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**The Ethics of Reading:  
Levinas and Gadamer on encountering the other in literature**

A thesis  
submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
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## Abstract

This dissertation explores the question ‘can we encounter the Other through the mediation of literature?’ The question reflects an increasing interest in ethics by literary theorists and particularly in the application of Emmanuel Levinas’s work to the field of literary studies. I identify a major concern with this trend that has been largely overlooked: Levinas states that the Other cannot be encountered through the mediation of literature. With questions of justice towards texts and the necessity to respect alterity at the forefront, I argue that Levinas’s concerns cannot be overlooked. To explore a possible solution to the problem I first consider Levinas’s concerns with literature and argue that his adamant stance on the Other and literature stems not so much from the arguments he puts forward but a human conviction that the ethical is limited to the immediate face-to-face encounter. I suggest that this desire which cannot be fully accounted for by his philosophical account finds its origin in the Holocaust but, more than this, can be seen as the ethical saying interrupting and disturbing his writing.

The answer to the question of the thesis hinges on the interpretation of both who the Other is and what exactly the encounter with the Other means for Levinas. Unlike most literary theorists, I do not look for ways in which Levinas’s ethical work is portrayed in literary texts; I am interested in the text as Other and the reader’s responsibility towards it rather than situations or characters that fit the face-to-face model. I draw upon Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics to both consider the relation one has with regard to a text and to clarify who exactly the Other might be. I conclude by trying to rehabilitate the idea of author but couch this in Gadamerian terms, it is the world view or horizon of the text that we encounter as other and I name this ‘author’. My consideration of Gadamer confirms that we *feel* that we encounter alterity in literature and he suggests a way to say something about this that does not annihilate otherness. I then return to the problem of literature for Levinas and find that I can answer the question of the thesis affirmatively, with some qualification. I argue that the Levinasian encounter is best understood by analogy to the Kantian sublime. We cannot encounter the Other at all except through experiences that signify or remind us of this primordial encounter. Lived encounters with the other are structurally similar to and signify the encounter with the Other which in turn gives the everyday encounters their meaning. I combine this interpretation with Jean Baudrillard’s argument regarding representation in photography which posits a view of a productive presentation of the fiction of reality rather than a hollow representation of an absent reality. With a positive answer to the question of the thesis in hand, I read Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, ‘The Purloined Letter’ to explore the implications of my research in a concrete example.

To Richard

Who makes me smile and feel loved every day

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## Introduction: setting the scene

Those interested in literature in the twenty-first century have a difficult task ahead of them: ‘the text’ has been expanded to include everything from shopping lists to fashion shows; the borders between literature and other discourses have dissolved; and meaning has supposedly been indefinitely deferred. In the wake of postmodernism a number of literary critics and philosophers of literature seem to be turning to ethics and questions of the Other in an effort to reconstruct an understanding of the nature and function of literature. In particular, the work of Emmanuel Levinas is being applied more and more to the study of literature to describe what happens when a reader engages with a literary text.

An initial justification for the shift in attention to an ethics of reading is suggested by the fact that ethical notions are often invoked in naïve descriptions of the act of reading. People talk about doing *justice* to the text; we accuse others of committing *violence* in their reading; and praise film directors for *faithful* interpretations of novels. With so much of what seemed to make literature special undermined by postmodern thought it seems a natural and potentially fruitful line of thought to look to *how* we interact with literary texts and try to carve out a place for them in terms of this encounter.

It is these concerns that lead me to the aim of this thesis, which is to investigate the question: ‘how can we have an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature?’ Two main thinkers will be drawn upon to answer this question. Levinas’s account of the encounter with the Other will provide the basis for the phenomenological account of the nature of the encounter with the Other. Hans-Georg Gadamer will be discussed to give a hermeneutic account of how this encounter can produce meaning or an interpretation. It is also a guiding hypothesis of this research project that reflection upon the ethics of reading may reveal something about the *nature* of literary texts that direct ontological interrogation is unable to account for.

