

The Controversy between Levinas and Derrida and the Methodology of Literary Studies or Why Seems Ethical Criticism to be Unavoidable?¹

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Abstract Why does literature have a basic affinity with ethical criticism? It looked as if ethical criticism had definitely disappeared from literary studies during the 20th century. However, by the end of this century, its scholarly legitimacy was reestablished. The debate between Levinas and Derrida played an important part in this reevaluation of ethical criticism. This is why this paper starts off from their controversy in order to demonstrate that the ethical dimension of literature cannot be derived from any theory of ethics or whatsoever theoretical approach. The base of ethical criticism, instead, is constituted by the specific communicative conditions of literature itself as I will argue at the end of this paper.

Key words methodology of literary studies; ethical criticism; phenomenology; Emmanuel Levinas; Jacques Derrida

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¹ This article constitutes the elaborate version of my keynote lecture at the *The Ninth Convention of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism*, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, November 8-10, 2019.

in 2016. In 2010 he was appointed *Commendatore* of the *Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà Italiana* by the President of the Italian Republic.

The disappearance of ethical criticism is widely considered to be one of the salient traits in the evolution of literary studies during the 20th century. Especially postmodern criticism seems to have been fiercely opposed to any moral statement about literary texts.¹ Such renunciation of ethical criticism obviously belongs to a general tendency to be observed in this academic discipline, a strategy aiming at an enhancement of its scholarly prestige by guaranteeing its strictly descriptive nature.²

Yet, the very term of description suggests an important distinction. If ethical criticism was largely discriminated in modern literary studies, this is true only insofar as normative ethical assessments of literary texts are no longer at stake. However, in a descriptive sense ethical statements never finished to constitute an integral part of the academic interest in literature. Reconstructing the premises of Giovanni Boccaccio's ethics in his *Decameron* by showing its dependence on late scholasticism (Küpper 47-93), the demonstration of Machiavelli's influence on Pierre Corneille's tragedies (Kablitz 491-552) or of the impact of Friedrich Nietzsche's ethics on André Gide's novels³, these and similar topics always were and continue to be regular subjects of literary studies.

However, even the normative aspect of ethical criticism could not be permanently banned from the academic discourse about literature. Especially, as a new philosophical approach to it was developed, an approach that made ethics and theory interdependent factors of the same intellectual attitude towards literature, ethical criticism — somehow justified by theory — seemed again to be back in the realm of legitimate academic methods of considering literary texts. As the *Call for papers* of our conference precisely outlines, the debate between Levinas and

1 Cf. Marshall W. Gregory, "Redefining Ethical Criticism. The Old vs. the New," *Journal of Literary Theory* 4 (2010): 272-301.

2 Gregory (cf. the preceding footnote) ascribes the decline of ethical criticism by the end of the 19th century predominantly to its "fatuity", as it had become "fat, lazy, repetitive, shallow, doctrinaire, self-indulgent, platitudinous, and sometimes mean spirited" (*ibid.*, 273) by this time. However, it seems to me that the inner evolution of ethical criticism does not suffice to explain its eclipse in modern literary studies. The causes of its decline cannot be reduced to an almost biological effect, to a kind of natural deterioration of an age-old discursive practice. There are external conditions, as well, to motivate this phenomenon among which the struggle for scholarly prestige of literary studies constitutes undoubtedly a major factor.

3 Jacques Le Rider, *Nietzsche en France. De la fin du XIX^e siècle au temps présent*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999.

Derrida, that opened the possibility to discuss ethical question as theoretical issues, has had a remarkable impact on the evolution of literary theory in this sense.¹ One could even go so far to say that the ethical turn within phenomenology triggered a similar turn in literary theory. This is why I would like to have a closer look to their controversy in my paper.

Despite the undeniable influence of this debate, I will raise the question of the conceptual suitability of this debate for the methodology of literary studies. The crucial question is if phenomenological ethics, as well as any other theoretically based ethics, is as such able to found ethical criticism. And, in order to anticipate from the very beginning the result of my reflections on Levinas' and Derrida's controversy, I harbor serious doubts about the compatibility of the phenomenological definition of ethics and the methodological needs of literary theory (as I am skeptical that there is any *theoretical* approach that might adequately lay a ground for ethical criticism). As I will try to demonstrate, the ethical dimension of literature relies on quite different conditions than those who allow for the establishment of ethics within the framework of phenomenology. On a somewhat more critical note, I would even say that phenomenological ethics rather misses than meets the ethical claims of literature. If literature has a certain propensity to ethical criticism, if normative ethical statements on literature seem to be not just unavoidable, but at least tempting, such affinity stems, as I will argue at the end of this paper, from the elementary conditions of literary communication itself.

However, before having a closer look to the controversy between Levinas and Derrida, I would like to make some general remarks about the phenomenology and its premises in the thought of modernity as it was established mainly by Edmund Husserl. For, the historical plausibility of the questions raised by phenomenology as well as its basic assumptions are hardly understandable without referring to the philosopher who, for good reason, is considered by many to be one of the founders, if not the founder, of modern thought: Immanuel Kant. Phenomenology somehow might be even described as a criticism and, simultaneously, as a consequence of Kant's thought.

1 Call for Papers. "The Ninth Convention of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism": *The Ethico-Political Turn in Literary Studies: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China November 8-10, 2019): "Without Derrida's confrontations with Levinas' ethics, such transdisciplinary developments would be hardly imaginable. Derrida opposed Levinas' tendency to save the ethically divine "face of the Other" from any contamination by human political investments, insisting instead on the political indebtedness of all ethical agendas, with the (possible) exception of literature." Cf. also Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas*, Edinburgh UP, 2014.

Kant's revolutionary epistemology, that he himself called a *Copernican Revolution*¹ in the *Preface* of the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1787, is mainly based on the distinction between two entities: between the *thing in itself* (*Ding an sich*) and its *appearance* (*Erscheinung*). The so-called *thing in itself* lies beyond the reach of human Reason, only its *appearance* is accessible to Man's understanding.

By means of this distinction, Kant's philosophy operates a momentous separation of thinking and being, thus disrupting, to considerable extent, the age-old tradition of Western Philosophy that, from its very beginning in Greek Antiquity, aimed at a definition of being by intellectual self-reflection. As Kant's conceptual innovations affected the very foundations of philosophy, it was, therefore, presumably inevitable that his successors focused on just that aspect of his philosophy, aspiring in several ways at a revision of his separation between being and thinking.

