
Taking Reading Hostage: Ethical Criticism's Rhetoric of Alterity

MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN

Literature has long been granted an ability to mediate certain aspects of ethics and morality that philosophy, the discipline traditionally overseeing these subjects, has, for many, failed to appreciate fully. Literary criticism regards rhetoric as the sticking point for most philosophies in this regard, even though literary critics such as Paul de Man recognise that the “terminology of philosophers is full of metaphors” (47). De Man thinks that philosophy has for too long either sought to “banish rhetoric from the councils of the philosophers” or to “rehabilitate rhetoric” (48). However, despite the best efforts of critics such as de Man to return an engaged formalism to commentaries on literature and the reading of literature, in recent decades it would appear that literary criticism's claim to possess a unique aptness for decrypting tropes or revealing the “disfiguring power of figuration” (49) has been challenged. The rise of cultural studies has meant that such markers of disciplinary privilege have been discredited. Theologians, literary critics and sociologists, to name but a selection, can all now be granted an equal hearing when it comes to discussing how figures such as metaphors and symbols might advance the claims of their respective brands of ethical theory. This article examines various aspects of this resurgent, if somewhat disfigured, interest in how rhetoric might mediate certain ethical worldviews.

The criticism that privileges the ethical aspects of a text, or that presumes “some ethical moment which underlies criticism” (Eaglestone, 178) goes by the name ethical criticism. There were many publications in the nineties that sought to define such criticism. The interdisciplinarity of post-structuralism and deconstruction allowed critics who were tired of flexing their altruistic muscles contesting themes of canonicity, what John Guillory refers to in terms of ‘a social order with all its various inequities’,ⁱ to be transformed into social commentators while never laying down their Proust or their Woolf. The kind of ethical criticism practised, chiefly in the eighties and nineties, can be divided into those more “deconstructive” approaches that have their origins in the language of French phenomenology and the neo-Aristotelian approaches of writers such as Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair McIntyre. This essay primarily deals with the former approach's borrowing of philosophical concepts such as alterity and difference so as to bolster theories of reading. Ethical criticism has a long history in literary criticism and its resurgence at the hands of phenomenological literary critics has radically refashioned what Northrop Frye envisaged for ethical criticism in one of the most influential works of literary criticism – *The Anatomy of Criticism* - published fifty years ago this year.

In *The Anatomy of Criticism* Frye defines ethical criticism as a theory of symbols that plays on the notion of the archetype. Frye's archetypal style of criticism presents “literary experience as a part of the continuum of life, in which one of the poet's functions is to visualize the goals of human work”.ⁱⁱ Whatever ethical experience Frye alludes to through reading and criticism must privilege, for him, the “continuum of life” between the world, the text, and the writer. The symbol is the essential trope of the ethical critic, for Frye, as it is the “symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience”ⁱⁱⁱ. However, it is Frye's suggestion that the ethical critic's

work must come ultimately to approximate to religious exegesis that is most troubling for contemporary ethical criticism; “When poet and critic pass from the archetypal to the anagogic phase, they enter a phase of which only religion, or something as infinite in its range as religion, can possibly form an external goal”.^{iv} Frye is forever seeking “a social, moral, or aesthetic standard” which would, in the long run, be externally determinative of the value of art.^v Even though Frye ultimately writes that it is “of the essence of imaginative culture that it transcends the limits both of the naturally possible and of the morally acceptable,” one feels that he is consistently measuring culture, and specifically literature, against religious references that would have to be subdued in contemporary criticism.^{vi} For Frye, ethical criticism “deals with art as a communication from the past to the present” (24) and he readily accepts “the theological origin of critical categories” (76). While more recent ethical criticism would possibly reject such admissions, as well as Frye’s textual naivety, such criticism’s rhetorical dexterity may yet harbour strains of messianism and religious conviction in paying scant heed to Frye’s understanding of art as a “communication from the past to the present” and in failing to inspect the origins of the tropes and rhetoric it borrows from phenomenology.

A very different account of the relationship between literature and ethics can be found in Robert Pippin’s recent essay, “The Felt Necessities of the Time: Literature, Ethical Knowledge, and Law,” collected in *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*, (2005). Pippin returns to what he describes as a “contested area of contemporary ethical theory” (268). The essay examines “not just the question of the relation between philosophical theories and literature, but the status of ethical theory itself”. The decline in the number of works of criticism that admit to practising anything so daring as ethical criticism^{vii} and “ethical theory,” is only a result of the ostensible ethical agenda of most new publications in the field of cultural studies. In the nineties the bridging of the disciplinary divide between philosophy and literary criticism was championed to such an extent that ethical criticism quickly became as contemptible as postmodern criticism. At that time literary criticism flaunted its good conscience by savouring the good in most academic pursuits; critics were, all of a sudden, mediators of an “ethics of reading”, an ethics of writing^{viii}, and most importantly for this essay, an “ethics of alterity”^{ix}. Pippin’s investigation of “ethical theory” chiefly through the lenses of such philosophers/literary critics as Martha Nussbaum, who promotes a “neo-Aristotelian picture of ethical knowledge” (277), demonstrates how the most vibrant strand of ethical theory that still privileges literature has advanced from Paul de Man’s admission that the study of rhetoric plays for “very sizeable stakes” (*Allegories* 15).