## Ethical leanings

Literature and ethics have been entwined for centuries. Plato raised moral concerns about poets in *The Republic*, suggesting their imitations of truth ‘maim the thought of those who hear them’.<sup>1</sup> His connection between ethics and poetry was the moral ramifications of representation within poetry on the consumers of poetry. Aristotle discussed the (moral) character imitated/represented in tragedy and its role in the tragic plot. Tragedy should ‘evoke fear and pity’<sup>2</sup> and the nature of the moral character of the tragic subject is essential to the best tragedy. Aristotle argues that neither fear nor pity is evoked when a person of outstanding moral character suffers a change from good to bad fortune (instead we feel disgust). Similarly we do not feel pity or fear when someone of poor moral character comes into good fortune from bad nor when they suffer a change to bad fortune. Instead, Aristotle continues, the best character for the tragic plot is one who is not of exceptional moral standing but does not have any moral defects that cause his fall from grace.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle was interested in the moral status of the characters in tragedies but only insofar as this impacted on the audience’s emotional and moral response.

Moving forward several centuries Leo Tolstoy, in his 1897 book *What is Art?*, argues that common conceptions of art (in which he includes literature) that focus on its ability to deliver pleasure are incorrect and miss the real concept of ‘art’. For Tolstoy art is more than a simple pleasant experience or even a relief from Schopenhauer’s world as Will. Tolstoy argues that art ‘is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.’<sup>4</sup> The definition Tolstoy puts forward here includes the moral element of well-being of individuals and humanity. Literature is a means to a moral life. By communicating feelings through the medium of literature, people are able to understand each other and this ability to share experiences and feelings, according to Tolstoy, raises the human above the ‘beasts’. Certainly writers of literature have embraced questions

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Republic Of Plato: Second Edition* (London: Basic Books, 1991), p. 595b.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981), pp. 51–52.

of ethics in their works. Questions regarding right and wrong, what the good life might be or what makes a person good or bad have been played out in fiction as diverse as Aesop's fables, Shakespeare's tragic heroes, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Mister Pip* and uncountable others.

The question of the ethical and its relation to literature continued to be relevant at least up until the 1960s. As deconstructive and post-modern criticism developed and scholars became interested in 'theory' in the 1970s and 80s, ethics seemed to be conspicuously absent. David Parker, in his introduction to *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* claims that the book 'starts from the perception that in "advanced" literary circles for most of the 1970s and 1980s, few topics could have been more uninteresting, more dépassé, less likely to attract budding young theorists, than the topic Ethics and Literature.'<sup>5</sup> Although Parker does go on to suggest that ethics never stopped being significant to literary studies his summary of the perception of ethics and literature seems apt. Robert Eaglestone also points to this, at least perceived, omission of ethics in literary studies during this time period. He claims that 'an explicit concern for ethics has been at the heart of literary criticism since its inception in a modern and modernist form at around the time of the First World War,' but that this 'ethical grounding has become insecure.'<sup>6</sup> Eaglestone claims that 'theory', and especially deconstructive theory, faces accusations of 'lacking an ethics, of being amoral.'<sup>7</sup>

Geoffrey Galt Harpham identifies the 'Theoretical Era (c. 1968-87)' as a time in which ethics was not deemed relevant to literary thought. He claims that the various schools of thought arising during this time ('semiotics, deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis') defined themselves against Enlightenment ideals such as "the universal subject," the "subject of humanism," the "sovereign subject," the "traditional concept of the self." He argues that ethics, as the discourse which enumerates and comments on the various deeds of

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<sup>5</sup> Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker, *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Eaglestone, p. 1.