The decisive change that happens between Kant and phenomenology concerns the status of the *appearance*, in Greek language: the *phainómenon*. This change is tantamount to a complete inversion of the conceptual perspective in which the *phainómenon* is placed. Whereas in Kant's epistemology the *appearance* is predominantly regarded as the appearance *of* something, in phenomenology the *appearance* is chiefly looked at as an appearance *to* someone, namely to the subject of understanding.

1 "Es ist hiermit eben so, als mit den ersten Gedanken des Kopernikus bewandt, der, nachdem es mit der Erklärung der Himmelbewegungen nicht gut fort wollte, wenn er annahm, das ganze Sternheer drehe sich um den Zuschauer, versuchte, ob es nicht besser gelingen möchte, wenn er den Zuschauer sich drehen, und dagegen die Sterne in Ruhe ließ. In der Metaphysik kann man nun, was die Anschauung der Gegenstände betrifft, es auf ähnliche Weise versuchen. Wenn die Anschauung sich nach der Beschaffenheit der Gegenstände richten müßte, so sähe ich nicht ein, wie man a priori von ihr etwas wissen könne; richtet sich aber der Gegenstand (als Objekt der Sinne) nach der Beschaffenheit unseres Anschauungsvermögens, so kann ich mir diese Möglichkeit ganz wohl vorstellen" (Immanuel Kant, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel, 3, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Erster Teil, Darmstadt 1983, *Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage* 25). [‘We here propose to do just what COPERNICUS did in attempting to explain the celestial movements. When he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved around the spectator, he reversed the process, and tried the experiment of assuming that the spectator revolved, while the stars remained at rest. We may make the same experiment with regard to the intuition of objects. If the intuition must conform to the nature of the objects, I do not see how we can know anything of them *a priori*. If, on the other hand, the object conforms to the nature of our faculty of intuition, I can then easily conceive the possibility of such an *a priori* knowledge’ {Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by John Miller Dow Meiklejohn, London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855, *Preface to the Second Edition* (1787) XXIX}.]

This distinction between both positions necessitates, however, some clarification. If in Kant's thought the *phainómenon* is the appearance of something, in the wording of his text it remains, nonetheless, somehow unclear the appearance of *what* it precisely constitutes. The logic of Kant's epistemology would suggest that the *appearance* is the appearance of the *thing in itself*. Yet, Kant's very definition of the *thing in itself* implies that no statement about the nature of that *thing in itself* might be legitimately asserted as this entity is not accessible to human knowledge. Therefore, it is, as well, impossible to claim that the appearance constitutes the appearance of the *thing in itself*. This uncertainty, however, nowhere seems to be resolved in Kant's thinking. There is some plausibility that the conceptual revision of the notion of appearance in phenomenological thought, the transformation of an appearance of *something* into an appearance *to someone*, follows from that very uncertainty in Kant's philosophy. If the entity represented by the *appearance* remains structurally undeterminable, it is nothing but logical to replace the consideration of the relation between the appearance and the entity it represents by an interest in the relation between the *phainómenon* and the one *to whom* it appears as such. The evolution of modern philosophy between Kant and Husserl and the rise of phenomenology seems to be based on a quite plausible logic of its change.

If the basic assumptions of phenomenological epistemology thus follow somehow logically from a basic ambiguity in Kant's thought, the farewell to the concept of a *thing in itself* in phenomenology, nonetheless, brings about some essential consequences for the subject of understanding itself. Under these conditions, understanding is now fully and exclusively integrated into the cognitive process initiated by the subject of understanding himself. This is why *intentionality* becomes one of the key terms in phenomenology in order to define the relation between the subject and the *phainómenon*, as the latter doesn't have any other status than being an *appearance* to the subject of understanding. Such redefinition of the *appearance*, considerably, strengthens the role of the I, that is to say, of the *individual* subject of understanding for the very existence of the *phainómenon*.

However, with regard to the central subject of this paper, with regard to ethics, one decisive question intrudes: If the basic assumptions of phenomenology are based on *epistemological* premises, how, then, does any *ethical* dimension come in to play? And precisely this is a fundamental question with regard to Emmanuel Levinas' work who is widely – and for good reason – considered the originator of an ethical turn in phenomenology. An answer to this question seems possible to me if we take into account the specific theoretical features that triggered such ethical turn. For, it looks as if the ethical turn in Levinas' thought constitutes the result of a

connection of two different theoretical concerns: It combines the interest to open a predominantly epistemological theory to the issues of practical philosophy with the wish to redefine the very status of metaphysics.

Undoubtedly, any definition of a relation between human beings proves a compelling challenge to a system of thinking that focuses on the individual conditions of understanding external objects. How, then, does it become possible to define, on the ground of these quite solipsistic theoretical premises, a relation *between* an I and another person, a relation that doesn't reduce this other person also to a mere object of knowledge? The answer given by Levinas to that question is based upon the notion of *transcendence*, a notion that in his view follows from the phenomenological idea of intentionality.¹ It is this connection of both entities that lays the ground for an integration of ethics and theory:

L'aspiration à l'extériorité radicale, appelée pour cette raison métaphysique, le respect de cette extériorité métaphysique qu'il faut, avant tout, « laisser être »—constitue la vérité. Elle anime ce travail et atteste sa fidélité à l'intellectualisme de la raison. Mais la pensée théorique, guidée par l'idéal de l'objectivité, n'épuise pas cette aspiration. Elle reste en deçà de ses ambitions. Si des relations éthiques doivent mener,—comme ce livre le montrera—la transcendance à son terme, c'est que l'essentiel de l'éthique est dans son *intention transcendante*, et que toute intention transcendante n'a pas la structure noèse-noème. (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 14s)

The aspiration to radical exteriority, thus called metaphysical, the respect for this metaphysical exteriority which, above all, we must “let be,” constitutes truth. It animates this work and evinces its allegiance to the intellectualism of reason. But theoretical thought, guided by the ideal of objectivity, does not exhaust this aspiration; it remains the side of its ambitions. If, as this book will show, ethical relations are to lead transcendence to its term, this is because the essential of ethics is in its *transcendent intention*, and because not every

