625 Colfax Street
Evanston, Illinois 60208-4210

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 0-8101-1375-9 (cloth)
ISBN 0-8101-1376-7 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The ethics of postmodernity : current trends in continental thought /
edited by Gary B. Madison and Marty Fairbairn.

p. cm. — (Northwestern University studies in phenomenology &
existential philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8101-1375-9 (alk. paper).—ISBN 0-8101-1376-7 (pbk. :
alk. paper)

I. Ethics, Modern—20th century. 2. Postmodernism. I. Madison,
Gary Brent. II. Fairbairn, Marty. III. Series.

BJ319.E7854 1999

170'.9'045—dc21

99-21665

CIP

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

The Crisis of the Image: Levinas's Ethical Response

Richard Kearney

La littérature est l'aventure unique d'une transcendance enjambant tous les horizons du monde (. . .) La littérature rappelle l'essence humaine du nomadisme. Le nomadisme n'est-il pas la source d'un sens, apparaissant dans une lumière que ne renvoie aucun marbre, mais le visage de l'homme? . . . [L]'authenticité de l'art doit annoncer un ordre de justice.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot*

Kierkegaard attributed the crisis of the “present age” to the fact that human subjects were lacking any passionate commitment to thinking. Today, more than a century after Kierkegaard, one is tempted to add that we are also lacking a passionate commitment to *imagining*. We live in a civilization of images where the human subject is deemed less and less responsible for the working of his/her own imagination. The citizens of contemporary society increasingly find themselves surrounded by simulated images produced, or reproduced, by mass media technologies operating outside their ken or control. Human subjects are considered more as copiers and consumers of images than as authors.

In all this, the predominant role of the image becomes one of parody. The image ceases to refer to some *original* event—in the world or consciousness—and becomes instead a simulacrum: an image of an image. In our *société de spectacle*, as Debord put it, the imaginary circulates in an endless play of imitation where each image becomes a replay of another which precedes it. The idea of an “authentic” or “unique” image becomes redundant.

I have analyzed this so-called postmodern dilemma of the image as parody/pastiche/simulation in some detail elsewhere.¹ My task here is to inquire whether the work of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the foremost ethical thinkers in Continental philosophy, has anything to teach us about the ethical implications of this dilemma in contemporary poetics.

In his 1972 essay "Idéologie et Idéalisme," Levinas offers this apocalyptic account of our society of simulation, where the Same reigns supreme: "The contemporary world—of science, of technology, of leisure—sees itself as trapped . . . not because everything is now permitted, and thanks to technology possible, but because everything is the same. The unknown immediately becomes familiar, the new normal. Nothing is new under the sun. The crisis written of in Ecclesiastes is not one of sin but of boredom. Everything becomes immersed and immured in the Same . . . [E]verywhere the machinations of melodrama, rhetoric and play accuse and denounce. Vanity of vanities: the echo of our own voices, taken as response to the few prayers which remain to us, everywhere fallen back onto our own feet as after the ecstasies of drugs. Except for the other whom, in all this boredom, we cannot let down."²

What Levinas suggests here is that the best response to the collective solipsism of Western culture is the assumption of ethical responsibility for the other. Such responsibility breaks through the circular game of mirrors, which perpetrates the reign of sameness through blank parody, and stakes a claim for radical otherness. But how can such ethical responsibility resist the ideology of the simulacrum which pervades our social imaginary? How, if at all, can we retrieve some ethical dimension of poesis from the faceless civilization of images which dominates our experience?

I Representation and the Face

There are a number of texts where Levinas undertakes an analysis of the aesthetic imagination, notably "La Réalité et son Ombre," "Sur Maurice Blanchot," "La Transcendance des Mots" (on the writing of Michel Leiris), "Agnon/Poésie et Résurrection," "Paul Célan/De l'être à l'autre" and "L'Autre dans Proust."³

