

# The ethics of poetic expression in Emmanuel Lévinas and Maurice Blanchot

Berta Galofré Claret  
Universitat de Barcelona  
berta.galofre14@gmail.com



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## Abstract

Lévinas believed that Blanchot identified artistic inspiration with his understanding of the *il y a*, that is, an inauthentic attitude toward life and the Other. Lévinas, who tried to overcome the neutrality of the *il y a*, criticised Blanchot's desire to establish ethics as a *prima philosophia*. Lévinas asked himself in what way the artwork could give access to the ethical, which is why he explored the relationship between expression and responsibility. He concluded that poetic speaking was excluded from his understanding of ethical language. Therefore, Lévinas was against poetic activity, in ethical terms, because poetic activity (dis)possessed the subject/artist in such a way that the creator was not able to control his writing, which converted art into the worst kind of irresponsibility. This paper will focus on Lévinas' first aesthetic period, and on the ideas collected in the essay *La Réalité et son ombre*, published in 1948.

**Keywords:** *il y a*; philosophy; literature; art; other; demand of writing; aesthetics; language

## Resum. L'ètica del llenguatge poètic en Emmanuel Lévinas i Maurice Blanchot

Lévinas considerava que Blanchot havia identificat la inspiració de l'artista amb el seu concepte d'*il y a*. És a dir, amb una actitud envers la vida i l'Altre inautèntica. Lévinas, que havia lluitat en contra de la neutralitat de l'*il y a*, criticava l'aproximació de Blanchot per tal de mantenir l'estatus de la *prima philosophia*. Així, Lévinas, tot preguntant-se per l'art com a accés a l'ètica, va explorar la relació entre l'expressió artística i la responsabilitat. Finalment, va concloure que el llenguatge poètic es trobava al marge de la seva concepció del llenguatge ètic. És per aquest motiu que Lévinas es mostrava contrari a l'activitat poètica, en un sentit estrictament ètic, ja que aquesta, segons ell, des(possedia) el subjecte artístic de tal manera que li impedia de tenir control sobre la seva pròpia escriptura. Això convertia l'art en una pura irresponsabilitat. Aquest article precisament se centra en aquestes qüestions, les quals són tractades durant el primer període estètic de Lévinas, idees que queden recollides a *La réalité et son ombre*, assaig publicat el 1948.

**Paraules clau:** *il y a*; filosofia; literatura; art; alteritat; exigència de l'escriptura; estètica; llenguatge

### Summary

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The philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas was known for his interest in ethics and the study of alterity. His ethical discourse articulated the complex relationship between human beings, which is why he tried to overcome oversight by the Other and create a new morality. But an ethical action always conceals a specific aesthetic development, and in this paper, I want to focus on Lévinas' language-first approach in order to understand what role it played in his ethics. In this case, it is fundamental to read attentively *La Réalité et son ombre* (Lévinas, 1948), the essay in which Lévinas wrote everything that he thought initially about aesthetics, ideas which are a response to Maurice Blanchot's had earlier views.

"For Blanchot, the experience of writing and the demand of ethics are inseparable" (Haase and Large, 2001: 70), whereas for Lévinas it is completely the opposite. As Haase and Large write:

The demand of ethics, rather, is the exposure of the self to excessive presence of the other who calls into question my ownership of the world. The other, as Levinas would say, demands a response from me, an interruption of my selfishness, and this 'response' is the true impetus behind responsibility. (Haase and Large, 2001: 71)

Blanchot and Lévinas shared an interest in our relationship with the unknown, but each dealt with it in an utterly different way. In both, this unknown or Infinite spoke to the subject with no consent, as a revelation (Lévinas, 2016). Lévinas identified the Infinite with the Other – understood as God or just as someone who is in front of me, which for him were one and the same. He was concerned with how to deal with that revelation especially how to answer ethically and be responsible to its demand. A response that, as Haase and Large have said, asks for "an interruption of my selfishness" (Haase and Large: 2001: 71). In Blanchot's case, where this Infinite revelation was seen in aesthetic terms, there was no interruption, as there was in Lévinas, just the subject embraced by the demand without hindrance (Blanchot, 1982). However, Blanchot thought that this surrender was only possible under an impersonal condition, i.e. through self-renunciation: "the writer, it is said, gives up saying I" (Blanchot, 1982: 26), as the only way to leave space for inspiration.