¹ “L'intentionnalité, où la pensée reste *adéquation* à l'objet, ne définit donc pas la conscience à son niveau fondamental. Tout savoir en tant qu'intentionnalité suppose déjà l'idée de l'infini, *l'inadéquation* par excellence” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, Paris: Le livre de poche, 1990, 12). [‘Hence intentionality, where thought remains an *adequation* with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently *non-adequation*’ {Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969, 27}.]

transcendent intention has the noesis-noema structure. (Levinas, *Totality and infinity* 29)

To Levinas, any ethical relation between myself and any other person can be established if and only if the realm of theory is left, if knowledge is abandoned in favor of the experience of the *tout autre*, of the ‘absolutely other’:

L’Autre métaphysiquement désiré n’est pas «autre» comme le pain que je mange [...] Le désir métaphysique tend vers *tout autre chose*, vers *l’absolument autre*. (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 21)

The other metaphysically desired is not “other” like the bread I eat [...] The metaphysical desire tends forward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*. (Levinas, *Totality and infinity* 33)

And, as Levinas claims, the ‘absolutely other’ has to be identified as “the Other” (i. e. the other person): “L’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui”.¹ But the encounter with him demands the renouncement of theoretical certainty of the Same:

La métaphysique, la transcendance, l’accueil de l’Autre par le Même, d’Autrui par Moi se produit concrètement comme la mise en question du Même par l’Autre, c’est-à-dire comme l’éthique qui accomplit l’essence critique du savoir. (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 33)

Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. (Levinas, *Totality and infinity* 43)

Such conclusion sounds quite plausible within the framework of phenomenology, if, on the other hand, all knowledge and all understanding depends exclusively on the relation between an *individual* subject and the objects of *its* understanding. The *transcendence* towards the (absolutely) *Other*, this way, unavoidably entails a loss of certainty, a renouncement of any logical or epistemological concept. Ethics, therefore, implies the acknowledgment of the total difference of the other. It implies

¹ Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 28. [‘The absolutely other is the Other’ {Levinas, *Totality and infinity* 39.}]

the transcendence of the very realm of understanding and constitutes, at the same time, the means by which such transcendence can be reached, as any encounter with the (absolutely) other requires the respect of its *irreducible* otherness. Yet, in Levinas' view, the renunciation of all intellectual certainty, the willingness to abandon all certitude in the encounter with the totally other offers a remarkable chance: The transgression of all theory and of all knowledge allows for a fundamental experience of being, a promise of truth, as we already saw. Levinas, to this purpose, conceives of thinking no longer in terms of that *what* can be thought, but in terms of the act of *thinking* itself:

L'acte de la pensée — la pensée comme acte — précéderait la pensée pensant un acte ou en prenant conscience. [...] Ce qui dans l'acte éclate comme essentielle violence, c'est le surplus de l'être sur la pensée qui prétend le contenir, la merveille de l'idée de l'infini. (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 12f)

The act of thought — thought as an act — would precede the thought thinking or becoming conscious of an act. [...] What, in action, breaks forth as essential violence is the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it, the marvel of the idea of infinity. (Levinas, *Totality and infinity* 27)

As conclusive as this argument might look, it seems to me, however, more than doubtful, that the idea of infinity is able to bring together both interests that Levinas here evokes: the preservation of rationality in the *act of thinking* and its simultaneous liberation of all limits. Levinas' attempt to reconcile both notions in the "marvel of the idea of infinity" is, in my view, largely based on a confusion of concept with meaning. If the semantic of 'infinity' refers, indeed, to an end of all constraints, this meaning itself, on the other hand, is undoubtedly based upon a concept — a concept that, as such, presupposes, a relation of opposition (to the 'finite'). In other words: As all semantic concepts 'infinity' presupposes other terms, and that is to say: borders. Determination, as the word itself reveals, needs limits. The idea of infinity, thus, appears to have a bit less 'marvelous' power than Levinas pretends. It does not allow for the *transgression* of all conceptual limits, Levinas claims for it. It rather transforms the notion of transgression *into* a concept. Levinas' metaphysical promise, the breakthrough into being by means of the *idea* of infinity, is, strictly speaking, based on weak grounds.

It is a strong distrust of reason, a deep skepticism towards any connection between rationality and the substance of the world that comes to light in this

celebration of the encounter with absolute otherness as the discovery of being. The origin of this skepticism might be also traced back to Kant's epistemology. Yet, there is a fundamental difference between Kant's philosophy and phenomenological thought. If Kant remained *agnostic* about any ontological relationship between the human intellect and the essence of the world, this attitude leads within phenomenology to a radical *antagonism* between both entities. Kant's agnosticism, here, is replaced by the certainty that being and truth might be reached only and exclusively beyond rational knowledge. However, this radical ontological skepticism towards Reason constitutes an intellectual attitude that is by no means more plausible than any traditional belief in the rational nature of being. Platonic ontology and its denial are equally likely or unlikely.

Levinas' conception of ethics, focusing on the idea of transcendence, evidently, exploits the traditional notions (and connotations) of metaphysics, as this term always referred to a sphere of being beyond everyday life and physical materiality. (In this regard even transcendence and transcendentality—which so often are confused—share the same properties.¹) Yet, at the same time, his ethics confers to metaphysics a new function. Metaphysics, commonly, is linked to epistemology. Platonic *ideas* or Aristotelian *formae* are concepts of being that determine conditions of knowledge. However, at latest with Kant's philosophy, this