In "La Réalité et son Ombre," written largely in response to Heidegger's ontological poetics of dwelling, Levinas begins by warning us against becoming engulfed in a "spellbinding world of images and shadows"—a world where enigma and equivocation rule and realities are evaded (RO 117). He reminds us of the ethical motivation behind monotheism's

proscription of idolatrous images of death (RO 115). But he does not go so far as to suggest that the artistic imagination should be censored for ethical or religious reasons. He is calling for a mode of critical interpretation capable of retrieving art as "a relation with the other" (RO 117). And he commends the practice of such a reflective hermeneutic in avant-garde writing as a critical defense against "artistic idolatry." "By means of such intellectualism," writes Levinas, "the artist refuses to be an artist only; not because he wishes to defend a thesis or a cause but because he needs to interpret his own myths" (RO 117).⁴

Levinas endorses such critical self-interpretation. In *Noms Propres*, he praises Agnon for his invocation of a certain "Hebraic saying" which "unravels the ultimate solidity beneath the plasticity of forms that western ontology teaches" (NP 18). And he contrasts the captivating power of "imaginary presence" to Agnon's poetry of "resurrection" which goes beyond the idolatrous tendency of images and opens us to the "irrepresentable as an endless fission of all that has dared to tie itself into a substrate" (NP 21). So also in his texts on Celan and Proust, Levinas endeavors to develop a similar ethics of writing and reading, based on the simple observation that their writing clears a path "toward the other" (NP 63). This entails, in Celan's case, a body of poetry which allows for an alterity exceeding the imagination of the author himself. Celan, he claims, is a poet who "concedes to the other . . . the time of the other" (NP 63).

But what, we may ask, is the motivation of Levinas's critique of poetic imagination? Some answer, I suggest, is to be found in his contrast between the "face" and the "image" in *Totalité et infini*.⁵ Here again, we find Levinas deeply suspicious of the enchanting power of images once they cease to be answerable to the other. The face is the way in which the other surpasses every image I have of him/her. As such, it is irreducible to a series of qualities that might be formed into some kind of noematic representation, correlative to a noetic intention. Or as Levinas puts it: "The face of the other destroys and surpasses at every moment the plastic image that it leaves behind . . ." (TI 51). The face transcends every intentional consciousness I have of it. It *expresses* rather than *represents*. And so Levinas describes it as that which I receive from the other rather than that which I project upon him. Face to face conversation becomes for Levinas the ethical model of relation par excellence. For it is here that the other comes to me in all his/her irreducible exteriority, that is, in a manner that cannot be measured or represented in terms of my own interior fantasies.

Is Levinas not therefore privileging conversation over imagination as the proper mode of ethical openness to the other? Is he not, indeed,

condemning imagination out of hand as a subjective intentionality which reduces alterity to its own remembered or anticipated fantasies? Or, worse, as that perverse agency of one-way voyeurism which he identifies with the figure of Gyges whose ring enabled him to see but never be seen by others?

While this is partly the case, it is not the whole story. Levinas's suspicion of images is not directed against the poetic power of imagination per se but against the use or abuse of such power to incarcerate the self in a blind alley of self-reflecting mirrors. In other words, the exercise of a poetic imagination open to conversation with the other (as Levinas claims is the case with Leiris, Celan, Jabes, and Blanchot, among others) is already one that allows the face to break through the plastic form of the image which represents or intends it. Such a poetic imagination responds to the surprises and demands of the other; it never presumes to fashion an image adequate to the other's irrecuperable transcendence. An ethical imagination would, consequently, be one which permits "the eye to see through the mask, an eye which does not shine but speaks" (*TI* 38). It would be one which safeguards the *saying* of the face against the attempts of subjective fantasy to reduce it to the subterfuges of the world.

That is why, in Levinas's words, the face is that transcendence of the other which "breaks through its own plastic image" (*TI* 128). And that is why an ethical poetics is one which responds to the face with the question "Who?" (opening us to the alterity of the other person) rather than the question "What?" (reducing such alterity to an impersonal system of substances, structures or signs). Moreover, it is just such a poetics of responsibility to the other which refuses the consumerist status of imaging as imitation without depth or reference. It challenges the claim by certain postmodern commentators such as Baudrillard that we are condemned to a culture of "simulation" without origin or end sublimely "irreferent" to the other.⁶ Faced with the postmodern crisis of endless self-mirroring, wherein the face of the other is dissolved into a play of sameness with itself, ethical language bears witness to the infinity of the other. And it is this infinity which testifies to "my responsibility, to an existence already obligated to the other, beyond the play of mirrors" (*S* 158). "Over and against all the fashionable talk about the 'end of man;' such a poetics of responsibility remains committed to human conversation with the other, to the possibility of imagination recovering its hermeneutic power to speak one-for-the-other and to listen to the powerless cry of the stranger, the widow and the orphan—a cry which, in demanding that I respond and speak to the unseen other (*le tiers*) is already a demand for justice" (*S* 215).

