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## Review of Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*.

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**Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. i-xxiv, 185 pp. ISBN 0226721132.**

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The strife between philosophy and poetry goes back at least to Plato's *Republic*, where certain art forms were banished from the ideal *polis* and from the education of its guardians on the grounds that the images and rhythms contained in them were capable of beguiling the senses and corrupting the soul. The argument in the *Republic* suggests that artistic expression should be subordinated to moral and social ends, themselves determined through philosophical means alone. As commentators have long observed, however, the text in which Plato advances such claims is written in a highly stylized literary form and is replete with images, allusions, poetic phrases, rhythms, and even myths. Indeed, although philosophy has from the first claimed the right to determine its own legitimate forms, and has almost always followed Plato in affirming the non-philosophical character of images, figurative language, and rhetoric more generally, this exclusion nonetheless regularly fails since, as Alcibiades already remarks at the end of another Platonic dialogue, the *Sophist* (221e), "in fact, Socrates talks about laden asses, blacksmiths, cobblers, and tanners."

The contest between philosophy and rhetoric, formulated in terms of the problematic relationship of ethics and literature, is at the heart of Jill Robbins's latest reflections on the work of Emmanuel Levinas. The eight essays of *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* may be read separately, each complete and rewarding in its own right; taken together, however, they mount an increasingly effective and persuasive attack on the possibility of maintaining a strict distinction and exclusion, as Levinas appears determined to do, between ethical and rhetorical language, and thus between the domains of ethics and literature. Robbins is clear from the first that the question of 'Levinas and literature' must be approached "intrinsically" or "internally" (39); that is, it is not to be a question of *applying* Levinas's thought to the interpretation of literary texts as has been the case in the appropriation of other French theorists. At issue rather is the question of how Levinas's own language *works*, in particular, the language that accomplishes the ethical relationship. The contradiction, already alluded to, between *what* Levinas says about literature and ethics and *how* he says it is the focus in various ways of the essays in Part I of the book, while those in Part II broaden the scope of the discussion through an exploration of Levinas's attitude toward art more generally, and through a discussion of his own use of literary allusions and examples, and of his readings of such authors as Rimbaud, Agnon, Celan, Claudel, and others.

Levinas's antipathy toward art and literature, as Robbins notes, appears in form and substance to be a direct inheritance from Plato (55). In early essays as well as in his first major works, Levinas deliberately excludes works of art and artistic expression as a means of access to the ethical relationship, exiling 'plastic images' much as Plato exiled the beguiling images and cadences of poetry. In "Reality and Its Shadow," published in 1948, Levinas argues that art is essentially disengaged from moral and political concerns, adding that it is constituted by a dimension of evasion and irresponsibility as potentially wicked, egoist, and cowardly as "feasting during a plague." In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), the language of the polemic is more subdued, less rhetorical, though ironically rhetoric itself has become the central target. Identified

with propaganda, flattery, and demagoguery (though also with pedagogy and diplomacy), rhetoric is said to approach the Other “obliquely,” through ruse, artifice, and exploitation, rather than in the straightforwardness of a “veritable conversation (17). Levinas argues that the ethical relationship is accomplished only in language, but stipulates that it entails an access to the Other outside of rhetoric and that it coincides with the ‘overcoming’ of rhetoric.

Like Plato in this too, however, Levinas’s writing is extraordinarily literary both in its use of rhetorical tropes and turns of phrase, and more importantly in its reliance on a *figure* or *image* to convey its main philosophical (and supposedly non-figural) point. Just as Socrates in the *Republic* is forced to abandon ‘plain’ speech and present an image of the Good in the famous ‘analogy with the sun,’ the central moment of Levinas’s ethics depends upon a figure—the face of the Other—that the reader is prohibited from interpreting literally. The face is the principal figure in Levinas’s early works of the absolute alterity of the other person but, as Levinas employs the term, it does not refer in the ordinary way to the assemblage of nose, brows, eyes, mouth, and so on by which we recognize one another. It encompasses this assemblage, but in order to invert its usual meaning, referring not to the form of the face but to the manner in which the face “divests itself of its form” and “breaks through” and destroys its own “plastic image” (24). The face thus refers to the Other’s non-coincidence with his or her own image, and to the ego’s consequent inability to reduce the Other to a self-identical object, graspable by means of an image or concept. For Levinas, this possibility of a relationship to the Other that that would be irreducible to knowledge is the ethical possibility *par excellence*.