1 The adjective 'transcendent' traditionally refers to a sphere of being beyond the material world the entities of which (intellectual entities as [Platonic] *ideas* or [Aristotelian] *formae* or personal entities as Gods) are considered to exist independently from the thinking of Man. The Kantian adjective 'transcendental', on the other hand, refers to the rational categories of human thinking; they allow for the knowledge of external objects, though it is not certain that in terms of ontology anything corresponds to them in the physical world. Levinas' concept somehow merges them together by an inversion of the Kantian notion of the transcendental. Whereas in Kant's thought transcendentality is linked with the rational means of understanding the world, Levinas' transcendence is just based on a renunciation of all intellectual instruments that might convey knowledge about it. Yet, just such surrender of rationality promises a transgression that allows for the discovery of being. In this sense, Levinas clearly distinguishes between ontology and metaphysics: "À la théorie, comme intelligence des êtres, convient le titre général d'ontologie. L'ontologie qui ramène l'Autre au Même, promeut la liberté qui est l'identification du Même, qui ne se laisse pas aliéner par l'Autre. Ici, la théorie s'engage dans une voie qui renonce au Désir métaphysique, à la merveille de l'extériorité, dont vit ce Désir.—Mais la théorie comme respect de l'extériorité, dessine une autre structure essentielle de la métaphysique" (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 33.) ['To theory as comprehension of beings the general title ontology is appropriate. Ontology, which reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom — the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other. Here theory enters upon a course that renounces metaphysical Desire, renounces the marvel of exteriority from which that Desire lives. But theory understood as a respect for exteriority delineates another structure essential for metaphysics {Levinas, *Totality and infinity* 42s.}.]

traditional task of metaphysics, the foundation of epistemology, becomes obsolete. If the *thing in itself* beyond the *appearance* is by no means accessible to human Reason, how could it still allow for any metaphysical determination? In Kant's thought metaphysics, therefore, is somehow absorbed by epistemology. Seen from this perspective, Levinas' attempt to make ethics the realm of metaphysics, his endeavor to transform ethics into metaphysics (and, vice versa, metaphysics into ethics), in order to identify them with one another, confers not only a new function, but, at the same time, a new base to metaphysics (as well as to ethics).¹ This way, metaphysics becomes possible again *as* ethics (and ethics gains a foothold in epistemology). Levinas' definition of ethics, thus, grants to ontology, to this age-old branch of philosophy, a new ground and a justification of its persistence. Levinas' phenomenological ethics strives for providing an argument in favor of the survival of metaphysics beyond its presumed worthlessness in modern thinking.

But—such question is hardly avoidable—what are the, so to say, moral consequences for an ethics conceived of as metaphysics, for an ethics modeled on traditionally metaphysical notions? What does it mean that such ethics predominantly consists in the acknowledgment of radical, of absolute otherness of the Other?

The first and quite obvious consequence that follows from these conditions is that ethics no longer consists in a definition of rules for the interaction of people living together, a traditionally undoubtedly primordial task of ethics. But Levinas, nonetheless, can't avoid assuming a common base for human interaction, as even an encounter on the base of respect — the moral name for absolute otherness — presupposes a relation between the Same and the Other. What, in his view, creates the possibility of establishing such relation, a mediation between them is *language*:

Nous tâcherons de montrer que le *rapport* du Même à l'Autre — auquel nous semblons imposer des conditions si extraordinaires — est le langage. (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 28)

We shall try to show that the *relation* between the same and the other — on which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions — is language. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 39)

1 From an historical point of view, Levinas' foundation of metaphysics by a recourse to ethics is but one of the many attempts to reestablish metaphysics in post-Kantian philosophy. Hegel's transformation of history in the story of a self-discovery of the spirit, Schopenhauer's *will* and Nietzsche's will to power—to quote only the most prominent among them—aim at the same purpose.

But the semantics of such language, a language beyond all logic, beyond all knowledge and understanding—and this will be one of the crucial arguments of Derrida’s objections in his reaction to Levinas’ *Totalité et infini*, ‘Totality and Infinity’—remains void. From a semantic point of view, there is no way of defining any positive form of interaction that might be derived from the idea of complete, of total otherness.¹ As we shall discuss still more in detail later on, the dissolution of form constitutes neither a necessary, nor a sufficient condition of signification. It even undermines its possibility.

Moreover, the definition of any ethical *rule*, of any principle of interaction, unavoidably, would put into doubt the radicality of otherness, as moral rules imply reciprocity: My own duty towards the other is equal to his duty towards myself. Yet, such reciprocity, obviously, undermines the idea of irreducible otherness, as reciprocity makes persons, to a certain extent, necessarily similar. Consequently, any definable principle of interaction appears unavoidably contingent with regard to total otherness, it, therefore, irrevocably conflicts with the very base of Levinas’ ethics.

If Levinas himself does not take into account any of the difficulties raised by

1 Levinas seems to avoid these difficulties by defining meaning itself in ontological, strictly speaking in religious terms: “Cette façon de défaire la forme adéquate au Même pour se présenter comme Autre, c’est signifier ou avoir un sens. Se présenter en signifiant, c’est parler” (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 61). [‘This way of undoing the form adequate to the Same so as to present oneself as other is to signify or to have a meaning. To present oneself by signifying is to speak’ {Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 66}.] However, such identification of communication and self-presentation not only disregards entirely any pragmatic motivation of linguistic exchange, at the same time, it leaves open some very basic questions about language, especially that of its understandability. The capacity of recognizing and grasping meaning necessarily presupposes an entity that preexists in relation to the act of communication. No doubt, meaning is created within the very act of communication, but such creation would not happen if the elements that make it possible were not prior to this act – to every single act of communication. But such constraints are covered up by Levinas’ recourse to the deeply religious notion of revelation: “*L’expérience absolue n’est pas dévoilement mais révélation*: coïncidence de l’exprimé et de celui qui exprime, manifestation, par là même privilégiée d’Autrui, manifestation d’un visage pardelà la forme” (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 61). [‘*The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation*: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form’ {Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 65s.}.] Yet, precisely this coincidence of the subject of enunciation and its content, the *énoncé*, is pure claim. And the notion of revelation hardly allows to identify them with one another: Revelation presupposes transcendence, it is necessarily based on the idea of the existence of a transcendent being acting *in* and *by* the act of revelation. Levinas somehow plays on the notion of ‘disclosure’. Disclosure presupposes insight. In this respect, an insight, therefore, might be, indeed, called a disclosure. But such insight is not necessarily caused by revelation. To repeat this argument again: Revelation presupposes transcendent acting. There is no theoretical concept that might be able to elude this condition of any revelation.

his own theoretical premises, this lack of interest is, presumably, due to his specific concept of ethics. Though its goal is just to transcend theory and to free Man from his captivity in unavoidably selfish theoretical issues, Levinas conceives of ethics as a highly theoretical phenomenon: Its major task consists in preserving the integrity of otherness. Any pragmatics of ethics, together with the theoretical implications that any pragmatic includes, do not come into play, as they lay far beyond Levinas' predominantly metaphysical perspective on ethics.