Lévinas believed that Blanchot identified the artist's inspiration and the ambiguous instant of literature with his conception of the *il y a*, meaning

the inauthentic attitude towards life and the Other, an impersonal and irresponsible behaviour. Lévinas, who tried to overcome the neutrality of the *il y a* throughout his life, criticised the Blanchot approach in order to establish ethics as a first philosophy. “The proximity between literature and ethics is that they both displace the subject through language” (Haase and Large, 2001: 77), in other words Lévinas said that there was an impassable distance between me and the Other, and the attempt to avoid it would represent the annihilation of the Other, a simplification which would reduce the Other. Thus, “to speak to someone is to respond to their distance” (Haase and Large, 2001: 75), being ethical means being conscious enough of this distance. However, for Blanchot, this effort is not needed, literature and poetics are for him: “the experience of the anonymity of language that seems to be spoken by no one, and which Blanchot calls the neuter” (Haase and Large, 2001: 80). A narrative voice which comes from outside, or as Blanchot called it: *the demand of writing*, and this gave rise to the present of the Other (Haase and Large, 2001).

## 1. Blanchot and literature

Bruns said that:

Poetics for Blanchot is not a theory of how poetry is possible – of how it might get made or how it might be differentiated as a genre (say from philosophy). His interest is not in the technology of linguistic performance; it is the experience of language, where language is irreducible to the discursiveness of subjectivity, and where experience is no longer subjectivists, much less aesthetic, but is rather an experience of (or, more accurately, with) alterity or exteriority of which *Thomas l'obscur* gives us a sensational – but perhaps not all that extravagant – account. (Bruns, 1997: 38)

Blanchot conceived of poetry and its creation as a speech of death, as the night experience. This is because poetry or literature refers to something which is unnameable (Bruns, 1997). In fact, this *something* was precisely what obsessed Blanchot. In addition, he was worried about the condition required to write. Finally, he concluded that in literature, the poet has to lose all his subjectivity in order to let the demand of writing appear, and give no space for anything else (Bruns, 1997). For Blanchot, art was a demand that required a loss of the “I” – in other words, a movement into exile or a passive state which turns toward impossibility and fascination:

He does not move toward a surer world, a finer or better justified world where everything would be ordered according to the clarity of the impartial light of day. He does not discover the admirable language which speaks honourably for all. What speaks in him is the fact that, in one way or another, he is no longer himself; he isn't anyone anymore. (Blanchot, 1982: 28)

This way of understanding poetry accepts that in it there is no sense of refuge. The author looks at the horror of the exigency of writing, as if it was an existence outside of being, and he is invaded by something that he cannot understand (Bruns, 1997). This is the inspiration of the artist, an experience which is the result of an absolute demand that is transformed into language. Nevertheless, language never coincides with what the writer really wants to express. That is why writing is an impossible task (Bruns, 1997). The writer is possessed by the impossibility, consequently it causes a voice which is not human: the dissolution of human subjectivity. In this way, writing is being exposed to the anonymity of language, a language which cannot take part in the ordinary understanding of language. For Blanchot, the task of poetry is then to respond to this sense of strangeness that separates me from the other (Bruns, 1997). This “other” makes the author speak in that weird way born from the outside. Poetry is an anarchic movement (Bruns, 1997).

## 2. *Il y a*: a Lévinasian term

Lévinas’ aesthetics cannot be understood without Blanchot, nor Blanchot’s without Lévinas. Hence, what Blanchot drew on regarding the artist’s anonymity is a conception based on Lévinas’ notion of the *il y a* (Critchley, 2005). Lévinas distinguished two kinds of existence: the authentic and the inauthentic one. The first was characterized by a recognition of the complex biography of each human being, while the second, which was named the *il y a* [there is], refers to an impersonal phenomenon (Lévinas, 2015). Moreover, Lévinas also called it *existence without existence* (Antich, 1993), i.e., the anonymous, undetermined existence or a lack of identity where the “I” cannot be reclaimed, just noted (Antich, 1993). Lévinas, who endured the Nazi horror, identified this non-existence as how Hitlerism dealt with Jews. He therefore wanted to overcome this neutrality, highlighting the relevance of responsibility to the other in order to vanquish the *il y a* and put it to flight.

In contrast, Blanchot gave another meaning to the *il y a*. He considered it was a precondition *sine qua non* for the writing experience. So it was not something the artist must run away from, in contrast to what Lévinas believed.

