
Zuzanna Ładyga argues that Barthelme’s fiction—she reads the novels rather than the short stories; the better to trace the stages in the writer’s career—is an exemplary textual embodiment of Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of subjectivity, which remains closely linked to his views on ethics. As Ładyga explains in an introductory chapter to her book, beginning with *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas was determined to demonstrate the primacy of ethics over ontology. This position involved a redefinition of both terms. His ethics is not a codification of norms but stems from an encounter with the Other, while his ontology concerns itself with the notion that something is there: the Heideggerian *es gibt*, rather than with any particular beings. His ideas are important for critics who think that we need an ethics of reading. They are also felicitously in tune with a certain postmodernist sensibility. And yet, much of the literary criticism citing Levinas—and there has been a notable upsurge in the number of critics citing him—is beset by the unfortunate tendency to treat him like a moral prophet, which often makes him seem quaint, almost like a mystic. To her credit, Ładyga avoids this pitfall with admirable dexterity. In any case, she would rather err in the opposite way and risk diluting Levinas’ specificity by comparing him with other thinkers. She is interested in his reception, especially in Derrida’s early acknowledgment of his work. Positioning Levinas alongside his intellectual peers—the list extends to Winnicot, Lacan, and Deleuze—is the mechanism producing her insights. Her comparative approach leads her to argue, e.g., that Barthelme “manages to textualize the fleeting nature of what Lacan calls the desire of the Other and what in Levinas’s thought bears the name of ethical sensibility” (129).

Ładyga’s overall thesis is that Barthelme’s novels enact a model of subjectivity, which questions the certitude of being in the name of the ethical, and that this ethics consists in a reconstitution of the self triggered by an encounter with the other. His unfinished novel, *The King*, is an exception because it “constructs a literary consciousness rather than a subjectivity (in the sense that Levinas gives to the word),” although this departure is readable as a way of thematizing the ethical (175). Ładyga’s reading of Barthelme through Levinas’ lens has the very important asset of avoiding a concentration on the face, a staple move of many critics inspired by Levinas. The face in Levinas is, arguably, an unfortunate metaphor lending itself too easily to a prosopopoeic reading, in which the face is seen as standing for a particular individuated being. Ładyga’s notion of interper-
sonal rapport in Levinas is not that one meets another person. Instead, an encounter with the other disrupts one’s self-identity. The other is thus a vehicle for one’s dissolution and eventual reassembly. There is thus a somewhat narcissistic investment in Levinas, which dramatizes his radical redefinition of ethics, and which also speaks to the postmodernist aesthetic. (But to be fair, Ładyga uses the word “narcissistic” only in a reference to Linda Hutcheon (145).

Ładyga’s argument moves in two main directions. She understands the ipseity of Barthelme’s language to be a textual analogue for the other’s corporeality. Language both conditions individuation and undoes it, something that Barthelme’s fiction celebrates, as do other postmodernist works. Ładyga’s own language when making this argument is unapologetically poststructuralist: she uses pairs of terms such as “Saying” and “Said” (36, passim), and triangulates communication, artifice, and rapport with reality in a discussion of Barthelme’s dialogues (159). Derrida and, even more prominently, Deleuze are referenced: “Deleuze explains that every expressive perspective at the same time contains and debars other perspectives” (160). There is a hint of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism in this and many other statements she offers.

An argument about polyvalent meanings and contradictory effects of language invites a discussion of the political—the notion of the ethical invites it, too—and Ładyga is equal to the challenge even if she treats this question somewhat marginally. She gives an interesting, if somewhat underdeveloped, account of the political in Barthelme and in Levinas that accord with their redefinition of subjectivity as something that must be undone. Political agency, she paradoxically claims, is achieved with what might be described as active surrender, “opening the possibility of...passive exposure to alterity...[as] the only source of a successful rebellion” (102). This formulation is of interest because passivity and exposure are obviously central to her thinking. They recur in her argument and appear when she cites authority, as in this comment about The Dead Father’s filial protagonist: “Robert Con Davis notes Thomas’s ‘creative passivity’” (127).

The terms “exposure” and “passivity” point to Ładyga’s other main argument, which draws on psychoanalysis. This thread opens with a discussion of Winnicott’s concept of transitional objects by way of explaining Levinas’ notion of the Other: just as the Winnicottian subject experiences transitional objects as both external and internal to it, the subject in Levinas incorporates the Other’s ipseity and experiences through this incorporation her own impersonal being. In other words, psychoanalysis is another discursive mechanism, alongside post-structuralism, transforming “consciousness” into a less determined “subjectivity.” Lacan is Ładyga’s main authority in this respect, and the category
jouissance is crucial (more so than the Other of the Symbolic Order). Another comment on the The Dead Father reads: “...the effect of jouissance is certainly complementary with the ethical interpretation of subject construction process in Barthelme’s novel” (133). This is not mere window dressing; in her discussion of the novel, Ładyga notes the “repetitive rhythm” introduced by descriptions of a porn film and a sex scene, and she comments that these “insignificant plot elements. . .can be treated as textual enactments of the pre-subjective event of the joy-ridden egoism” (115). The excessive enjoyment of jouissance simultaneously returns us to primary narcissism and makes us feel the drive’s pulsations. In one sense, jouissance is the opposite of egoistic, as the drive momentarily shatters the ego.