For Levinas, not surprisingly, the best poetry is unfinished poetry—like Celan's, whose exposure of nothingness within is in fact a recognition

of otherness without. A poetry which is always an “interrupted breath” (“*une soufuffle coupée*,” as in *Atemwende*) because haunted by the recognition that its own saying can never be said, completed, closed off. Celan in this respect remains for Levinas the poet who lent his voice to those who have no voice, who—like Beckett—was devoted to the failure of complete communication, to the impossibility of ending, to the refusal to bring *saying* to a full stop in the *said*. A poetics responsible to the other is therefore one which resists the temptation to mask the face behind an anonymous game of vertiginous repetition (S 270). It insists instead that language always expresses more than any plastic representation can suggest. Ethics is there to remind poetics that the other can never be captured in an image or imitation. And no matter how pervasive the persuasion that there is nothing beyond the image but other images, I will argue that the ethical ear of hermeneutic imagination refuses to be taken in.

II Toward an Ethics of Imagining

If a certain reading of Levinas’s opposition of face to image in *Totalité et infini* might lead us to believe that ethics is opposed to any poetic functioning of imagination, a reconsideration of this argument in the light of what Levinas has to say in qualified favor of poetics in his texts on Celan, Proust, Blanchot and others would seem to redress the balance. Here it becomes clear that it is not the speaking and expressive power of poetic imagination that Levinas objects to, only its power to fetishize or idolize images by setting them up as a self-referential play of imitation. Bearing this important distinction in mind, it soon becomes evident that Levinas does suggest the possibility of an ethical reading of the contemporary crisis of poetics. We return therefore to our original question of how to form an alliance between an *ethics of responsibility* and a *poetics of imagination*.

Although Levinas never addresses this task directly, there are suggestive hints in certain texts. Before examining these, however, I would like to take an example not mentioned by Levinas himself but relevant to this problematic. I refer to the attempt made by Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* to portray the horrors of the Holocaust in cinematic images. Here we have an instance of a practical endeavor to combine an ethics of responsibility with a poetics of imagination. Lanzmann seeks to present the irrepresentable in and through the audiovisual medium of film. He is trying to recount what cannot be recounted, to demonstrate the impossibility of

reproducing the event of the holocaust in some kind of linear narrative while reminding us of the unforgettable—though usually forgotten—character of this event. To this end, Lanzmann refuses to portray the holocaust in terms of spectacle or sensation. He shows no images of burnt bodies or SS Commandants. He resists the temptation to imitate the inimitable in terms of dramatic reproduction or documentary newsreel. We do not see the victims—for to do so would, Lanzmann believes, be to reduce them to “objects” of genocide. What we do see are faces of some survivors who bear witness to the impossibility of representing in images that which they witnessed at first hand. In short, it is the use of cinema to express the irreducible otherness and unimaginableness of the holocaust which actually succeeds in reminding us that we have forgotten how unimaginable it was, and that we must not be allowed to forget this forgetfulness.