For Lévinas, Blanchot’s poetics excluded his view of ethical language and consequently he denounced rhetoric as a violent sign (Robbins, 1995). So, even though for Blanchot the experience of writing was inseparable from ethics (Haase and Large, 2001), for Lévinas this could not make any sense. As Robbins said:

He opposes poetic activity to ethical discourse, in the process asserting that poetic activity possesses or dispossesses the subject: hence the work carries away not only its producer but also its audience. (Robbins, 1995: 69)

Moreover, Lévinas thought that this way of understanding poetry misunderstood people. Actually, Blanchot affirmed the same, but for him it was not a problem, just a fact:

This movement is “pure contradiction.” It is linked to the infinitude of the transformation which leads us not only to death, but infinitely transmutes death itself, which makes of death the infinite movement of dying and of him who dies him who is infinitely dead, as if in death’s intimacy it were for him a matter of dying always more, immeasurably. (Blanchot, 1982: 157)

### 3. *La Réalité et son ombre*

Art is expression and the artist speaks of the ineffable, but at the same time it is an invasion of shadow (Lévinas, 1982). In *La Réalité et son ombre* Lévinas argues against the dogma that art grasps the truth of reality. For him art disengages itself from the world but does not rise above it towards the eternal (Hart, 2005). In the end, art distracts us, and prevents us being aware of the ethical call of the Other. Hence, only a philosophical interpretation of the artistic phenomenon can save us from this threat (Hart, 2005). This idea introduces a new dichotomy between ethics and poetry, because “where the philosopher identifies ethics as a way of overcoming the *il y a*, the writer figures the approach of the Outside as essential to literature” (Hart, 2005: 133).

Darkness is the main idea in *La Réalité et son ombre*. Furthermore, the work talks about how the artwork stands outside all categories of cognition and representation, and at the same time does not belong to the order of revelation (Bruns, 2004). Lévinas argues that art is made of images, which work as if they were a rhyme, the unique situation where we cannot speak of consent (Bruns, 2004). Images are not transparent because they “do not come into being according to a logical mental operation” (Bruns, 2004: 215), otherwise image comes from the *il y a* condition, i.e., from an interruption of being where there is just space for ecstasy. Hence, there arises the instance of misfortune, a moment characterised by a monstrous and inhuman sense (Lévinas, 1982). This made Lévinas believe that art was the worst kind of irresponsibility: a type of idolatry (Robbins, 1995), because art substitutes its image for the object, as a way of neutralising the real relationship with the object (Robbins, 1995). For Lévinas, there was an abdication of responsibility in this substitution, determined by the musicality of the image, an effect that possesses the artist without consent, paralysing and bringing him into the anonymity of the *il y a* (Robbins, 1995). In some way, when the artist is immersed in the artwork through the demand of writing, subjectivity disappears, absorbed by the aesthetic process.

*La Réalité et son ombre* concluded that “art is in fact disengaged and evasive” and it cannot affect reality in a positive way (Riera, 2006: 111). “Reality refers to the natural presupposition of critical philosophy, whose fundament and purpose revolve around the notion of cognitive truth, while *shadow* refers to an image already exiled from the real: the sensible or sensation” (Riera, 2006: 112), which is why, in the image, the object becomes a non-object. For Lévinas, even “the phenomenology of images insists on their transparency [...]

nothing is more mysterious than the term world it represents” (Lévinas, 1982: 135). Hence: “By the very way it refers to its object: resemblance. But that supposes that thought stops on the image itself; it consequently supposes a certain opacity of the image” (Lévinas, 1982: 135). As Lévinas states, we only find opacity in the image. It is just an image, and we cannot put into its allegory all its real meaning. Thus, image neutralises the real relationship with the object (Lévinas, 1982). The artist is possessed, inspired, “we say, harkens to a muse” (Lévinas, 1982: 132), surrendered by the idea of rhythm where the artist submits to the poetic order and is disengaged from reality (Lévinas, 1982). “There is something wicked and egoistic and cowardly in artistic enjoyment”, he writes (Lévinas, 1982: 142). This explains why art cannot be the supreme value of civilization.

