The Eros of Ethics: Posthumous Writings of Emmanuel Levinas

Seán Hand

Abstract

It is still often claimed that Levinas’s early enthusiasm for Heideggerian philosophy became transformed during the Shoah and re-emerged as a combination of phenomenological ethics of responsibility and Talmudic interpretation. Based on this narrative, some scholars criticize what appear to be the later Levinas’s residual humanism, eurocentrism, anti-feminism, and Zionism. The recent publication of previously unavailable writings by Levinas, including poems in Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian, as well as draft novels he outlined during his internment in a Stalag camp, make a more complex reading of Levinas’s intellectual development necessary. This essay recontextualizes some of Levinas’s later well-known ideas by highlighting how early influences, cultural practices, religious heritage, and emerging philosophical conception were developed in literary form before becoming absorbed by a later ethical formulation. The concrete aim of this essay is to bring into focus the constitutive complexities, ambiguities and indecisions of Levinas’s attempts at creative writings, and to scrutinize their modes of making and unmaking.

Literature and Philosophy

The status of literature is one of the most remarkable aspects of Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy. The expressive enactments he isolates in the works of Shakespeare, Proust, Celan, or Blanchot do much more than illustrate philosophical themes; they exemplify the surpassing of philosophical totality by an ethics of adherence to alterity, and thus guide and encourage that ethic’s self-conscious testing of its own modes of comprehension and description. In Levinas, literary works are often elevated to the level of Plato or Maimonides, especially as contributions to a meta-ethical critique of Western thought from Parmenides to Heidegger. However, for all its testing of categorial assumptions, the elevation of literature by philosophy can also ultimately seem to confirm a hierarchical and appropriative relationship, suggesting that literature’s expressive intuition assisted Levinas in his development of a more radicalized philosophy, in particular from the 1940s onwards. More concretely, one could argue
that Levinas used literature to create a significantly different set of artistic visions from those utilized by the Heideggerian mythography.

The 2013 posthumous appearance of Emmanuel Levinas’s own unpublished poems and novelistic extracts, in the volume Éros, littérature et philosophie: Essais romanesques et poétiques, notes philosophiques sur le thème d’éros, constitutes a major moment in Levinas studies.¹ The existence of these imaginative writings and, just as significantly, the extended duration of Levinas’s conservation and revision of them, bring us beyond a mere philosophical approval of literature’s capacity to animate thought and demonstrate a more balanced and ambiguous coexistence of alternative value systems which, at a crucial moment for Levinas, typify a radical choice regarding mutually exclusive intellectual identities and destinies. This impression is reinforced by the editorial presentation of these writings in both “continuous” and “génétique” versions: the latter’s typographical depiction of Levinas’s own amendments, along with the reproduction of certain pages, graphically highlight the amount of detailed reworking, the imbrication of different genres, and even the association of different categories of existence. These creative writings were preceded by the 2009 appearance of the remarkable Carnets de captivité suivi de Écrits sur la captivité et notes philosophiques diverses, also published posthumously. This publication detailed the extent of Levinas’s serious preoccupation, during (and in the years immediately following) his wartime internment in a Stalag camp, with the possible elaboration of novels and the sometimes surprising reading that accompanied this project.² Taken together, these collections of novelistic plans, extracts, and other preserved literary attempts show us more than just the extent of Levinas’s lifelong attachment to literature. They demonstrate quite dramatically Levinas’s enduring concern that a certain kind of philosophy might have come to an end, at least for him, and that his formulations of phenomenological identity might henceforth happen via the techniques and possibilities of fiction, poetry, and drama, rather than through the writing of recognizably philosophical works.


² Emmanuel Levinas, Carnets de captivité, suivi de Écrits sur la captivité et Notes philosophiques diverses, ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier (Paris: Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, IMEC Éditeur, 2009). Henceforth abbreviated to Carnets de captivité and to CC in notes.