Pippin seeks to draw a distinction between the “moral relevance” of “*literature*” and the “moral relevance” of “*reading*”. In questioning the moral relevance of reading, he writes that literature “cannot be a means to improve” the capacity whereby reading might help us “appreciate properly what may be analogous or similar cases in life (or not), for which our broadened perceptual powers [gained through reading] would now be relevant” (270). His distinction between the “moral relevance” of “*literature*” and the “moral relevance” of “*reading*” would seem to be making a case for the argument that reading in general and not just the reading of literature can be ethically enlightening in some way. In other words, Pippin is challenging the claims of philosophers/critics such as Nussbaum, who build their ethical theory around literature’s unique aptness for mediating ethics, thereby exempting literary criticism from claims that it is morally irrelevant. He claims that literature cannot be a means to improve the above capacity because this is the “capacity” that makes “literature relevant in the first place” (270). However, there are two problems with Pippin’s reading. Firstly, the capacity that he highlights in literature and that he claims is what makes literature “relevant” for ethical theory is, in fact, a very good estimation of what underlies most moral theories, namely the capacity to interiorise a dictum, commandment or rule for living and then have the ability to perceive its applicability (or not) for a certain event or experience. If we can call this capacity the ethical faculty, then Pippin can be regarded as arguing that literature cannot be a “means

to improve" our ethical faculty because it is the ethical faculty that makes literature relevant in the first place. The argument begs the question and leaves us none the wiser in terms of understanding exactly why literature should be relevant for ethics. The second problem with his argument is that in differentiating the "moral relevance" of "reading" from the "moral relevance" of "literature," it only serves to reinscribe the kind of disciplinary divide that critics such as Paul de Man want to deconstruct. It can be regarded as furthering the claim that literature is special in some way, that it does command a unique sensitivity for figuration (something traditionally associated with it), a claim de Man challenges.

If Pippin's examination of the relationship between literature and ethics seems to come to a dead end, then there is a style of ethical criticism that does not look towards the neo-pragmatism of Nussbaum *et al.* The ethical criticism that has its roots in continental philosophy and phenomenology, and particularly in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, has devised a rhetoric of criticism that would never tolerate such clear distinctions between the text and whatever might be found to be analogous, yet distinct, "in life". Deconstruction, a practice of textual commentary that also has its roots in close readings of phenomenology, is also influential for this style of criticism. The literary criticism that is influenced by these philosophical discourses pays careful attention to the themes of otherness and difference, to the extent that these concepts act as tropes within the writing. However such criticism, and this investigation will take up the majority of the rest of this article, can also be seen to take much less heed of the formalist precision and careful tropological analysis that de Man envisaged for criticism that highlights the "ethical tension" rhetorical analysis uncovers.

The fact that in recent years phenomenology has experienced what it refers to as a "theological turn"^x or "turn to theology"^{xi} raises important questions of the concepts of alterity and difference that criticism has inherited from phenomenology. In recognition of this, the next section examines the nature of Levinasian alterity, a notion that became important for ethical criticism in the nineties. It then investigates whether the kind of phenomenological language that is regarded as sparking a "theological turn" in phenomenology is influential for the literary criticism that relies on these inherited concepts of alterity and difference. Might such criticism be implicated in a similar "turn" if it does not explicitly acknowledge or examine the origins of the phenomenological language it employs for its ethical theory?

It is important to remember that even though Levinas's understanding of alterity became almost synonymous with the kind of alterity that was most prevalent in literary studies at this time, that very different accounts of alterity were put forward by some of Levinas's contemporaries in phenomenology. Michel Henry has devised a style of philosophy that he refers to as a material phenomenology. It shares Levinas's interest in distinct interpretations of alterity, manifestation and transcendence. Why is it that only one definition of phenomenological alterity, namely Levinas's definition, was taken as exemplifying and eliciting the kind of ethic that ethical criticism deemed suitable for textual practice? While it has been widely acknowledged within philosophy that Levinas's work bears certain affinities with rabbinic scholarship and that the phenomenologies of his contemporaries Henry and Paul Ricoeur lie closer to Christian interpretation and scholarship, ethical criticism appeared unwilling to explicitly deal with these connections in borrowing from these phenomenologies and constructing ethical models for reading.

One of the most important works to apply Levinas's philosophies to theories of reading is Robert Eaglestone's *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (1997). Eaglestone seeks to take Levinas "at his word" in making a "clear distinction" between Levinas's "philosophical and confessional texts" (5). However, to presume that Levinas's understanding of the "confessional" is solely bound up with the religious does an injustice to the linguistic sensitivity of Levinas's writing, a point Jill Robbins's more recent, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*, has noted. Alphonso Lingis also suggests in his introduction to *Otherwise than Being* that, "in transferring religious language to the ethical sphere, Levinas no doubt divinizes the relationship with alterity" (xxxiii). These comments give a clearer understanding of

the kind of alterity prevalent in the literary criticism inspired by Levinas. Any ethical theory making claims for universality while being grounded in such a rhetoric of alterity is unsettled by this religious dimension, especially at a time when our ethical theory is being consistently challenged by acts of desperation borne out of beliefs that lie beyond the remit of the Judeo-Christian world.

The language of Levinasian phenomenology, as well as some of Derrida's later work, has afforded literary critics the opportunity of referring to some project as seemingly authentic as Frye's "moral or aesthetic standard" while at the same time framing their argument within the unique, critical double-speak now associated with deconstruction. Derrida's later work has commented on how phenomenology very often becomes a kind of "eschatology" when it deals with ethical matters such as responsibility. In reading the work of Jan Patočka in *Gift of Death* Derrida finds much of worth in Patočka's claim that the call to responsibility must be undertaken not solely by means of a messianic eschatology, that is "nevertheless indissociable from phenomenology"^{xii}. Derrida responds to the awareness within phenomenology that some distance must be retained between ethics, responsibility and whatever the language of "messianic eschatology" demands, by offering readers the prospect of an imaginary state of givenness dependent on the "possibility of religion without religion". If phenomenology is having difficulties discerning the boundaries between itself and the "messianic," then any version of ethical criticism that builds its ethical theories around key concepts borrowed from phenomenology, may also inherit unforeseen interdisciplinary difficulties. While such criticism may have ostensibly moved beyond a concern for unity, the "continuum of life," and Frye's respect for "the theological origin of critical categories" (76) in embracing a secular account of alterity, it would be foolhardy to think that this rhetorical shift has completely separated ethical criticism from Frye's reading.