#### 4. Philosophy vs. literature

“The difference between Lévinas and Blanchot is that Lévinas cannot abandon philosophy, that is, cannot give up the discourse of concepts and definitions” (Bruns, 1997: 114). This idea is fundamental. For Lévinas, *prima philosophia* was moral (Lévinas, 2015), and nothing else could be more important than this. Thus, Lévinas thought that ethics and the demand of writing could not be the same because the exigency of writing does not depend on our control, since it works without consent. By contrast, Lévinas understood that ethics implied self-control, according to the terrible distance between the other and me. If there is no consent in writing, the artist can behave unethically, because he is unconscious. This is why we can have an ethics, but not a poetics (Bruns, 1997). In ethics we cannot be immersed in a dark state of mind; we need clarity, awareness of our actions; this is the only way responsibility can work, despite the difficulty that it can entail.

Lévinas and Blanchot shared the basic premise that the Other/Infinite/Unknown escapes from us (Riera, 2006), but the main difference between both of them came down to the manner they dealt with it. The philosophical analysis argued by Lévinas allows for responsible conduct before acting, which means an ethical dictation by which to be guided. Regarding this, in *Reality and its shadows* Lévinas said: “Philosophy discovers, beyond the enchanted rock on which it stands, all its possible swarming about it [*a poetic image/art work*]. It grasps them by interpretation. This is to say that the artwork can and must be treated as a myth”. And later he added: “Philosophical exegesis will measure the distance that separates myth from real being and will become conscious of the creative event itself” (Lévinas, 1982: 142). Philosophy wants to become conscious of the creative event, but we cannot fit a philosophical logic into art. So, while Blanchot believed that the experience of writing and the demand of ethics were inseparable, this did not work for Lévinas.

## 5. Conclusions

Is it possible to think of ethics poetically? According to Lévinas, art cannot give way to ethics. In this way, the philosopher was against poetic speaking when we are talking about ethical language. If poetic activity dispossesses the subject in such a way that the creator is not able to control his or her writing, there is no place for art in the ethical discourse. Art has been just an evasion, and it must stay away from ethics. Hence, Lévinas replied to and rejected the Heideggerian “poetically man dwells” view, because only with philosophical interpretation can we live according to an adequate relationship with the Other.

It is impossible, then, to think that the demand of writing without consent can fit with ethics. As Blanchot writes:

Fascination is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence, to the indeterminate. They, the immense, faceless Someone. Fascination is the relationship the gaze entertains – a relationship which is itself neutral and impersonal – with sightless, shapeless depth, the absence one sees because it is blinding. (Blanchot, 1982: 33)

The fascination suffered by the writer is linked to the impersonal. Precisely this condition is what makes the artist blind and faceless. Lévinas demanded a face-to-face relationship, which required an absolute consciousness of the other who is in front of you. But in art, this is impossible. In conclusion, for Lévinas in 1948 there is no possibility to think of art as an ethical expression. Art is a monstrous evasion, in contrast to what being an ethical human means, which is a response to the Other's demand.

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**Berta Galofré Claret** (Sant Vicenç dels Horts, 1999). Bachelor in Humanities from UPF, currently studying for a Master's in Contemporary Thought and Classical Tradition at UB. In her last year of her bachelor's degree, she was awarded the Collaboration Scholarship by the Spanish Ministry of Education, which enabled her to study the Eros phenomenon in Neoplatonism through the Haas Library at UPF, in collaboration with the Alois Haas research group. Following completion of her bachelor's degree, she was awarded another scholarship to develop an international research project at Vrije Universiteit Brussel during the summer. On this occasion, she was supervised by Professor Douglas Atkinson. She has participated in conferences such as the International Conference of Undergraduate Research (Warwick University & Monash University).

**Berta Galofré Claret** (Sant Vicenç dels Horts, 1999). Graduada en Humanitats per la UPF, actualment estudia el màster de Pensament Contemporani i Tradició Clàssica a la UB. Durant el 4t curs de grau va ser guardonada amb la Beca Col·laboració del Ministeri d'Educació per a una investigació sobre el fenomen de l'Eros dins el neoplatonisme a través del Fons Haas de la UPF, tot col·laborant amb el Grup de Recerca d'Alois Haas. Tanmateix, en acabar els estudis de grau va aconseguir una segona beca d'investigació, aquesta vegada gràcies al programa EURSS d'Eutopia, amb la qual va tenir l'oportunitat d'anar a la Vrije Universiteit Brussel l'estiu de 2021 per aprofundir en la primera etapa del pensament estètic d'Emmanuel Lévinas. Ha participat en congressos com ara l'International Conference of Undergraduate Research, organitzat per la Warwick University i la Monash University.

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