this subject, was ‘implicated’<sup>8</sup> in these ideals that critics wanted to leave behind. Moreover, he claims that the turn away from ethics was a result of the insistence that ethics was based on a universal law. The subject of Enlightenment thinking could justify its actions by recourse to a moral law and this might lead to people thinking their own desires, actions and interests were necessary under this universal law and hence they may be able to ‘preserve a good conscience while overriding or delegitimizing the claims of others.’<sup>9</sup> If your actions are explainable by a universal moral law then the specifics of the implications of these actions do not need to be considered in full; the only important factor is that you have in fact followed the moral law. For example, you might be in love with your neighbour’s wife. You might know that your neighbour is home alone when someone knocks on your door to ask where he is. The interlocutor may explain to you that he wants to murder your neighbour for some past grievance. You decide to follow the ethical imperative ‘do not lie’ which has the added bonus of a dead neighbour and a grieving wife to console. Thus by, perhaps unconsciously, following your own desires whilst applying the moral law, you can maintain a good conscience. As a result of this kind of argument Harpham claims that ethics ‘became for many the proper name of power, hypocrisy, and unreality.’<sup>10</sup>

This is one reason Harpham cites for ethics being left off the forefront of literary studies during this time. He goes on to draw out ways in which this traditional ethical approach failed in representing the ethical subject along the lines of ‘Reason, Freedom, Value,’<sup>11</sup> virtues it is supposed to extol. The ethical subject is repeatedly represented as male and it is this kind of ‘sinister and silent collusion,’<sup>12</sup> argues Harpham, which has led to people such as Jacques Derrida claiming that the ethics [of the living word] is predicated on ‘nonrespect’. He goes on to say that ‘like Jameson and Irigaray, Derrida warned that a discourse that encouraged submission to a general or universal law lent itself to projects of mastery whose agendas were not universal, just unvoiced or unacknowledged.’<sup>13</sup> Derrida’s project involves showing how the Western philosophical tradition is

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, ‘Ethics’, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 387–407 (p. 387).

<sup>9</sup> Harpham, p. 387.

<sup>10</sup> Harpham, p. 387.

<sup>11</sup> Harpham, p. 388.

<sup>12</sup> Harpham, p. 388.

<sup>13</sup> Harpham, p. 388.

logocentric. He argues that the Western philosophical tradition privileges the spoken word and presence over the written word and absence. Harpham links this to ethics. He claims that by privileging speech as ‘more natural, fundamental, primary’<sup>14</sup>, the logocentric, Western philosophical tradition is putting the spoken word forward as ethical and not acknowledging the absence inherent in all language; spoken and written. All the major players of this time, argues Harpham, used ethics as a point of critique of humanist ideals. Thinkers such as Derrida, Fredric Jameson, Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray tended to focus their attention on exposing the underlying subversive and transgressive drives that had been covered up by an ethics of universal law, and ‘virtually all joined Derrida in seeing ethics as a combination of mastery *and* delusion.’<sup>15</sup>

It is a little surprising then that Parker and Eaglestone remark on a perceived lack of engagement with ethics in the ‘theoretical era’, as Harpham calls it. Ethics was seen as an instrument of power and repression and theorists at this time tended to only engage explicitly with ethics to critique the ways in which it allowed marginalisation of certain people, thoughts or cultures. When ethics was discussed during this period the focus was on exposing ethics and its claims to universality and this was in turn used to justify a more ‘theoretical’ approach to literature where the text, usually divorced from historical, authorial and political conditions, was king.

### **Why Levinas? Why now?**

With ethics exposed as an instrument of repression and power during the ‘theoretical era’ of the 1970s and 1980s one must ask why a thesis on ethics and literature would be necessary in the early twenty-first century and why would Emmanuel Levinas be the theorist to centre this thesis on?

Some will argue that ethics never really left the conversation around literature. It has always been relevant and continues to be so. Parker agrees with Wayne C. Booth’s argument that the ‘theoretical era’ has ‘been dominated by

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<sup>14</sup> Harpham, p. 388.