Alterity, manifestation, transcendence and incarnation are central concepts for Levinas that have come to act as tropes within literary criticism. It is alterity's relation to manifestation and incarnation that elicits most clearly the important differences between the phenomenologies of Levinas and Michel Henry. At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* we learn that "[t]he metaphysical desire tends towards *something else entirely, toward the absolutely other*" (33) and that "[f]or Desire^{xiii} this alterity, non-adequate to the idea, has a meaning. It is understood as the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High" (34). The two important features, therefore, of Levinasian alterity are that it is "*absolutely other*" and that the inescapable desire for it is equivalent to the desire for what Levinas calls the "Most-High". For Levinas, language analysis and reading practises are irrevocably charged with and influenced by particular exegetical practises. He asserts that Christian exegesis served to alter how "prefiguration" is understood in the reading of biblical narratives:

We wonder, in fact, if the idea of prefiguration, legitimate to the extent that it coincides with that of prophecy, does not alter, when it is raised into a system, the very essence of the spirit which Judaism installed. If every pure character in the Old Testament announces the Messiah, if every unworthy person is his torturer and every woman his Mother, does not the Book of Books lose all life with this obsessive theme and endless repetition of the same stereotyped gestures? Does the spiritual dignity of these men and women come to them through reference to a drama operating on a miraculous level, in some mythological and sacred realm, rather than from the meaning that this life, which is conscience, gives itself? Does the monotheist God haunt the roads of the unconscious? (*Difficult Freedom* 120)

In early works such as *Totality and Infinity* Levinas's own reading strategy and his reception of such narrative modes as prefiguration does appear to be influenced by how narrative and the reading of "pure character" has been made to mediate distinct codes of belief. For Levinas, "[e]thics is the spiritual optics"

and [t]here can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men" (TI 78). Even though Levinas admits that the "ethical relation is defined, in contrast with every relation with the sacred, by excluding every signification it would take on unbeknown to him who maintains that relation," (TI 79) defining it in terms of everything it is not, presupposes a distinct understanding of the sacred and also seems to confine the ethical relation to a discourse and logic that is reminiscent of negative theology. Jill Robbins also argues that the sacred, as distinct from the religious, is associated with idolatry for Levinas. Levinas also writes in a late essay entitled "God and Philosophy" that a "religious thought which appeals to religious experiences allegedly independent of philosophy already, inasmuch as it is founded on experience, refers to the 'I think,' and is wholly connected on to philosophy" (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 159). On the whole, *Totality and Infinity* seeks to replace ontology with ethics as first philosophy, with an ethics that simultaneously navigates and manifests Totality and Infinity. However, in order to elicit the precise contours of this unique philosophical project, Levinas quite unashamedly calls on the religious: "Totality and the embrace of being, or ontology, do not contain the final secret of being. Religion, where relationship subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole—the idea of Infinity—is the ultimate structure" (TI 80).

Jill Robbins's *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* argues that the distinction in Levinas between the "philosophical and the nonphilosophical writing is not absolute" (xvvi). In claiming, however, that Levinas sought to keep his "'confessional' writings" separate from his philosophical texts, at least until 1975, "as the difference between an exegetical adherence and a phenomenological inquiry aware of its own presuppositions" she does not examine at any great length how eschatology and something akin to an "exegetical adherence" might themselves be, as suggested above, presuppositions of much recent "phenomenological enquiry". She also develops her argument that Judaism "is so oriented toward the exterior and the outside, it seems to lack even the possibility of such interiority," (44) an interiority found, she argues, in the "Christian 'drama' of personal salvation" by tracing its influence on the language and the aesthetic appreciation of Levinas. This aspect of Judaism that, we are told, is pervasive in Levinas is what, Robbins argues, informs his distrust of representation. The fact that, for Robbins, the Christian imagination can be "characterised by its movement from sensory to nonsensory," whereas Judaism refuses this movement through "its perpetual recourse to the interhuman" (47) leads, for Robbins, to Levinas's distrust of representation, figuration, and anything that might serve to idolise or make an icon of the interhuman. This leads Robbins to suggest that Levinas regards all rhetoric not as "intersubjective persuasion" but as "trope". In other words, Levinas's religious motivations are seen to directly influence his understanding of trope, a fact that must surely be acknowledged when his own philosophical concepts are transplanted into literary criticism in such a way that they themselves are asked to do the work of tropes. Even though Robbins does rightly admit that the division in Levinas's later work between the "pathetic and the nonpathetic is not simply an opposition between Christianity and Judaism" she qualifies this by arguing that "the division is already internal to Judaism" (112).

If it can be argued, as Robbins suggests, that Levinasian alterity is particularly revealing of hidden elements in language and figuration because it "render[s] explicit what Levinas calls 'the hidden resources' of the Judaic tradition" (45) resources that have been, for Robbins, "covered up by the negative and privative determinations of the Judaic within (Greco-)Christian conceptuality," then surely it elicits a dependence on Judaic exegetical practices in the language Levinas employs to explain how ethics is first philosophy. In continuing to learn from phenomenology, can criticism that privileges responsibility and ethics learn to practice what another phenomenologist, Paul Ricoeur, refers to as an "interconfessional, interreligious hospitality, comparable to the linguistic hospitality that presides over the work of translating one tongue into another" (*Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"* 132)?