What is more, Levinas' ethics of radical otherness is a highly individualized ethics. The totally other is and must be an individual, a completely unique person. If he belonged to whatsoever group or category, absolute otherness would come to an end. Also for this reason, it is difficult to identify any perspective for a social dimension in Levinas' ethics. And this, again, proves a consequence of the epistemological premises of phenomenology: The solipsistic cognitive process that takes place between the subject of understanding and the *phainómenon* corresponds to and is mirrored by an ethics based on a still solipsistic experience of transgression as transcendence.

Traditionally, however, ethics is considered to be the ethics of a community, and this is true for several reasons. Ethics not only defines the rule of interaction *for* a community, but it defines them, as well, *in* and even *by* a community. This second aspect is of considerable importance as it guarantees the liability and, at the same time, the validity of ethical principles. The community is the addressee of these principles, but it constitutes, at the same time, the institution that ensures their

persistent validity. Ethics seems to be, by nature, the ethics of a community.¹

1 There is, interestingly, one remarkable exception to this rule, namely, the ethics of the *New Testament*: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Unlike in the *Old Testament*, the neighbor in the Gospel is defined by no social relationship preceding this commandment of love. The neighbor is no longer your neighbor, as you belong both to the same community, or to the same family or people. He is your neighbor because and only because the other has been created, as yourself has been, to the image and likeness of your Creator. Such ethics is, therefore, not based on a community, but its foundation is to be found solely in God himself. The relation to him lays the ground for all ethics, as the Gospel explicitly states: “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25.40). The love for God and the love for the neighbor are interdependent. Compared with the conception of the neighbor in the *Old Testament*, his role is obviously universalized in the *New Testament*. Everybody, and no longer only the members of the same social community, becomes your neighbor as all men are creatures of the same God. At the same time, however, the very notion of community loses any importance for the constitution of ethics, the only ground of which is from now on a triangular relationship between the Creator and two individual persons. Seen from this perspective, the ethics of Levinas presents itself, to some extent, as the counterpart of the Christian ethics. Both are not based on the fundament of a social community, but on a relationship between individual human beings. However, both ethical conceptions point, so to say, in opposite directions. Whereas in the *New Testament* the relation to oneself constitutes the model of the relation to the other (“You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*”), Levinas’ ethics, on the contrary, demands the transgression of the self in order to make ethics possible. However, some of the characteristics Levinas ascribes to the figure of the Other remind of traditional divine attributes, especially the idea of “total otherness”. It is, in this regard, revealing, that Levinas tries to shape the very act of creation in terms of radical otherness: “La grande force de l’idée de la création, telle que l’apporta le monothéisme, consiste en ce que cette création est *ex nihilo* – non par parce que cela représente une œuvre plus miraculeuse que l’information démiurgique de la matière, mais parce que, par là, l’être séparé et créé n’est pas simplement issu du père, mais lui est absolument autre” (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 58). [“The great force of the idea of creation such as it was contributed by monotheism is that this creation is *ex nihilo*—not because this represents a work more miraculous than the demiurgic informing of matter, but because the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued from the father, but is absolutely other than the father” {Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 63}.] This argument is all the more remarkable as the historical circumstances that motivated Augustine to introduce the idea of a *creation out of nothing* were quite different from those here evoked by Levinas. The Church Father’s main interest was to preserve the integrity of Christian belief by a rejection of all gnostic-manichean interpretation of Creation that might have affected the concept of God’s omnipotence. Indeed, not in order to enhance the marvelous nature of the act of Creation, but as a guarantee of the divine origin of the *entire* Creation the concept of a *creatio ex nihilo* was invented by Augustine. What is more, the idea of total otherness does not really apply to the relation between God and his Creation, as the work of the Creator, especially, by its beauty, reflects its divine origin. This is, by the way, is the basic assumption on which the notion of the *Book of Nature* is based. The idea of Man as *imago Dei* therefore only accentuates in the case of human beings a general similarity that exists between God and his Creation. Levinas’ reinterpretation of the theological concept of a *creation out of nothing*, on closer consideration, proves a strategy for providing a theological base to his own ethical notion of absolute otherness the conceptual grounds of which remain weak. (But, as might be mentioned only in passing, does it really support Levinas’ argument if the figure of the Other is related to the product of an act of creation? Of a *creation* of that Other *by* the Same and made by him out of nothing? It seems more than doubtful that under such conditions nothingness guarantees—radical—otherness.)

However, all these characteristic and indispensable traits of traditional ethics are abandoned in Levinas' thought. And they have necessarily to be neglected in a concept of ethics that originates from a fundamentally solipsistic, not to say—though Levinas himself frequently uses this term—egoist epistemology. Hence, even the ethical way out of such solitude, that he proposes, works only partly, as the encounter with the irreducibly other produces again solipsistic experiences of otherness. And precisely absolute otherness inevitably, not to say by definition, produces highly individual experiences.

The first part of Jacques Derrida's reply to Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* in his long article *Violence et métaphysique*, (*Violence and Metaphysics*), gives the impression of broad agreement to Levinas' argument. Yet, in the second part of this essay, a rather harsh criticism, though partially hidden under Derrida's polite rhetoric, can't escape the reader's notice. Strictly speaking, Derrida fundamentally puts into question the central issue of Levinas' theoretical system, namely the base of his combination of metaphysics and ethics.

Derrida's objections frequently refer to the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, in order to demonstrate Levinas' misunderstanding of the thought of these originators and proponents of phenomenology.¹ As the so to say orthodoxy of Levinas' reading of their work is of minor importance for Derrida's discussion of Levinas' main argument, I will not go into the details of that aspect of Derrida's essay. I will instead focus rather on the systematic dimension of their debate, considering their controversy within the logic of phenomenology itself. For, as I will detail in what follows, from this point of view, both positions appear, to a certain degree, equally plausible. They both have their internal conclusiveness, depending on which perspective one takes.