Such “joy-ridden” moments in which the self finds pleasure in self-destruction do not obliterate the importance of the interpersonal as a site of both individuation and dis-individuation. Ładyga elaborates on the erotic in a remarkable passage in which she brings her psychoanalytic insights side-by-side with her poststructuralist, mainly Deleuzean, argument: “As long as the touch reaches for the corporeal, the physical border of the toucher’s skin causes the affection for the other body to always return to the self and remain an ‘auto-affection,’ that is, ‘an alienation through self-absorption’ [reference omitted]. This is where erotic love and enjoyment conflate with ipseity. Just as the arrest of the subject in the recurrence of ipseity carried the promise of an ethical exposure, the same promise of the most intimate encounter with the impersonal in the Other arises from the essential impersonality of erotic love” (117). The psychoanalytic investment is thus welded fast into the structure of her argument. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips’ recently coined “impersonal narcissism” comes to mind, with its triple context of the erotic, the aesthetic, and the therapeutic (see their Intimacies). In a manner that departs from psychoanalytic orthodoxy, Ładyga brings affect, which she relates to the phenomenology of aesthetics by referencing Deleuze, to bear on the sexual, ushering in jouissance as an encounter with one’s own impersonal being.

If there is an overwrought moment in her book, it occurs at the intersection of the psychoanalytic and the political, in her discussion of gender. Ładyga seems hesitant to engage gender, and her reservation seems to be reflected in a sudden convolution of her syntax. Describing Levinas’ transition from rendering the other in terms of “feminine fecundity” to having the other play the “paternal” role, she comments: “Unless one is ignorant of its [postmodernism’s] insights, it becomes completely impossible to think that ethics, understood as radical exposure to the Other, should be tied to one specific gender....” Restated some few lines further, this phrase communicates her “claim that ethics belongs to the region of gender
indeterminacy” (137). And yet, a shift beyond gender categories is precisely what is in doubt, and Ładyga’s claim is in fact accompanied with an explicit proviso that it involves reading Levinas against the grain. The problem, however, is not simply Levinas’ apparent awkwardness when addressing gender. Ładyga’s own terms, including both passivity and exposure, also display a gender bias: the self-undoing subject whose passivity and exposure become the means of agency may not be identified as female or feminine, but associations of gender seem nonetheless inescapable, as do those of sexuality. To momentarily return to another critic interested in the relationship between postmodern aesthetics and psychoanalysis, Bersani’s writings are exemplary in the way they evoke both gender and sexuality as a ubiquitous dimension. His and Phillips’ speculative “impersonal narcissism” originates from the figures of the passive woman and the passive homosexual male, which Bersani addressed more directly in his earlier work. The point is that gender and sexuality never just disappear, especially not in a psychoanalytic reading. A claim about gender being indeterminate in a definition of ethics is unclear at best. Moreover, Barthelme may have thematized the ego’s self-undoing with motifs of gender transgression, both in and out of sexual contexts, and the possibility that Levinas used a similar strategy, if less clear, can hardly be dismissed.

As this review hopes to illustrate, Ładyga’s readings of Barthelme’s novels are a notable contribution to literary scholarship. Her use of Levinas is refreshing. Rather than invoking the Other through the face, she talks about encountering the Other in oneself. This opens the way for the happy intercourse between the post-structuralist and the psychoanalytic, a move which avoids trivializing Levinas’ ethics. Given the psychoanalytic dimension of her argument, the post-structuralist ipseity of language is no mere analogue for the Other’s corporeality; they remain in a metonymic relationship, welding these disparate discourses fast together in a phenomenology of the body. Similarly, when discussing the erotic, she establishes an intimate connection between the interpersonal and the narcissistic (which she calls impersonal), and links affect, as it figures in phenomenology and aesthetics, with the psychic pulsations known as drives.

As an afterthought to these remarks, it might be interesting to push further the definition of the ethical. For example, the notion that the ethical consists in undoing the self in an encounter with the Other is, in some ways, the opposite of Michel Foucault’s ethos of care of the self, which seems intent on forming the self rather than disrupting it, and imagines this to be an autonomous, perhaps even somewhat solipsistic, enterprise. But these different ideas may have quite a bit in common once Bildung is understood to encompass the art of managing one’s self-shattering, and once the other assumes a function akin to that of
a transitional object, serving to both individuate and dis-individuate the subject. The broad scope of Ładyga’s discussion invites such speculation. She has opened up a path that others may want to explore.

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