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Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*.B

Reviewed by John David Dawson, Haverford College

Robert Eaglestone has discovered in the later writings of Emmanuel Levinas a postmodernist, post-humanistic "ethics of reading" that escapes the weaknesses of competing approaches represented by Martha Nussbaum and J. Hillis Miller. After describing the contemporary discrediting of various modernist approaches to literary ethics based on literature's underlying universal human values, as well as the failures of recent "anti-theorists" who have sought to revive such unsophisticated humanism by "trying to grasp certainties that are no longer certain" (p. 93), Eaglestone sets up the thesis and the antithesis out of which his Hegel-like discussion of Levinas will generate an ethically satisfying *Aufhebung*. Nussbaum is presented as literary humanism's most sophisticated contemporary advocate, but one who (having in effect failed to take seriously enough her binary opposite, Hillis Miller) neglects the textuality of texts in favor of their representations of ethically salient interactions of character and circumstance. Miller, on the other hand, probes textuality for a textually immanent ethic, but ends up caught in an unresolvable confusion between an insistence that "the ethical" is both fixed in language and yet ontologically or linguistically indeterminate. With awkward terminology borrowed from Denis Donoghue, Eaglestone calls Nussbaum an "epi-reader" who reads texts in order to hear an absent person, and Miller a "graphi-reader" who ignores the world in favor of the text. At this apparent impasse, "the thought of Emmanuel Levinas becomes relevant" (p. 5). Levinas's work can "be seen as moving from epi-reading through to graphi-reading and then beyond the opposition of the two." The result is "a new and different way of attending to the ethical in the textual, and of the responsibility inherent in reading" (p. 7).

How does Levinas discover responsibility in reading, especially given his well-known "deep-seated antipathy to art" (p. 98)? In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas had discovered the ethical to lie in one's face-to-face encounter with the presence of another person, not through the presence or absence of representation. But Derrida, in "Violence and Metaphysics," showed that this conception of ethics was unable to escape language, representation, and the metaphysics of presence, despite all of its efforts to do so. Eaglestone argues that Levinas took to heart Derrida's deconstructive reading of *Totality and Infinity* by executing a linguistic turn in *Otherwise than Being*: "Levinas abandons his previous position which demanded 'true representation' and instead offers a way of understanding ethics philosophically through representation, through the phenomenon of language" (p. 135).

How, then, is ethics understood "through language"? The key lies in grasping the double nature of language, its character as "amphibology." Language interweaves "the saying" (*le dire*) with "the said" (*le dit*). All persons find themselves already within "the saying," in proximity to others to whom they are already responsible. Responsibility is not an act of will by which one person decides he or she is obligated to another; it is an a priori condition of ethical possibility, a site in which one finds oneself already bound up with the other, unable to do anything other than respond. Individual self-identity is subsequent to one's more primordial stance within the saying. Like would-be biblical prophets proclaiming "Here I am" in response to a divine call, persons find themselves immediately available and obliged to others as a function of their status "beyond" or "otherwise than being."

In contrast to the transcendent saying, "the said" is the realm of space and time in which the saying is always "incarnated." But this incarnation does not manifest so much as it hides and immobilizes: "The said has this hold because it designates, and, in designating, denies the transcendence of the saying" (p. 145). "The saying, unthematisable, becomes trapped in the said" (p. 146). Nonetheless, ethics requires the said, for the saying does not exist in pure form: ". . . without the interweaving of the said and the saying there could be no ethics" (p. 149), though it is the saying which is "the site of our responsibility for the other" (p. 144). The heart of the ethics of reading, then, consists in the interruption of the said for the sake of releasing or manifesting the saying. Although Eaglestone uses the term "transcendence" (ruling out any suggestion of divinity) to designate the saying, the saying can also be characterized as any critical approach that "interrupt[s] established understandings, the said." It turns out that it is the very "disruptive power" of the saying that is ethical--the state of "not being at home, the strangeness of the ineluctable call to responsibility" (p. 177), which is also, Eaglestone notes, a call to love. Put in terms coined by Levinas, Nussbaum's plea to read in order to hone moral perception and sensitivity "does not account for . . . the puncturing of the said, of the logocentric language of ontology, by the saying" (p. 169). Conversely, in Miller's proposals "there is no other, no saying" (p. 170). Sublating both these deficient efforts to move beyond modernist humanism is Levinas's vision, in which "criticism, or literary interpretation, as interpretation and in many different forms, is a 'witness' to the saying in the language of literature: this witnessing is its responsibility and its duty" (p. 170).

Eaglestone is at his best when summarizing Levinas's later philosophy, especially when articulating his self-contradictory remarks about the status of art and literature (despite a critique of artistic representation, Levinas's own literary performance in *Otherwise than Being* suggests that literature can provide the sort of interruption of the said required by any ethics of reading). However, Levinas's own philosophy proves more gripping than Eaglestone's interpretative remarks, mainly because those remarks are so heavily dependent on the simple, even reductive, straw-man presentations of Nussbaum and Miller. At least in the case of Nussbaum, that presentation seems excessively narrow and one-sided. There is too much of an assumption that remarks by deconstructors about textuality simply trump Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian project. The conclusion that Nussbaum doesn't care about textuality, or reduces the literary to the philosophical, does not square with Nussbaum's richly textured description in *The Fragility of Goodness* of the opposition of Greek dramatists to prevailing philosophical ideals. The treatment of Miller seems equally quick and narrow, again designed primarily to provide an antithesis to Nussbaum and a backdrop to the exposition of Levinas. I do not think the exposition of Levinas really benefits all that much from the contextualization provided by Nussbaum and Miller, though one could argue that juxtaposing Levinas to these two widely-read thinkers helps bring him more directly into contemporary literary debates about the ethics of reading. Eaglestone's wooden thesis-antithesis-synthesis approach (Nussbaum wants the world rather than texts; Miller wants texts without the world; Levinas gets the world through the text) unfortunately draws attention away from some of the nuance and insight of his exposition of Levinas.

Although Eaglestone occasionally draws attention to the religious, anti-theological, and specifically Jewish features of Levinas's work, the relation (or lack of relation) between Levinas's conception of ethics and his stance toward religion remains largely unexplored. Likewise, the central category of the discussion--ethics or "the ethical"--is not so much defined

as taken for granted, as though once one had mentioned terms like "transcendence" or "responsibility" one had sufficiently accounted for "the ethical." Levinas's notion that one is always already responsible to and for others is compelling but arises largely as a circular, phenomenologically-grounded assertion: it will be compelling for those to whom it is compelling. Finally, the occasional intrusion of the category of love in Levinas's text and Eaglestone's summary also goes unanalyzed, as though it too were a self-evident phenomenon. But what is the character of this love, what is its relation to responsibility, and how is a responsibility generated by love different from one generated by other predispositions or motives? Here one might return to Nussbaum, who writes about "love's knowledge" afforded through reading attentively, to see whether she and Levinas might have more in common as ethical thinkers than Eaglestone discerns.

In sum, Eaglestone's book is a welcome illustration of the pertinence of Levinas to current debates about the ethical value of literature and reading. Levinas is a difficult writer, and Eaglestone succeeds in explicating key Levinasian ideas about the saying and the said in ways that will help literary critics and theorists build productive conceptual links between this enormously stimulating thinker and other voices among those concerned with the ethical dimension of reading.