One of the major objections raised by Derrida against Levinas' concept of ethics consists in the assertion that, from the very beginning of phenomenological

1 To quote just one example: "On pourrait sans doute montrer que Levinas, inconfortablement installé—et déjà par l'histoire de sa pensée—dans la différence entre Husserl et Heidegger, critique toujours l'un dans un style et un schéma empruntés à l'autre, finissant par les renvoyer ensemble dans les coulisses comme compères dans le «jeu du Même» et complices dans le même coup de force historico-philosophique" (Jacques Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique. Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas", in: J. D., *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris. Éditions du Seuil, 1967, 117-228, cf. 145). [It could no doubt be demonstrated that Levinas, uncomfortably situated in the difference between Husserl and Heidegger—and, indeed, by virtue of the history of his thought—always criticizes the one in a style and according to a scheme borrowed from the other, and finishes by sending them off into the wings together as partners in the "play of the same" and as accomplices in the same historico-political coup' {Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", in: J. D., *Writing and Difference*, The U Chicago P, 1978, 79-152, cf. 97s.}]

thought, the *phainómenon* itself was regarded as something radically exterior:

Les corps, les choses transcendantes et naturelles sont des autres en général pour ma conscience. Ils sont dehors et leur transcendance est le signe d'une altérité déjà irréductible. [...] L'altérité de la chose transcendante, bien qu'elle soit déjà irréductible, ne l'est que par l'inachèvement indéfini de mes perceptions originaires. Elle est donc sans commune mesure avec l'altérité aussi irréductible d'autrui qui ajoute à la dimension de l'inachèvement (le corps d'autrui dans l'espace, l'histoire de nos rapports, etc.) une dimension de non-originaire plus profonde, l'impossibilité radicale de faire le tour pour voir les choses de l'autre côté. Mais sans la première altérité, celle des corps (et autrui est aussi d'entrée de jeu un corps), la deuxième ne pourrait surgir. (Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique" 182s)

Bodies, transcendent and natural things, are others in general for my consciousness. They are outside, and their transcendence is the sign of an already irreducible alterity. [...] The alterity of the transcendent thing, although already irreducible, is such only by means of the indefinite incompleteness of my original perceptions. Thus it is incomparable to the alterity of Others, which is also irreducible, and adds to the dimension of incompleteness (the body of the Other in space, the history of our relations, etc.) a more profound dimension of nonoriginality — the radical impossibility of going around to see things from the other side. But without the first alterity, the alterity of bodies (and the Other is also a body, from the beginning), the second alterity could never emerge. (Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" 124)

Unlike Levinas, Derrida claims that the very notion of *phainómenon* already implies irreducible otherness. As the *phainómenon* is the object that appears *to me*, it is indeed correct to say that there is a basic *difference* which separates the self from this object. From a logical point of view, subject and object are, in fact, opposite. Yet, on closer examination, it looks as if the difference between Derrida and Levinas leads to a debate not about words, but about one word, or better, one notion: the idea of the *totality* or *irreducibility* of otherness.

If it is undeniable that the relation between subject and object constitutes an opposition, the question is to what extent this opposition becomes radical or absolute. Levinas claims that the *phainómenon* as such, as something that appears *to me*, is always already integrated into the perspective of the same. And

as the *phainómenon* comes into my view only as already viewed by me, there is, indeed, no room left for any relevant otherness, for any meaningful outside of my perspective of understanding. This is why Levinas speaks of the *closure* of the cognitive process. There is nothing, within this process itself, that is able to transcend the realm of understanding. Derrida, on the other hand, focuses on the idea of the *phainómenon* as an *object*. The very need of cognition presupposes to him the existence of a fundamental difference that as such will never and by no means disappear.

Levinas' and Derrida's position both seem, as I said, depending on the perspective one takes, equally convincing. Derrida argues from a logical point of view, and under these conditions, the conceptual opposition between subject and object, actually, remains irrevocable. On the other hand, Levinas takes into consideration the cognitive process between the *phainómenon* and the same. Considering *its* logic, there is indeed no outside of this process, as the *phainómenon* always already appears to *me* and only to *me* as an individual being. Regardless of the question of an appropriate interpretation of Husserl and Heidegger, from a systematic point of view, Derrida's and Levinas' positions indeed, somehow, can claim equal plausibility.

But what are the consequences of this equivalence of Levinas' and Derrida's respective positions for the constitution of ethics within phenomenology? As we saw, in Levinas' thought the irrevocable and indispensable closure of understanding constitutes a necessary condition of ethics, as this closure makes ethics possible and at the same time necessary—necessary as the desire of transcendence is, following Levinas, inherent to the very concept of intentionality. Such transgression of the cognitive features of any understanding, which deeply characterizes the encounter with the absolutely other, enables an attitude of respect. But beyond this respect, as we discussed already, no other moral value or principle seems to be definable. The promise of a breakthrough to being thus remains void.

On the other hand, it is very disputable if there is at all any base for ethics as a specific human attitude or behavior in Derrida's thought. The encounter with the other, in his view, is nothing else than a specific consequence of the irreducibility that characterizes already the *phainómenon* itself. And the specificity of the encounter with the Other seems all the more precarious as it relies on the, to use again Derrida's own words: *impossibilité radicale de faire le tour pour voir les choses de l'autre côté* (on 'the radical impossibility of going around to see things from the other side'). But, what does this, at first sight quite enigmatic, formulation precisely mean?

Implicitly, this sentence refers to Levinas' notion of *visage*, 'face', which constitutes an important aspect of his concept of the Other. The face allows for the approach *to* the Other.¹ This role given to the face by Levinas explains why Derrida makes the impossibility to go around things and to see them from the other side an important issue. However, he is, quite revealingly, still talking about *things*, and the very use of this term demonstrates the status which ethics has in his reaction