Reading Levinas *a la* Robbins also indirectly serves to excuse the work of those Christian

phenomenologists who claim that the resources of Christianity have themselves not been fully realised within the phenomenological tradition. Michel Henry has made such claims in his material phenomenology and he attaches distinctly different meanings to concepts such as alterity and manifestation. Henry shares Levinas's distrust of traditional accounts of representation, but he distances his material phenomenology from any concentration on representation in order to embrace the flesh's capacities for embodying "suffering and joy". Even though both Henry and Levinas recognise the failings of classical accounts of language and representation, Levinas builds his philosophy around radical alterity, what Derrida transforms into primordial difference, while Henry retreats to the close inspection of affectivity, suffering, and praxis. Henry's material phenomenology relies on such a large glossary of terms linked to the daily conditions of life – suffering, joy, pain, auto-affectation, labour, living, life, ecstasy, praxis – that he would be unable to formulate his philosophy apart from corporeity and according to the dimensions of the 'text', or according to the rigours of exegetical practice. These differences between the philosophies of Henry and Levinas, as mediated through their treatments of representation, have important influences on their later work on religion. Henry's material phenomenology is representative of the most extensive articulation, within recent phenomenology of religion, of what he describes as a 'philosophy of Christianity'. Henry, in a similar manner to Levinas^{xiv}, incorporates aspects of what are customarily regarded as religious symbols and language into his phenomenology to forge new interdisciplinary routes for philosophy, aesthetics and theology.

Henry wishes to move beyond the 'circular character' of the philosophy of representation. While Henry spends less time than Levinas and Derrida documenting the philosophical aspects of the subject's encounter with the other, a consideration that makes his work vulnerable to attacks from advocates of deconstruction, he does write that this 'circular' nature of the monistic argument can be overcome, not by fleeing the jurisdiction of interiority, but by clarifying its 'essence of manifestation', a process that necessitates our rethinking of 'receptivity'. We recall also that, for Robbins, Judaism is so concerned with the "exterior" that "it seems to lack even the possible of such interiority" (44). One of Henry's most important philosophical moves is to rethink the 'essence of receptivity' (*Essence* 237) from a state of interiority that wishes to redefine received understandings of monism, receptivity, and what he refers to as the 'exterior content'. For Henry, interpretations that have sought to investigate receptivity solely from the perspective of its receiving what is an 'exterior content' have been unwilling to accept the real conditions of the essence of manifestation as representation. Henry regards the central movement of receptivity as that of an 'essence whose property is that of itself receiving *itself*' (*Essence* 237). He writes that the 'problematic of receptivity' must be 'capable of understanding itself in its own ontological meaning'. It is only 'once the reception whose content it must give basis to is interpreted, no longer as a being, but as the *pure ontological element which permits it to appear* [my emphasis]' that the problematic of receptivity, and hence the essence of manifestation can be clarified. Henry replaces conceptions of exteriority, interiority and otherness with a foundational 'pure ontological element' that does not yet know or sense individual beings, or differences.

The differences between Levinasian alterity and Henryian alterity can be further elicited if we look, very briefly, at what one critic has suggested are the differences between Henry and Derrida. Sébastien Laoureux's reading of Henry's phenomenology in *L'immanence à la limite: recherches sur la phénoménologie de Michel Henry* uncovers some interesting points of intersection between material phenomenology and Derridean deconstruction. Even though Laoureux argues that Henry certainly "escapes" in a certain manner the Derridean reading of Husserl by not 'espousing the metaphysical presuppositions that Derrida finds in Husserl', for Laoureux, this does not imply that Henry 'completely escapes' Derridean deconstruction [Laoureux's italics] (90). For Laoureux, material phenomenology is chiefly concerned with preserving a certain 'heterogeneity' between what is primary and what is

secondary, or between an 'originary' phenomenological element and a 'derived' element, something Henry has inherited from Husserl's understanding of 'phenomenological originality' (Laoureux, 88). This heterogeneity manifests itself most clearly, for Laoureux, in Husserl's distinction between 'perception or originary representation' and 're-presentation or re-production' (88). However, Laoureux acknowledges that even though Henry strives to preserve a sense of this Husserlian heterogeneity, his understanding of 'self-presence' 'has nothing to do with Husserl's understanding of this term' (86). For Laoureux, Derrida and Henry do not accept Husserl's conception of a 'purely immanent apprehension' (Laoureux, 80) and they recognize the 'impossibility for Husserlian phenomenology of accepting the problematic of the unconscious' (L 85). In other words, while both Derrida and Henry do not accept Husserlian presence or intentionality, and while they both acknowledge that the originary impression's interaction with what Henry refers to as the 'temporal flux' (*Incarnation* 75) introduces a foundational element of 'Différance' (*Incarnation* 75) into phenomenology, what ultimately comes to divide them is the place they assign such 'Différance' in their larger philosophical schemas. Henry, for his part, would, according to Laoureux, suggest that '*the analysis proposed by Derrida is not consistent because it only conceives of one kind of phenomenality* [Laoureux's italics]' (Laoureux, 83). The essential difference between Derridean deconstruction and material phenomenology would then appear to have something to do with their deployment of 'Différance'. Henry only refers to Derrida's notion of 'Différance' once in *Incarnation* in discussing Husserl's understanding of the impression's relation with temporality. Henry refers to 'Différance' in passing and he ultimately favours language promoting a sense of 'synthesis' (*Incarnation* 77) that serves to unify what is present and what is 'retentional'. He suggests that a strict adherence to 'Différance', or to the 'paradoxical incapacity of the consciousness of the here and now to give to the present that which is in itself never present but always in flux' is only in truth 'an attempt to camouflage the idea of continual synthesis according to which a retentional consciousness ties itself to this consciousness of the here and now' (*Incarnation* 77). In other words, Henry chooses, in acknowledging the importance of 'Différance', to persevere with a phenomenological project that consistently unravels aspects of personhood that, for him, consistently elicit illuminating degrees of synthesis, unity and incarnation.