This cinematic *via negativa* combines an ethical and poetical function. It uses images against themselves to suggest what they fail to capture (by virtue of their failure to do so). *Shoah* provokes what it cannot evoke. To Adorno’s question whether poetry can be written after Auschwitz, it answers that it cannot, but that we cannot stop trying. It is in that sense that we may describe it as a poetics committed to an ethics of responsibility. As a former disciple of Levinas’s, Jean-François Lyotard, observes:

To represent “Auschwitz” in images, in words, is a way of forgetting it. I’m not just thinking here of B movies and soap opera series and pulp novels or testimonies. I’m also thinking of those representations which can and could best make us not forget by virtue of their exactness or severity. Even such efforts represent what should remain unrepresentable in order not to be forgotten precisely as forgotten. Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* is perhaps a singular exception. Not only because he resists the use of representation in images and music, but also because he hardly offers a single testimony where the unrepresentable character of the extermination is not indicated, even momentarily, by an alteration of voice, a tightening of throat, a tear, a sob, the disparition of a witness out of frame, an upset in the tone of the narrative, some uncontrolled gesture. So that we know that the witnesses are surely lying, or “playing a role,” or hiding something, however impassive they may appear.⁷

We are concerned here with self-negating imagination: one might even be tempted to add: self-deconstructing imagination. For at issue is a functioning of images which debunks its own claim to representational presence. We are confronted with a series of cinematic signifiers which refuse to be tied to a “transcendental signified”—intentions without

fulfillment, as phenomenology would put it, *visées à vide*. And such a poetic refusal of intuitive closure, completeness, or certainty would seem to approximate to an ethical form of deconstruction. This supposition, or suspicion, becomes even more compelling when one considers Levinas's account of deconstructive thinking in *Idéologie et Idéalisme* as "signifiers playing in a game of signs without signifieds . . . a conceptual disillusionment with the possibility of positing sense, with Husserl's 'doxic thesis,' a denunciation of the rigor of logical forms as repressive, an obsession with the inexpressible, the ineffable, the un-said sought after in the mis-said, in the lapsus . . ." Are these not the very conditions of Lanzmann's *Shoah*? Or at least of Lyotard's reading of it? One is tempted to respond in the affirmative. But then we read Levinas's own concluding remark on such deconstructive discourse and are given pause. "Such," writes Levinas, "is the painful rupture of modern discourse, exemplified by its most sincere representatives, but already trading on the false coin of primary truths and fashionable cant" (TI 31).

Although Levinas does not mention any poststructuralist thinkers by name, it is difficult not to associate such a description with philosophers such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Barthes. But the important issue here is not who's who in Levinas's description but how Levinas is to retrieve an ethical poetics from a deconstructive discourse on imagination. How, in other words, is he going to make a distinction between the "painful rupture of modern discourse" as ethical irrepresentability, on the one hand, and as mere fashionable cant, on the other? I think we find some hint of a solution in a passage in *Totalité et Infini* where Levinas speaks of a primary mode of expression where the signifier as face transcends all signifying systems and allows the other to present itself to us. Such language of proximity, which precedes linguistic signs, is actually an ethical language of the face as "original expression," as the "first word—you shall not kill" (TI 157, 173). This is a language which can break through the "neutral mediations of the image" and impose itself on us in a manner irreducible to the form of its manifestation (TI 174).

But to admit as much is surely to admit that the face has nothing really to fear from mediating, or mediated, images as long as we who respond to such images respond to the underlying language of the face which speaks through them? The face is only threatened, is it not, by images which would have us believe that the language of poetics can definitively divorce itself from the language of ethics? If this be the case, then Levinas's ultimate position would appear to be that poetic imagining is fine as long as it remains answerable to an ethics of alterity. Indeed such answerability could itself be seen as compatible with, and complementary

to, a certain gesture of deconstruction. I refer here to the *dismantling* of the claim of modern subjectivism (idealist or existentialist) that the transcendental ego or existential imagination remains the origin and end of all value. The deconstruction of such a transcendental self might be said to serve an ethics of alterity.

Levinas appears to suggest as much in certain passages which acknowledge an ethical motivation behind anti-humanist critique of the self. The following admission from "Un Dieu Homme?" is a case in point:

The contemporary anti-humanism which denies the primacy of being enjoyed by the person taken as an end in itself has perhaps opened a space for the (ethical) notion of subjectivity as substitution . . . the infinite patience, passivity and passion of the self (*soi*) whereby being empties itself of its own being.⁸

Viewed in this way the deconstruction of the humanist subject as locus of self-identical sameness can be seen as releasing a different kind of self, an ethical subject open to alterity and transcendence, open to that eschatological order of creation, still to come, announced in Genesis, a creation in which, Levinas insists, "everyone has a part to play."⁹ But such a deconstruction of the humanist self in the name of eschatological poetics is only ethical, for Levinas, to the extent that it acknowledges that "responsibility as response is the primary saying; and that transcendence is communication which implies, beyond the simple exchange of signs, a 'gift,' an 'open house'" (II 33).