1 "Le visage est une présence vivante, il est expression. La vie de l'expression consiste à défaire la forme où l'étant, s'exposant comme thème, se dissimule par là même. Le visage parle. La manifestation du visage est déjà discours. Celui qui se manifeste porte, selon le mot de Platon, secours à lui-même. Il défait à tout instant la forme qu'il offre" (Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 61). [‘The face is a living presence; it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse’ {Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 66}.] If language allows for Levinas the establishment of a relation between the Same and the Other, the face plays an important, not to say the crucial part for the creation of such relationship as it seems to provide the very origin of language. Especially his use of the adverb *déjà* reveals the fundamental role that he describes to the face for the emergence of language: “La manifestation du visage est *déjà* discours” (‘The manifestation of the face is *already* discourse’). I will not discuss here in detail the highly questionable equivalence between face and discourse claimed by Levinas. We only should take into account that language again is conceived of as pure self-presentation. And, indeed, only by means of such a concept of language it seems be possible to transform the elementary phenomenological situation, the confrontation to the same with the other, into an origin of language. Crucial, in this regard, is Levinas' assertion of the interdependency of expression and dissolution: “La vie de l'expression consiste à défaire la forme où l'étant, s'exposant comme thème, se dissimule par là même” (‘The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated.’) By means of a destruction of form via expression Levinas seems to make his basic condition for the origin of ethics, the transgression of the same by the discovery of (absolute)n otherness, concrete. But this definition of the function of the face not only substantiates the logical relationship between the same and the other, it, also, lays the ground for language as this self-destruction is based on a semiotic operation, on the transformation of the self into a sign. However, there is no evidence that the notion of sign, even necessarily, implies the destruction of form. It looks much more, as if, on the contrary, form constitutes an unavoidable condition of the recognition of meaning. The semiotic quality of a thing, the fact that it refers to another thing than itself, can hardly be adequately described as a consequence of destruction and self-dissimulation. Signs, as for instance and especially linguistic ones, are things that from the very beginning have no other identity than that of referring to something else than themselves. In this case the notion of transgression would be totally misleading, as the meaning does not constitute any transcendence, it is part of the identity of the thing which is sign because its identity is founded on the relation between two entities. And, as this relation is characterized by interdependence, there is no possibility to distinguish ontologically between the same and the other. Interdependence makes the difference between both attributes a purely perspective one. In the case of indexical signs, these signs gain a semiotic quality by being *related* to something else by someone else. But it seems difficult, if not impossible to imagine how things might become signs by self-destruction. Levinas transformation of ontological relations into semiotic categories appears hardly convincing. However, this lack of evidence for his claims puts basically into question the operability of his ethics.

to Levinas. Ethics brings about further conditions for dealing with a *phainómenon*, with the object of knowledge; and these conditions turn out to be restrictions, as there is no access to the other side. But this proves a *gradual* difference, not an *essential* or even *substantial* one as his words, on the other hand, seem, nonetheless, to suggest: *l'altérité de la chose transcendante [...] est donc sans commune mesure avec l'altérité aussi irréductible d'autrui*. Yet, Derrida's own discourse undermines the plausibility of that statement.

Levinas' as well as Derrida's argument, rather than offering convincing concepts of ethics, basically show the fundamental difficulties to establish any notion of ethics within the framework of phenomenology. And, especially, the controversy between them is apt to demonstrate the, so to say, systemic impediments that make it problematic or even impossible to formulate ethical principles on the basis of the elementary assumptions of phenomenological philosophy. Derrida is certainly right to say that Levinas' claim for an ethics of transcendence, for an ethics build upon a radical transgression of all rational capacities and categories, relying on pure experience of otherness, ultimately turns out to be a fundamentally void ethics.¹ On the other hand, Derrida's criticism of Levinas' argument hardly exposes an alternative foundation of phenomenological ethics. Ethics, in his view, shrinks to another, more complex form of epistemology. The encounter with the other, as designed by Derrida, brings about a cognitive process that makes knowledge more complicated, as it underlies some specific restrictions. But there is no essential difference between dealing with a *phainómenon* in general and dealing with that particular *phainómenon* which is constituted by the other. Strictly speaking, there is no specificity of any ethics in Derrida's reply to Levinas.

As we are mainly interested in the relevance of phenomenological ethics and its reception by deconstructionism for the issues of literature, there is still one more question to be discussed a little bit more in detail, namely the role of language.

We saw that Levinas defines its function very precisely: *Nous tâcherons de montrer que le rapport du Même et de l'Autre [...] est le langage*. Language, thus, has to bridge the gap between the Self and the Other. However, as we mentioned already, Derrida, with quite convincing arguments, puts into question the possibility

1 "L'infiniment autre, l'infinité de l'Autre n'est l'autre *comme* infinité positive, Dieu ou ressemblance avec Dieu. L'infiniment autre ne serait pas ce qu'il est, autre, s'il était infinité positive et s'il ne gardait en lui la négativité de l'in-défini, de l'ἄπειρον" (Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique" 168). ["The infinitely other, the infinity of the other, is not the other *as* a positive infinity, as God or as resemblance with God. The infinitely Other would not be what it is, other, if it was a positive infinity, and if it did not maintain within itself the negativity of the indefinite, of the *apeiron* {Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" 114}."]

of such language under the condition of radical transcendence:

Levinas parle *en fait* de l'infiniment autre, mais, en refusant d'y reconnaître une modification intentionnelle de l'ego — ce qui serait pour lui un acte totalitaire et violent — il se prive du fondement même et de la possibilité de son propre langage.¹

Levinas *in fact* speaks of the infinitely other, but by refusing to acknowledge an intentional modification of the ego — which would be a violent and totalitarian act for him — he deprives himself of the very foundation and possibility of his own language. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 125)

But I will not discuss their disagreement here more in detail. I'm much more interested to see at which point of his argument Levinas brings language into play. And, in this respect, one has to admit that this happens quite late within the logic of his conception. Only, when the notion of absolute otherness as the very condition of all ethics is already established, only then language comes into play. Consequently, language is hardly more than a means of making possible what logically seems impossible. It is a strategy for a transgression of transgression, for a mediation of total otherness. Yet, it is hard to imagine how the exchange of words can take place without undermining the absolute otherness of the other. Linguistic communication, on which all language is based, irrevocably defines and, simultaneously, presupposes a common ground for both interlocutors in their encounter.

In sum, in Levinas' ethics of total otherness, language comes into play only as a means of *dealing with* such otherness. It appears to be a quite welcome instrument to make pragmatically possible what theoretically seems to be excluded. But language doesn't *constitute* the conditions of ethics. It proves a means of handling the logically insoluble problems raised by an ethics of transcendence.

It is, precisely, this last aspect that turns out to be of particular interest for a discussion of the ethical status of literature and its basic affinity with ethical criticism we were talking about at the beginning of this paper. The lesson we can draw from the debate between Levinas and Derrida can and even has to be generalized.