The essays throughout Part I of *Altered Reading* persistently ask what we are to make of this philosophy which denigrates rhetoric as the opposite of ethical language and of ethics itself, but which then simultaneously relies precisely on a figure or trope to express the central notion in virtue of which the ethical relationship is to be understood. The absolute alterity of the Other is approachable, according to Levinas, only in non-figurative or non-rhetorical language, but the notion of such alterity can be expressed only figuratively with the aid of an image that the philosopher claims represents the inadequacy of images! The incomparable strength of Robbins’s book is not only that she broaches this difficult and intriguing question, but that each essay approaches the problem from a new “angle”—a new oblique regard!—which increases the complexity and scope of the problem with regards to Levinas’s ethical project as a whole.

Robbins’s deconstruction of the opposition between ethics and rhetoric is classically Derridian in both form and inspiration. In the first two chapters, which provide a critical exposition of Levinas’s notion of an ethical language and an examination of the trace as the mode of signification of the face, Robbins calls attention to the performative contradictions that Levinas’s thought is forced into in order to state its notion of the ethical relationship. Subscribing to the line of interpretation advanced by Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, Robbins reads Levinas as locating the ethical moment of language in its performative dimension, that is, in the fact that discourse not only thematizes or represents something, but always does so *to* someone. This moment of sheer invocation or address, Levinas argues, constitutes the possibility of a relation to the Other outside of, beyond, or before the cognition, which in representing the Other by means of universal concepts, negates her alterity and singularity. The ethical dimension of language thus lies in its *performance* of the relation to alterity rather than in what it says or can say constatively about alterity (11). Robbins wonders, along with Derrida and Lyotard, whether

Levinas's work is thus able to meet its own strict ethical requirements. The problem, moreover, is not just Levinas's but applies equally to anyone who would read or interpret his text: "How to speak about this ethical language without rendering its performative dimension constative, without returning it to the denotative language of the same? How can the reader possibly do it justice" (13)? If thematization and comprehension are equated with the attempt to destroy or reduce alterity—in Levinas's terms to 'reduce the Other to the Same'—then the problem is at least two-fold: how to state an ethics that can only be performed, and how to remain ethically faithful to the alterity of a work that claims that understanding and comprehension always to some extent violate alterity?

Perhaps the most concentrated expression of the problematic embedded in the phrase "Levinas and literature" is to be found in Chapter 3, "Facing Figures," where it is a question not only of the imbrication between ethical and rhetorical discourses or possibilities within discourse, but also in a parallel fashion of the intertwining of "Judaic" and "Greek" conceptualities. This chapter asks explicitly what is at issue in Levinas's turn away from the notion of figure. Doesn't this *turning away* enact a figure of speech, involving Levinas in a new sort of performative contradiction? Robbins wonders whether there can be a "nonfigural position" from which to speak (52), and sees in this problem a parallel to that of the relation between the "Judaic" and "Greek" discourses that Levinas invokes. For Robbins, the Judaic in Levinas "is always a problem of . . . the language and the conceptuality that is available to us" because "there is no access to Judaism that does not take place in the 'Greek' language, that does not first confront the dominant 'Greco-Christian' conceptuality in order to disengage the specificity of the Judaic" (41). In a similar fashion, the essay suggests, there may be no access to the ethical that does not take place in figural language.

How, then, does Levinas's own discourse negotiate the inevitability of "speaking Greek?" In the Greco-Christian tradition—illustrated for Robbins's purposes by the Pauline tropes of sight/blindness, freedom/servitude, spirit/letter of the law, and so on—the Judaic has been determined primarily in a negative and privative fashion, being in each case associated with the second, subordinated term within the pair. Levinas's hermeneutic, on Robbins's view, involves a "double interpretive movement" whereby some possibility within the subordinated term is "radicalized," coming to stand for the term as a whole, after which the term is then reinscribed in a manner that brings out its "positive force" (43). The combined effect of this reinterpretation and reinscription is that the dominant conceptual schema undergoes an inversion and consequent reorganization allowing an "alternative intelligibility" to emerge (*ibid.*). A classic example of this strategy may be seen in Levinas's treatment of the emphasis on law in traditional Judaism—an emphasis stereotypically described as overly legalistic and contrasted with Christian compassion and an emphasis on the virtues. Robbins shows how Levinas focuses on the moment when, standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Jews received the law by "doing" it before "hearing" or understanding it. This "doing before hearing," as Robbins wryly remarks, is a "kind of folly" that not only inverts the philosophical priority of theory over practice but "goes against the grain of the entire conceptuality of the West" (12-13). Thus, Judaic adherence to the law is in one sense a "blind" obedience, but this obedience takes the radical form of an originary devotion to the Other expressing the possibility of an ethical obligation that precedes cognition and that undermines the privilege given to both sight and understanding within Western or "Greek" philosophy.