<sup>15</sup> Harpham, p. 388.

forms of political and post-structuralist criticism that are at the very least implicitly ethical.’<sup>16</sup> This line of argument situates feminist, anti-racist and other discourses on marginalised groups as having an ethical agenda. The argument claims that attempts to expose ways in which groups have been marginalised, even under the auspices of ethics itself, is inherently ethical. But this view of ethics is rather weak; ethics is simply the act of deconstructing or exposing ways in which the ethical is unethical or ways in which ethics constructs binary oppositions (good vs evil; rich vs poor; white vs black, et cetera) and falls into logocentric ideology.

Despite the overwhelming difficulties discussed in the above section for approaching literature from an ethical perspective post-1970, there does in fact seem to be a resurgence of interest in this field. J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), Adam Zachary Newton’s *Narrative Ethics* (1995), Geoffrey Harpham’s *Getting it Right: language, literature, and ethics* (1992), Robert Eaglestone’s *Ethical Criticism: reading after Levinas* (1997) and the collection *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* (1998) all point to a renewed interest in the connection between ethics and literature.

One theory for this ethical turn comes from Harpham who points to the date December 1 1987 as the turning point for ethics and literature. It was on or around this time that Paul de Man’s wartime journalism, discovered by student Ortwin de Graef, was brought to the attention of the world. Famously, these articles were anti-Semitic in nature and threw academic theorists into a spin. In American criticism theoreticians faced ‘charges of personal immorality, collaboration in the Holocaust, opportunism, and deception,’<sup>17</sup> a far cry from the previous debates on metaphor and the nature of literary language. Harpham describes the outcome of the discovery of the de Man wartime writing:

Deconstruction’s dominance had discouraged any ethical evaluation of the author; but now that that dominance was rapidly proving to be delusory, the repressed – ethics, which had been repressed, ironically enough, because it was seen as an *agent* of

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<sup>16</sup> Adamson, Freadman and Parker, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Harpham, p. 389.

repression - was returning in force, and the American academy gave itself over to a glut of judgment. Many antitheorists seemed simply astonished at their good fortune in finding de Man and deconstruction vulnerable on ethical grounds, just when they had nearly given up hope of victory on other grounds. When the last incontrovertible point was made, one thing, and perhaps only one, was clear: ethics was on the agenda.<sup>18</sup>

With ethics back on the agenda theorists who accepted the deconstructionists' critique of ethics had to look for an ethics that would not act as an agent of repression, and that would allow for the particular attention to textuality and *différance* that disrupts univocal meaning. The initial critique of ethics, as we have seen, lies with its insistence on a universal law. It is this universality that critics claim causes the repressive drive of ethics. These concerns led many post-1990 thinkers to Emmanuel Levinas.

Levinas's ethical work on the Other initially seems an ideal resource from which to build a connection between ethics and literature in a post-post-structuralist world.<sup>19</sup> Levinas's ethics rejects methods and universal laws. He is not interested in ethical dilemmas nor does he posit normative edicts; he does not look to maximise utility nor discuss virtues. Instead Levinas is concerned with describing the ethical encounter with the Other. For Levinas this relation is primary; he calls it first philosophy, pointing to it as the foundation for all other aspects of human endeavour. Chapter One will investigate the relation to the Other in more detail but briefly: Levinas argues that the encounter with the Other is not an event we can point to but rather it is part of the structure of human experience. We live in a world and feel at home in this world. There are things we can eat, use, throw, manipulate, et cetera. These are all things that are for me. I can incorporate them into my understanding and experience. They do not call my sense of self (or self-mastery) into question. Levinas characterises this as 'the same'. All these things can be made part of the totality of my world and

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<sup>18</sup> Harpham, p. 390.

<sup>19</sup> The current political climate also points to an increased need to consider Levinas's work. With numbers of refugees such that we have not seen since World War II, increasing unrest in the Middle East and spreading terrorism based upon religion and race, Levinas's unique take on questions of otherness offers a mode of relation that might provide a way forward or an understanding of the political situation and climate in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

incorporated into my sense of self. By contrast the Other is Absolutely Other. I cannot turn the Other into something for me. In fact, I find myself for-the-Other. When I encounter the Other I discover that I am called upon, I am completely responsible for the Other. This relationship is characterised by its asymmetry. The Other is not responsible for me in the same way that I am responsible for him.