¹ Levinas, *Totalité et infinité* 183. Cf. also: "Ainsi, dans sa plus haute exigence non-violente, dénonçant le passage par l'être et le moment du concept, la pensée de Levinas ne nous proposerait pas seulement, comme nous le disions plus haut, une éthique sans loi mais aussi un langage sans phrase" (ibid. 219). ["Thus, in its most elevated nonviolent urgency, denouncing the passage through Being and the moment of the concept, Levinas' thought would not only propose an ethics without law, as we said above, but also a language without phrase" {Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 147}].]

No ethical system, no theory of ethics is able to lay the ground of ethical criticism. As I will now briefly argue at the end of my paper, it is the specific structure of literary communication itself—and not the function of language in whatsoever ethical system—that establishes the ethical relevance of literature. If literature is open to discussions of its moral status, and if the debate about such questions seems to remain an unavoidable part of literary criticism, this is due to its basic communicative conditions.

The ethical nature of literature is based on mainly three factors: The first of them is a rather trivial, not to say banal one: Literature deals with human actions. This is quite obvious for the genres of drama and narration itself, but even lyric poetry is, in general, based on actions. Though, unlike ballads, poems don't unfold entire plots, the situation they present as well as their discourse, in general presupposes actions. Lyric discourse reacts to or draws consequences from action. This is why it probably seems to lend itself less than other poetic genres to moral issues, although, by no means, this dimension is totally lacking in lyric poetry.

Yet, to say it again, this first factor conditioning the ethical status of literature is a rather banal one. More important seems to be the second one, namely the very structure of literary communication.

As we saw in our discussion of Levinas' concept of ethics, his philosophy presents a highly individualized ethics. The Other, on which figure his ethics centers, is at all times an individual other. On the contrary, literary communication is basically asymmetrical. The individual authors of literary texts address a multiplicity of addressees. It constitutes the community of communication in which a book is received, in which it is discussed, criticized and praised.

This is one of the reasons why literary texts enact discussion not only with their authors but, predominantly, among readers. The multiplicity of addresses produces a network of communication that largely exceeds communication between sender and addressee. The relevance of these communicative conditions of literature for its ethical status consists in the fact that the community of literary communication is tendentially identical with the community that guarantees for the validity of ethical principles. Because, as we claimed, ethics is—to use an expression of the French philosopher Henri Bergson—*un fait social*, 'a social fact', ethics is always the ethics of a community.¹ It is defined *for* and guaranteed *by* this community. This way, literary texts address the *guarantor* of ethics. The subject of literary communication

1 This, by the way, applies, also, to ethical systems the principles of which are not based on or defined for a community as the acceptance and, hence, the *validity* of these systems depends on the consensus of a community.

and the guarantor of ethics are tendentially identical.

To this argument one might convincingly object that this kind of communication structure is not specific to literary texts. It applies to all forms of publishing. Publishing texts, by definition, entails asymmetrical communication. Especially historiographical texts seem to be apt to put into question my analysis. They, as well, are dealing with human acting, and they address more or less the same community of communication as literary texts do. What, then, is the specific feature that confers to literature its special ethical status? Here, the third factor I mentioned comes into play, namely, the *reality status* of literature.

Literary texts are, to a large extent, characterized by fictionality. They have the freedom to report things that don't correspond to facts — although they are not at all obliged to do so. This specific relation between literary texts and reality brings about the logical status of their content. *Literary texts* deal with *possibilities*, they present *possible human actions*. And as these actions don't — or don't have to — correspond to historical facts, they have a mere textual status. They exist only in and by texts. In other words, they are exclusively destined to communication and therefore initiate communication. Consequently, literary texts are submitted to judgement.

The probably most common subject of communication about literature is their aesthetic value on which their success largely depends. But such judgement is by no means confined to aesthetic questions. As literary texts present possible human actions they, also, initiate a discourse about the moral value of such acting, as their possibility also makes them potentially real actions. The question, therefore, is, too, if they *should* become true. This is why it is so important that the subject of such discussions and the guarantor of ethical principles are tendentially identical.

Historical facts can, of course, be judged morally, but fictional actions are always already part of communication and, therefore, *lend* themselves to discussion. By their very communicative status, they are offered to discussion, as they are made *for* the audience.

The structural affinity between the logical status of human actions in fictional discourse and their propensity to moral assessment is, by the way, mirrored in literature itself. Literary texts frequently present morally controversial actions, such cases are probably even their favorite subjects. Somehow, literature is a medium for morally dubious cases. And, this is, by no means, true only for modernity.

To quote just some prominent examples from Western literature: The plot of Greek tragedies structurally unfolds morally complex questions. The figure of *Antigone*, for instance, reflects the conflict between the abuse of political power and the legitimacy of resistance against it. And *Oedipus Rex* deals with the question

of moral responsibility for non-deliberate actions. The songs of the Troubadours, as well, are dedicated to an ethical conflict. They implicitly discuss the morality of erotic desire under the conditions of a restrictive religious ethics. And classical French tragedies are centered on the controversial relationship between public power and private emotions. The basic literary propensity to discussions of ethical principles, due to its elementary communicative conditions, is mirrored in a tendency of literary texts to represent morally controversial human acting.

Pre-modern literary texts, and certainly not *only* pre-modern ones, frequently tend to control the propensity of literature to moral discussion by defining explicitly the moral value of the actions represented in them. Precisely this is the function of many comments of narrators or authors in literary texts. They intervene in order to fix ethical meaning. But this interest in control is nothing else than another symptom of the very nature of literary texts that, by the very structure of their communicative conditions, tend to put moral principles to discussion which always includes the potentially subversive power of putting these principles into question. This is why literary texts, presenting morally transgressive or controversial actions, unlike even historiographical texts that report on facts that constitute obvious moral atrocities, are considered to be much more subversive.

Notwithstanding the remarkable impact that the phenomenological debate about ethics undoubtedly had on literary theory, I'm skeptical about its conceptual relevance for literary methodology. However, at the same time, the discussion between Levinas and Derrida demonstrates that whatsoever theory cannot provide a sufficient or even suitable ground for ethical criticism. The base of the ethical dimension of literature and its affinity with ethical criticism are constituted by the specific communicative conditions of literary discourse itself. Ethical criticism, therefore, should perhaps focus much more on the structural conditions of the ethics of literature than it has done in the past.

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