On what basis, then, are literary critics to decide upon usable definitions for alterity and difference, and what weight will their ethical convictions have if they do not examine the origins of the tropes that are so important for their ethical theories? Simon Critchley's^{xv} and Andrew Gibson's work utilises the rhetoric of French phenomenology in a manner that is central to their readings of literature. Their models of reading and interpretation seek to transplant key concepts from phenomenological accounts of inter-subjectivity onto the reader's encounter with the literary text. The extent to which it was considered possible to transfer certain tropes, developed in phenomenological discourses on ethics, responsibility, and alterity, into literary criticism is often related to deconstructive criticism's purported tendency to unsettle binary oppositions. Since deconstruction privileges the text and a notion of difference that it seeks to return to the sign, it is most effective for tackling an interdisciplinarity evidenced through literary influence. If called upon to oversee the drafting of policy documents or anything akin to a constitution, then its celebrated ability for revealing contradictions and states of "undecidability" is less effective. Even though deconstruction provides criticism with a radically new language for challenging textual indiscretions in claiming that there is nothing beyond the text, ethical criticism must sustain the supposed myth that there is life beyond the text and, in recalling Robert Pippin's words, that reading can help us "appreciate properly what may be analogous or similar cases in life (or not), for which our broadened perceptual powers [gained through reading] would now be relevant" (270). Criticism forgets at its peril that whereas reading necessitates and perhaps exemplifies one's individuality, intersubjectivity entails an encounter with alterity, if you like, that is distinct from the imaginative self-forgetting sometimes associated with reading.

One distinguishing feature of Levinasian ethics is that the encounter with alterity is most often

deferred or phrased in terms of the *l'avenir*, of what is at a remove, or what is to come. Derrida also writes of responsibility in *The Gift of Death* that “[i]t is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility^{xvi}. It would appear, then, that the location of responsibility and alterity in “the site of death,” or in the *avenir*, invests in an idealisation of responsibility, and that it allows the agent to construct an ethical programme of engagement with others that is strongly influenced by one’s interiorisation of the language employed to describe this imagined encounter. Reading and interpretation also rely fundamentally on imagination, but on an imaginative power that can never solely be expressive of the conditions of responsibility. We recall Jill Robbins’s tracing of Levinas’s early aversion to the aesthetic and the figural due to Judaism’s “particular ambivalence about imagination” (44). Imagination is sometimes discarded when reading is made subservient to a rhetoric of alterity. The most evocative commentaries on literary works of art make the reader believe that the critic is reading with the reader; they attend to stylistic, narratological, and aesthetic concerns in an interpretive encounter that never suggests that this commentary is merely an imitation of a more perfect reading that remains in the *avenir*, or in some future moment. The translation of deconstruction’s intersubjective ethic of alterity onto the act of reading, is prefigurative, it sets up interpretation as an act that contains, or relays, an already conceived ethical programme. Ethical criticism that privileges and necessitates a primordial and *a priori* textual “otherness” neglects that element of reading that incites auto-affection, self-discovery, what Michel Henry’s phenomenology argues must be privileged through a rhetoric of embodiment and incarnation. The reader also comes in contact with previously unrealised dispositions through reading; reading affords the reader moments of contemplation that reveal, not otherness, but self-recognition, something Michel Henry has sought to return to phenomenology.^{xvii}

Levinas refers to the approach of this other in terms of the acceptance of a kind of “radical alterity”; he writes that “the absolutely foreign alone can instruct us. And it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me”.^{xviii} He also employs the metaphor of the face in speaking of this event. One crucial aspect of this recourse to the figure or *figura* is that there is a subtle move in these ethical discourses; there is an elaboration of what is customarily the domain of morality, namely the social context, in terms of the attributes of an individual. The figure of the face stands in for the other and for the approach of the other. The fact that the agent elaborated through this metaphor is separated from any specific, historically grounded, social encounter is never explicitly debated by those employing these discourses. These traits of the person, of the agent, are never openly offered as linguistic tropes or instances of a figurative or rhetorical impulse in the language. If Levinas’s recourse to a taxonomy of the face as that which is expressive of the context of the ideal ethical encounter is merely representative of a metaphorical or symbolic language on his part, to a rhetoric, then it alters the parameters of his phenomenology and raises the question of the suitability of figurative and non-figurative discourses for ethical investigation. Is there any difference between the “face” (what takes on the figure of a person for the reader) Levinas employs to mediate his meditation on ethics and an existentialist rendering of character in a novel?

Readers very often read Levinas’s rhetoric of alterity, and its allusions to the face of the other, in terms of the contemplation of real encounters with people from real communities. Levinas’s phenomenological accounts of the “Other” are very different from the agents referenced in other philosophies of intersubjectivity. For example, when Kant informs us that “[f]or rational beings all stand under the law that each of them should treat himself and all others, *never merely as a means*, but always *at the same time as an end in himself*”^{xix} he does not build a vast rhetoric around the appearance or facial characteristics of “all others”. These “all others” never appear so disconnected from the communicative practices shared within communities. There is no evidence of a necessity to phrase each individual’s differences in terms of a “radical alterity” that Levinas, on the contrary, aggrandises to such an extent that social cohesion often appears as distant as the “divinisation” each “other” must somehow prophesise. For Kant, the description

of the person, or people, to be encountered is less important than the maxim of behaviour that is then to be adhered to in such an encounter. Those critics who assert that interpretation is ethical, because reading a text marks an instance of difference or *excedance*,^{xx} offer only sound bytes for an approach to ethics that hides much beneath its rhetorical surface.