Levinas's description of the encounter with the Other as a call to 'responsibility'<sup>20</sup> has appealed to a number of theorists looking to reconcile ethics with literary studies in the post 'theoretical era'. David P. Haney, for instance, claims 'that the structure of the reader's interpretive relationship to a literary text has affinities with a person's ethical relationships to others.'<sup>21</sup> This seems intuitively correct, especially if, like Haney, we take Levinas's ethics as our framework. As a reader reads a text they find themselves called upon. The reader must make interpretive decisions and has a responsibility to respond to the text in some way. The focus on the relation between the text and reader avoids some of the concerns raised with ethics by theorists in the 1970s and 1980s. There is no claim to universality, rather a phenomenological description of how one relates to the literary text.

Adam Zachary Newton is another post 'theoretical era' theorist who seeks to utilise Levinas's philosophical writing to reintroduce ethics to literary studies. His focus is on developing a notion of narrative *as* ethics. Like Haney, Newton claims that there are parallels between texts and the ethical encounter as Levinas describes it. Newton says 'narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text.'<sup>22</sup> He takes the general intuition that when we sit down to read we experience something like an ethical relationship and identifies the narrative aspect of literature as that which produces the relation to the text.

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<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1994), p. 203. Cited hereafter in line as *TI*.

<sup>21</sup> David P. Haney, 'Aesthetics and Ethics in Gadamer, Levinas, and Romanticism: Problems of Phronesis and Techne', *PMLA*, 114 (1999), 32–45 (p. 38).

<sup>22</sup> Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 13.

Robert Eaglestone also looks to Levinas to create an ethical methodology to interpret texts. Unlike Haney and Newton, Eaglestone does not focus his attention on the ethical relation with the Other when working with Levinas and literature. This is the part of Levinas's account of ethics that seems intuitively to fit the application to literature but Eaglestone identifies a problem with the application of this aspect of Levinas's work to literary texts (more will be said of this below and in Chapter Two), and instead looks at the distinction between the ethical 'saying' and the immanent 'said' in Levinas's conception of language. Briefly the distinction is thus: the 'said' are the words that are said, the meaning of the utterance. The 'saying' is harder to understand and nearly impossible to articulate but can be thought of as the desire to say something when with another – to respond, to speak – but the 'saying' itself does not carry meaning as such. 'The saying is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it'.<sup>23</sup> Levinas concentrates much of his later book *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence* on exploring the 'saying' and the 'said'. The saying disrupts the concrete meaning of the said and Eaglestone develops a method of ethical reading which attempts to show how the ethical 'saying' aspect of language works to disrupt univocal meaning within literary texts which has certain parallels with Derrida and other post-modern theorists' projects.

To some extent, then, the idea that Levinas's ethics may provide an important aid for understanding literature in the post-modern world has already begun to be explored. Levinas's work is a good candidate for providing the ethical framework for post-post-modern literary criticism, as he avoids recourse to a universal moral law which had been criticised as being an agent of repression. Levinas's notions of the saying and the said, especially the saying's ability to disrupt the meaning of the said, allows us to accept many propositions of the 'theoretical era' whilst still discussing ethical aspects of literature.

## The Problem

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<sup>23</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 88.

