

To understand and to be responsible:
literature, knowledge, and ethics in the philosophy of
Hans Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Lévinas

It is the aim of my research to explore in detail the possibilities of theoretical complementarity of the thought of Hans Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Levinas. I am going to argue that the post World War II developments in the field of Literary Studies, which have debated the question “What is Literature?” from different critical perspectives, have made a space visible where such a project could be located and undertaken. “What is Knowledge?”, and “What is Right Action” – questions of epistemology and ethics – find a new relationship with the questions of aesthetics in that they themselves get redefined in the Post-Auschwitz phase of our history. Levinas’ definition of the absolute Other creates a direct passage to Gadamer’s hermeneutic ponderings about the Self and the Other and the nature of knowledge in the context of understanding literary texts.

For both, Gadamer as well as Levinas, the relationship between the Text and the Reader (Gadamer) and between the Same and the Other (Levinas) demands a dialogue. Gadamer’s ‘Poetry and Dialogue’, and the notion of ‘Responsibility’ in Levinas’ philosophy can be interpreted as a response to – and hence a dialogue with – the Other. The complex relationship between the ontological importance of ‘prejudice’, the simultaneously existing situatedness and freedom of the ‘experiential horizon’, Ethics as First Philosophy, and ‘responsibility’ as the basic constitutional requirement of any meaningful subjectivity forms the framework of this research, which will try and show how such a discursive matrix can bring about perceptual changes in the area of literary studies.