The difficulties involved in comparing the attributes of the text to notions of an embodied other have been mooted many times in literary studies. Wallace Martin argues that deconstruction initiated a deracination of the reader/text encounter. He writes that the “closure of metaphysics” and the “autotelic text” extend the “dehumanization” of writing that is itself enabled by the “detachment of text from consciousness”.^{xxi} This problem has its roots in the philosophical debate on private language and on how the relationship between consciousness and language is to be understood. While I cannot go into this debate in any great detail here, it is important to note that Derrida does not believe there is any such thing as a private language that can exist apart from the primordial difference of the sign. Derrida’s argument is very persuasive and it is one of the reasons why the notion of the Levinasian “other” has been favoured by criticism. Levinas’s rhetoric of alterity has even found its way into ethical criticism removed from the phenomenological tradition. Adam Zachary Newton writes in *Narrative Ethics*:

Just as the “other” in Levinas assigns the self to obligation before it is willingly chosen, so Anderson’s story teaches or commands some readerly transfiguration before the book is put aside and the mind has a chance to catch up.^{xxii}

Newton’s use of the Levinasian “other” in such a manner is evidence for how Levinasian alterity has become synonymous with the kind of ethic reading evokes. Newton describes an easy correspondence between self and text. His readings regard texts as *teaching* or *commanding* what he names “some readerly transfiguration”. Even if the “other” of Levinasian ethics does work exactly like Newton’s understanding of the text of the story by Sherwood Anderson, the text does not “teach” or “command” the relinquishing of what Levinas refers to as my “spontaneity”^{xxiii}.

Andrew Gibson’s work on postmodernity and the novel in *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* employs French phenomenology to bolster ethical readings of novels. He sets up an account of the ethical nature of narrative through a reading of Levinas. However, it must be questioned whether Gibson supplements his adoption of certain *motifs* from the Levinasian *oeuvre*, which then come to adorn states of being in relation to narrative, with an examination and recognition of Levinas’s stance on signification and language. Does he, as a literary critic, interrogate the Levinasian understanding of signification that produces such tropes as *excedance*? If not then we might be left with a state where criticism becomes a kind of filter permitting only those phenomenological tropes most representative of the critic’s preordained understanding of narrative. These tropes are then applied to the reading of extracts from novels, thereby affording the reader a fresh glimpse of an ethic of reading. While the potential of such a process for fostering challenging ethical readings of literature must be accepted, the accounts of radical alterity and divergence that motivate Levinas’s understanding of signification could equally be employed to present reading as an exclusionary or discriminatory act. After commenting on some of the work of Willa Cather and Henry James, Gibson writes:

What is ethical, here, is precisely the extent to which narrative is put into question as a kind of ‘frame of knowledge’ whose conditions are separation, distanciation, structures of opposition. It seems possible to re-imagine narrative in terms of constitutive ambivalences, exchanges and substitutions. An entity deemed to be identical with itself no longer holds the other at bay, at a ‘knowing’ or *scrutinizing* distance. It rather enters into composition with, is invaded by or

questioned in relation to this other. Indeed, the ethical stake, here, is precisely the question of the limit, the boundary or borderline, the categorical distinction (36).

Gibson first of all sets up a straw man argument that appears to suggest that the conditions of narrative are “separation” and “structures of opposition”. The most ethical conditions he can then offer as an alternative following his employment of Levinas are “constitutive ambivalences, exchanges, and substitutions”. One might well wonder how such conditions are to act as bedrock for an ethic of reading, or for an ethic of narrative. One might be excused for thinking that the conditions Gibson regards as necessary for the “ethical” could also be regarded as fostering a reading that is quite divisive. Gibson then opens out his reading informing the reader that “[a]n entity deemed to be identical with itself no longer holds the other [...] at a scrutinizing distance”, and one must imagine that this is now to be the new ethical state of affairs following our re-imagining of narrative as “constitutive ambivalences”. Gibson’s disinclination to accept “an entity deemed to be identical with itself,” (and we are not told whether this is part of the narrative, a character in the narrative, or the reader) recalls Levinas’s insistence that any identity between speech and action, or between speech and the body that acts, must be unsettled. Levinas^{xxiv}, as we recall, writes that “at the bottom of speech” there must exist a “dominant position of the subject foreign to all compromise and all contamination” something that must “surpass the plane of activity” (202). Once again the reader is left with the sense that the language of alterity translated from Levinas’s writings onto the interpretation of narrative might just as easily be employed to argue that reading and narrative cause division and discord.

Charles Taylor’s understanding of the recent institutionalisation of ethical theory explicitly accounts for what may consistently trouble an ethics of criticism and reading. For Taylor, contemporary morality is conceived purely as a guide to *action*; it is concerned exclusively with what it is right to do, rather than with what it is good to be. Therefore, as Taylor writes, “the task of moral theory is identified as defining the content of obligation, rather than the nature of the good life”.^{xxv} Ethical accounts of reading are also predominantly concerned with the *act* of reading, or as J. Hillis Miller^{xxvi} might suggest, with what the reader can *do* with the cognitive understanding of a work. Miller writes that there is a component of any response to a text that “is a response to an irresistible demand” (43). The ethical criticism of Miller and Gibson is read according to an ethic of obligatory action, where the worth of reading is judged against some capacity, cognitive or otherwise, deemed to have been incited by this reading. Such an admission leaves the ethical literary critic in a somewhat difficult position. If she disregards an ethic of obligatory action, then she appears to lose the courage of her convictions in paralleling intersubjectivity with the relationship between a reader and text. Such a comparison for these critics can only be constructed with the presumption that the text is either *read* ethically, or *cognitively grasped* ethically, something we are told can only be inferred a posteriori through some action based on this reading. A text, however, can never be made to bear witness like another person. Can it engage in a performative that might offer proof for having caused a certain action or having affected an “other” in a certain manner? The text will never make the first move, never unsettle my spontaneity as Levinasian phenomenological ethics suggests another subject, or the face of the other, is free to do. Ethical literary criticism must rely on such an ethic of obligatory action if it is to persist in one of its grounding theses, namely that the relationship between text and reader is comparable to an *other-oriented* action. It therefore leads, within interpretation and criticism, to a deliberation upon the “right,” as opposed to the “good,” which Taylor regards as disallowing a careful negotiation of what he describes as our “qualitative discriminations”. These are productive of a pre-articulated orienting sense for what is important or valuable. Such contact with a “pre-articulated orienting sense” is only possible through what Taylor describes as a language of “thick descriptions” (141).