This method of recovering the hidden resources of a marginalized tradition and using them to subvert the dominant conceptuality equally characterizes Robbins's own strategy in reading Levinas. Given the opposition between ethics and rhetoric that throughout Levinas's *œuvre* organizes his discourse on language and literature, the combined force of the arguments advanced in Robbins's book is to show that the subordinated term within the pair not only cannot be wholly excluded since, in point of fact, it always inhabits and "contaminates" (19) the privileged term, but also, and perhaps more significantly, that there is a possibility within rhetoric to which Levinas's thought seems willfully blind: that *as trope* rhetoric harbors the possibility of an alterity as originary as, though not identical to, the ethical alterity identified with the face of the Other. This latter claim is specifically at issue in the second half of the book.

In the essays in Part II, Robbins explores the hermeneutic demands of a nontotalizing thought through a consideration of Levinas's interactions with literary texts, allusions, and examples. At issue again is the question of style, of how Levinas *performs* his relation to literature and of how that performance ensnares and works against the sense of what he *says* about language and ethics (95). Part II contains excellent and much needed explorations of the influences of the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Jean Wahl, Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and others on the development of Levinas's thought, and on his attitude toward artistic expression in particular. As in the essays in Part I, a central concern here is to show the contaminations and intertwinings of terms and concepts that Levinas's thought would keep apart: ethical transcendence versus the immanence of participation; the obsession of the ethical demand versus the horror of the *il y a*; ethical values versus aesthetic ones, and so on. A common thread among the essays here, especially as concerns the discussion of Levinas's relation to Wahl and Blanchot, is the possibility that poetry or art might "say" alterity or the heterogeneity of existence *better* than does philosophy (107). To be sure, it is admitted that the alterity of a poem is not the same as the alterity of the other person (though Robbins is not explicit on the differences), but the question remains whether the work of art or literature might not also give access to the ethical as Levinas understands it. That is, in the alterity of the work of literature—an alterity that Robbins associates with the workings of trope as well as the question of style—does not literature, too, become an interruptive force, preventing the ego's or the reader's return to him or herself and thus inaugurating an ethical movement in Levinas's sense?

In a final contrapuntal gesture, bringing together "terms" that would seem naturally allergic to one another, an Appendix to the book presents Robbins's translation of Georges Bataille's very early essay, "From Existentialism to the Primacy of Economy"—a review of four existentialist treatises, among them Levinas's *De l'existence à l'existant*. Robbins provides an extended commentary on the essay in Chapter 6, though Bataille's article is of considerable interest in its own right given that the philosophies of these two thinkers as they developed could hardly have diverged more completely in tone and tendency, showing again that what is at issue in a philosophical style is hardly an indifferent matter for the question of philosophical content.

What would an ethical language be? What are the demands placed on reading and criticism by Levinas's identification of ethics with a nontotalizing thought? Are "figures" then unethical, and if so can there then be a figure *for* the ethical? Can the work of art give access to the ethical in Levinas's sense? And why, after renouncing art, does Levinas admit certain exceptions? The questions multiply and ultimately there is a sense in which *Altered Reading* poses more questions

than it answers, but this is decidedly its strength and its virtue rather than a shortcoming. For the reader not versed in Levinas's philosophy or terminology, Robbins's discussions are accessible and well-articulated, and her explanations of relevant concepts render Levinas's thought clearly and precisely without loss of complexity or subtlety. Most importantly, the arguments in this work show that the relationships between ethics and aesthetics, ethics and literature, ethics and rhetorical trope, cannot be considered mere "side" issues for Levinas scholarship; rather, when one begins to take their measure and plumb their depths as Robbins has, they become capable of illuminating and challenging the stakes of Levinas's conception of the ethical in a fundamentally new and exciting manner.