III Primary Sayings

This would certainly seem to be Levinas's thinking in his readings of Proust, Celan, Blanchot, and Agnon. It is time to have a closer look at some of these. In one of his essays in *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, entitled "The Servant and the Master" (first published in 1966), Levinas praises Blanchot's writing for what he calls a "moral elevation, an aristocracy of thought." What he means by this is a cold neutrality in Blanchot's language which expresses the inexpressible—that experience of *desastre* which he identifies with our contemporary culture of absence and death. "Objectivizing consciousness is replaced by a sense of being that is detached from cosmological existence, from any fixed reference to a star (dis-aster), a being that strains towards obliteration in an inaccessible non-language" (LR 150). What fascinates Levinas here is a poetic *saying* which

undermines the *said*. Blanchot uses images as ciphers of infinity, gestures of interminable waiting that can never be fulfilled. His words operate as intentional signifiers of a self which undoes its own self-centeredness, exceeds its own ontological ipseity, out of concern for something other, something beyond the said or the sayable, the imaged or the imaginable—what Levinas describes as a “first concern for justice” (LR 150). Indeed, one is tempted to add that what distinguishes deconstructive writing as “moral elevation” from that denounced as “fashionable cant” (*bavardage à la mode*) is just that: a concern for justice.

Levinas makes a similar case for an ethically responsible poetics in his readings of Proust and Leiris. He interprets the Proustian author’s endless quest for the lost self as an encounter with the enigma of the other. The fact that Marcel never fulfills his desire for Albertine does not mean he does not love her. On the contrary, “to the extent that Marcel struggles with her presence as absence in the narrative, this struggle is love, in that it is directed not by being-towards-death but by the death of the Other, not by Dasein, but by the responsibility for the Other’s death which creates his infinitely answerable ‘I’” (LR 160). The Proustian drama of solitude and incommunicability is not about the retrieval of some ideal state of self-being. It is about an ethical relation with the other that remains forever other. The Proustian imagination is read by Levinas accordingly less as a quest for lost being than “as the relational space in which I am hostage to the other” (LR 160).¹⁰

“Moral elevation” of a parallel kind is to be found in the writing of the avant-garde author Michel Leiris. Here once again the linguistic imagination is never allowed to slip away into empty imitations but is constantly recalled to critical responsibility. Images ceaselessly undermine their own mesmerizing power generating a movement of transcendence towards the other. They become genuine speech, which for Levinas means a “moment of critique” which explodes the *imaginaire* of self-sufficiency and opens us to a relation with someone.¹¹ As Levinas puts it, “this need to enter into a relation with someone, in spite of or over and above the peace and harmony derived from the successful creation of beauty, is what we call the necessity of critique” (TW 147). At this point Levinas contrasts writing which approximates to *vision*—where form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it—and writing which approximates to *sound* where “the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content” (TW 147). The necessity of critique is met by the later kind, epitomized by Leiris’s own texts. Here a rent is produced in our imaginary world and words are uttered which “surpass what is given.” The ethical imagination of writers like Leiris is, it appears, acoustic rather than representational.

Leiris's writing is praised accordingly as a textuality of verbal sound which privileges "the living word, destined to be heard, in contrast to the word that is an image and already a picturesque sign" (TW 147). Leiris invents a literature of bifurcations (*bifurs*) and erasures (*biffures*) which resist the idolatry of total meaning. Levinas explains: "Bifurcations—since sensations, words and memories continually turn a train of thought from the path it seemed to be taking towards some unexpected direction; erasures—since the univocal meaning of cacti element is continually altered." (TW 145–46) In this way, Leiris reminds us that responsible art is in the first instance an act of speech where we hear, and respond to, the words of the other. But these words of transcendence can only assume a presence amongst us, as trace of the other, precisely because they refuse to become flesh. Levinas spells out what he means by such an ethical *asceticism* of words as follows:

The use of the word wrenches experience out of its aesthetic self-sufficiency, the "here" where it has quietly been lying. Invoking experience turns it into a creature. It is in this sense that I have been able to say elsewhere that criticism, which is the word of a living being speaking to a living being, brings the image in which art revels back to the fully real being. The language of criticism takes us out of our dreams, in which artistic language plays an integral part. . . . Books call up books—but this proliferation of writings halts or culminates at the moment when the living word is installed (TW 148).