The application of a rhetoric of alterity to the text can therefore be seen to take many forms. It can interpret reading as a *traversal* to the text as something alien with guaranteed ontological alterity, as

“a response to an irresistible demand”, as Miller suggests, or according to Gibson’s reading of the conditions of narrative in terms of “separation” and “structures of opposition”. However, one of the more extravagant claims of Levinasian ethics describes the “ego come back to itself,” (*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 138) what stands in opposition to the other, as “hostage”. Levinas writes that the “ego can be called into question by the other in an exceptional way” (132-3); “[t]he ego can be brought to accusation, despite its innocence, by violence, to be sure, but also despite the separation in which the exclusiveness and insularity of the psychic leave it, by the other” (133). The ego is, therefore, as hostage, “brought to accusation” “for all the others who precisely as *others* do not belong to the same genus as the ego, since I am responsible for them without concern with their responsibility in my regard – for in the last analysis and from the start I am responsible even for that” (139). In other words, this “pre-original” and “pre-liminal” ego “that is prior to its freedom and its non-freedom” (133) and that “obsesses” (133) over responsibility can be represented or embodied by the figure of the hostage. The ego as hostage possesses, pre-originally, an embarrassment of responsibilities; she must bear responsibility for all “*others*” whom her life is being put in jeopardy and possibly sacrificed for and for any responsibility or concern these others, who “do not belong to the same genus as” this ego, may bear for her. Since the concern of the “others” is based on the fact that they may feel partially responsible for the ultimate sacrifice of this life, the suggestion that the hostage is also responsible for this feeling of responsibility implies that the hostage should feel somewhat responsible for the fact that her life is being put on the line. Hostage taking becomes like the handing down of a life sentence, where the judicial system seeks to impart a feeling of responsibility to the guilty party. A hostage who is beyond freedom and non-freedom, wholly other, and *a priori* synonymous with responsibility, is denied both the will to survive and the power to cite injustices. For the “hostage for everyone,” who is radically other to all “*others*,” there is no differentiation between the hostage takers and everyone else. In a time of hostage-taking, where a “terrorist’s task is to abduct hostages that make the government’s pledge too costly to maintain” (Enders, 181) any reading of the book of myself, of the text, in terms of hostage-taking may consign the pledge one make’s to oneself in reading to a more cost-effective regime. Levinas’s hostage “obsesses” to such an extent over its “traumatism” (133) of responsibility that alterity becomes a life-threatening marker of similitude. Should ethical criticism ever see fit to embrace the “hostage” as another figure for its rhetoric of alterity, then the reader may only become a hostage to the “radical alterity” of the text; the urgency of ethical criticism’s claims on behalf of the ethical may end up idolising alterity to such an extent that its reading of the gradations, increments and degrees of difference language affords will atrophy before the “traumatism” of desire to allocate responsibility. The ethical theory of criticism that does not acknowledge the ethical baggage its tropes carry with them may be lead into such critical impasses. The only alternative might then be to sacrifice our hard won ethical allegiances for a reading that returns once again to the beginning of the story.

NOTES

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- ⁱ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), p.ix.
- ⁱⁱ Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism : Four Essays* (Princeton : Princeton UP, 1973), p. 115.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ^v *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ^{vii} A short list of such criticism might include: J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), Simon Critchley’s *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), Adam Zachary Newton’s

Narrative Ethics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), and David Ellison's *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

viii See Peter Trifonas's *The Ethics of Writing: Derrida, Deconstruction and Pedagogy* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

ix Thomas Docherty's *Alterities: Criticism, History, Representation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) writes that "[t]he ethics of alterity disposes a reading subject-in-process towards a historical futurity in which she or he constantly defers the production of identity or of an empirically determined self-present selfhood" (41).

x I am also referring here to the large body of work, which has emerged in recent years, and which explicitly speaks for an essential potentiality in the language of religion for advancing philosophical and critical discourses. A selection of such works includes: Hent de Vries's *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), Jacques Derrida's *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), Jacques Derrida's Jacques and Gianni Vattimo's, eds. *Religion* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998) and Gianni Vattimo's *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

xi Dominique Janicaud writes in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"* (New York: Fordham UP, 2000) that "French phenomenological studies [...] harboured a fecundity whose fruits and coherence revealed themselves in the light of more recent developments" (16). It is a fecundity that is, in part, "captured under the rubric of a theological 'turn'" (16-17).

xii Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 28.

xiii Desire is capitalised as soon as we learn that it is the kind of desire that "desires beyond everything that can complete it" (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 34).

xiv Robbins describes Levinas's method as follows: "Levinas's hermeneutic of Judaism entails a double interpretive movement: he takes a negative term for the Judaic (invariably the subordinated term within a dyadic hierarchy, as in the Pauline tropes of blindness/sight, servitude/freedom, letter/spirit), radicalizes a possibility inherent in it, and reinscribes it in order to bring out its positive force, even the alternative intelligibility that it harbours" (43).

xv In *The Ethics of Deconstruction* Simon Critchley sets out to explain how deconstruction is ethical. His reading of deconstruction has strong ties to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics is "*the new name of thought*" (Badiou 20), and it applies the thought of Levinas, via deconstruction, to a model of reading called *clôtural*, a model he regards as allowing for moments of "ethical transcendence" in the reader. As deconstruction is for Critchley "always thinking *about a text*," and as such thinking is for Derrida, as Critchley informs us, "a first task, the most elementary of tasks," (qtd. in Critchley 22) one that is always begun through reading, it is perhaps no surprise that Critchley believes deconstructive ethics is only to be experienced through reading. Are we, therefore, to recognize the ethics of deconstruction as being implicated in the broader understanding of ethics where ethics is understood otherwise than *reading*; or in taking ethics to be wholly bound up with reading where do we leave the illiterate, the *illettré*? As Critchley applies Levinasian ethics to a model for reading, his work is of distinct importance to the literary critic. Alain Badiou informs us in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (Trans. Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2001) that Levinasian ethics requires that the "experience of alterity be ontologically 'guaranteed' as the experience of a distance [...] the *traversal* of which is the ethical experience itself" (22). The combination, therefore, of Levinasian ethics and deconstructive textualism leaves Critchley with a *clôtural* ethics dependent on such notions as radical alterity, "traversal", and "essential distinctions" that I question in this essay. The first problem with Critchley's application of Levinasian ethics to a model for reading is that it involves the text in an ethics that is solely manifested in a *traversal* to something that is alien or that has a guaranteed ontological alterity.

Another important consideration is that it is possible to relate the ethics implicit in this sense of *traversal* back to a discussion of literature and language analysis. When Critchley applies this model of ethics to the *clôtural reading* it privileges the space of the reader as a space that has already assumed a certain alterity in the text. As the ethical is unveiled only in the *traversal*, the "passing over" to the text is privileged at the expense of what

older phenomenologically based theories such as reader-response criticism emphasise as an interaction between reader and text.

- ^{xvi} Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 41.
- ^{xvii} Michel Henry's *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000) regards any positing of primordial difference as denying life the opportunity of experiencing the auto-revelation of its flesh within itself, it denies the experience of "*le sens ek-statique*," of the body, now conceived as flesh, experiencing auto-revelation through its "*passivité radicale*" (242). Henry has spoken of the necessity to "return to life" through the "denunciation of phenomenology" '*le retour à la vie impose la dénonciation de la phénoménologie*'. He states that "it is not enough to recall the duality of the modes of givenness of the real, it is necessary, once again, to understand the possibilities and the modalities of the passage from one to the other" (Jean-Michel Le Lannou, "Le 'renversement de la phénoménologie' selon Michel Henry" *Critique* 667 (2003): 968-85, p. 984).
- ^{xviii} Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1969), p. 73.
- ^{xix} Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. and Ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), p. 95.
- ^{xx} In *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel* (London: Routledge, 1999) Andrew Gibson employs Levinasian language to suggest that "narratorial relations in certain kinds of fiction are characterized by *excedance*" (42). *Excedance* is a word Levinas devises in his early work *De l'évasion* (1935). It is used in an ontological sense to describe the subject's imperative for escape from what would be a Heideggerian understanding of Being.
- ^{xxi} Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, and Wallace Martin, eds, *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America*. Theory and History of Literature 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 16).
- ^{xxii} Adam Zachary Newton. *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), p. 22.
- ^{xxiii} "Spontaneity" is another favoured Levinasian motif. Levinas writes that "the relation with the Other who puts into question the brutal spontaneity of one's immanent destiny — introduces into me what was not in me" (*Totality and Infinity* 203).
- ^{xxiv} On an institutional note, Sean Hand informs us in the *Levinas Reader* that Levinas writes of an ethics which "is acquired and held, finally, in the particular type of intellectual life known as study of the Torah, that permanent revision and updating of the content of Revelation, where every situation within the human adventure can be judged. According to such an understanding of ethics and interpretation the institution of literary criticism will always already have been assigned its own particular ethic. We must, however, continue to recognize the importance of phenomenology and philosophy in general for the study of narrative. It is time that we began to look beyond a language of alterity so as to discover an alternative ethic of reading. See Seán Hand's *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 257.
- ^{xxv} Altham, J. E. J., and Ross Harrison, eds, *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1995), p. 134.
- ^{xxvi} J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987) marks a watershed for ethical criticism. Miller attempts to express concisely the ethical nature of the act of reading. His ethical reading can be broached through his phrase, "without storytelling there is no theory of ethics" (3). Miller espouses a brand of ethics that is distinctly Kantian in tone. He follows Kant in proposing as a response to the ethical dilemma a narrative strategy. Kant states that the subject must enter into a "little fiction of the imagination" in any ethical endeavour. The subject must pretend that her maxim, or the particular rule by which an act is guided, is to be a universal legislation. We therefore, in inspecting the work of Miller, must see narrative as a locus for the ethical event. Miller asks whether the "ethical act of the protagonist inside the book corresponds to the ethical acts the reading of the book generates outside the book," (2). He states that his interest "is not in ethics as such but in the ethics of reading and in the relation of the ethical moment in reading to relation in the sense of giving an account, telling a story, narrating" (15). Yet Miller consistently highlights notions of "mastery," (3) necessity,

and demand in speaking of an ethic of reading, so much so that Steven Connor finds it odd to see Miller “so dogmatic and portentous in his assertion of the compelling ethical force of deconstruction” (qtd. in Gibson 12).

^{xxvii} Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 60.

^{xxviii} Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 9.

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