IV Conclusion

Leiris thus serves for Levinas—along with Proust, Blanchot, Agnon, and Celan—as a poet who responds to the fetishizing power of contemporary images by producing counterimages, word-images which disclose how being for the other, in and through language, is the first fact of existence. And one is compelled to infer that it is just such a poetics of the "living word" that Levinas would recommend as antidote to the proliferation of mirror-images and mirror-texts which characterizes our contemporary culture. The best answer to the parodic imagination is an auditory imagination critical of images and open to what exceeds them.

But avant-garde literature is not the only poetical medium to testify to the ethical. The critique of our civilization of images does not necessitate, as thinkers from Adorno and Marcuse to Steiner and Henri imply, a retreat from the glare of popular culture to the inaccessible

reaches of High Art.¹² Levinas also acknowledges the possibility of media images offering ethical testimony in his remarks on the news coverage of a dying Colombian girl buried up to her neck in mud after an avalanche in 1986.¹³ TV viewers can respond to such an image in a purely sensational or voyeuristic fashion. But we can equally respond to it as a naked face crying out to us in powerlessness and destitution. The choice of response to such a media image is ours, but it is always an *ethical* choice. And it cannot in fact be otherwise, for it is a response, one way or the other, to the ethical cry of another. Even the decision to be voyeuristic or sadistic in viewing such suffering—a decision to *refuse* to respond to the ethical cry—is itself a form of response to the other, albeit negative. Before we are condemned to be free, we are condemned to be responsible.

Recognizing the ethical charge of media images is, I submit, a first step toward developing a critical hermeneutics of postmodern imagination. It is regrettable that Levinas himself never explicitly pursued this path—and that, furthermore, he adopts an elitist attitude to poetics in his privileging of avant-garde writing. The closest he comes, perhaps, is when he acknowledges in “L’Idée de la Culture” (1983) that contemporary culture in the broadest sense can serve as the “irruption of the human in the barbarism of being.” “Culture is not a surpassing or neutralization of transcendence,” he claims,

rather it is an ethical responsibility and obligation towards the other, a relationship to transcendence as transcendence. One could call it love. Culture is obliged to the face of the human other, which is not a given of experience and does not come from this world.¹⁴

But what Levinas fails to address, it seems, is the right of art as art to explore a realm of imagination which, in Ricoeur’s phrase, “knows no censorship.”¹⁵ So that even if one is prepared to admit that aesthetic images are derived from the primary expression of the face and remain in the end of the day answerable to the face, one still reserves the right of art to suspend judgment, however provisionally, while it explores and experiments in a free play of imagination. Levinas does not fully appreciate that if the ultimate origin and end of art is ethics, the rest belongs to poetics.

Without this alibi, however temporary, poetics would cease to play freely, would cease to imagine how the impossible might become possible, how things might be if all was permissible. Deprived of such lee-way we are ultimately left with Lenin’s maxim that “art is the hammer of the benevolent propagandist,” or Sartre’s that “words are loaded pistols.”¹⁶ Polemics notwithstanding, such slogans are the kiss of death for art.

The free play of imagining is indispensable not only for poetics but also in a real sense for ethics itself. This Levinas failed to see. If ethics is left entirely to itself, or allowed to dictate to poetics at every turn, it risks degenerating into cheerless moralism. Ethics needs poetics to be reminded that its responsibility to the other includes the possibility of play, freedom and pleasure. Just as poetics needs ethics to be reminded that play, freedom and pleasure are never self-sufficient but originate in, and aim towards, an experience of the other-than-self, of being-for-one-another. That is where ethics and poetics meet—in those words which the self receives from the other and returns to the other.