As hinted at above, there is a problem with applying Levinas's work to the field of literary studies. This is a major problem which is raised by Levinas himself but to date it has tended to be overlooked by theorists wanting to use Levinas's ethical writing to establish an ethics of literature: Levinas rejects the possibility of an ethical encounter through the mediation of literature. Levinas's relationship to literature is complicated. He frequently uses literary examples to illustrate points but at the same time dismisses literature as rhetoric. His dismissal of literature mostly stems from his notion of 'ethical language'. Jill Robbins gives a good account of the problem in her important work *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. She claims that:

This ethical language is repeatedly characterised as having an exceptional *droiture*, that is, straightforwardness, uprightness, justice; he [Levinas] also calls it "sincerity," "frankness." In privileging such an ethical language, Levinas quite explicitly...excludes rhetoric – as a form of language that is devious, that is not straight, that does not face – and with it, implicitly, any language that is figured or troped; he denounces rhetoric as violent and unjust. The ethical language relation is to be found only in a vocative or imperative discourse, face-to-face. It is not then surprising that Levinas excludes from his conception of the ethical language relation to the other all forms of poetic speaking.<sup>24</sup>

Levinas is also concerned that the absence of the maker of the work of art means that the author's expression becomes 'a plastic form' (*TI*, p. 227). The presentation of self becomes a mask to be faced rather than a face and 'the other's transcendence is somehow blocked, stopped, turned into immanence.'<sup>25</sup> These claims make the straightforward application of Levinas's work to the field of literary study, at the very least, problematic.

As indicated in the Introduction above, I intend to explore the question of ethics and literature using Levinas's phenomenological account of the encounter with the Other, but also, due in part to the problem raised here, Gadamer's

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<sup>24</sup> Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Robbins, p. 77.

hermeneutics. Gadamer is most well-known for his work on hermeneutics. He rejects a methodological approach to interpretation, discussing understanding in terms of a 'dialogue'. Gadamer posits that there is an otherness in texts and further that it is possible to understand a text whilst maintaining this otherness. He does not give a clear or in-depth definition of otherness and it is clear that the term does not signify the exact same sense of the Other that Levinas is interested in, but there is enough ambiguity and similarity to consider his hermeneutics in light of Levinas's ethics to attempt to understand if it is possible to encounter the Other in literature. This thesis aims to address the question of how we can encounter the Other in literature by bringing into the open the divergences between Levinas and Gadamer, with the aim of reflecting upon and working through their differences and complementarities towards a coherent view of the question.

Gadamer and Levinas were both heavily influenced by Martin Heidegger's phenomenological approach in *Being and Time*. As a result, the two thinkers have some similarities. Levinas and Gadamer both emphasise the importance of alterity. Alterity is obviously central to Levinas's thought but it is an important aspect in Gadamer's thinking as well. In discussing the notion of prejudice, Gadamer claims one ought to be 'aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings.'<sup>26</sup>

Gadamer and Levinas both point to the unique status of language in terms of what we can know. For Levinas language is crucial for the ethical encounter with the Other. Levinas characterises the ethical encounter as the manifestation of the face of the Other. The face is expression; the Other addresses me. As the Other speaks to me I find a breach in what I know. The Other upsets my feeling of mastery of the totality of my world. The Other expresses to me something I could not find out for myself: that I am not the sole possessor of the world but that I, in fact, share it with the Other.<sup>27</sup> Language is also of central importance for Gadamer. Gadamer's hermeneutics relies on the notion that we understand through dialogue and this dialogue is mediated through language. He claims that 'all understanding

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<sup>26</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), p. 272. Hereafter cited in line as *TM*.

<sup>27</sup> Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 47.

is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language' (*TM*, p. 390). He is not saying that our only experience of the world is that which is expressed in language but that language 'embodies the sole means for carrying out the conversation that we are and that we hope to convey to each other.'<sup>28</sup>

Gerald L. Bruns draws out a further similarity between Levinas and Gadamer in his essay 'On the Coherence of Hermeneutics and Ethics: An Essay on Gadamer and Levinas'. He justifies his engagement of the two thinkers by claiming that they both reject rule-based methods in their respective fields. He says, 'Levinasian ethics is concerned with the claims other people have on us in advance of how right we are with respect to rules and beliefs or how in tune we are with a just and rational order of things.'<sup>29</sup> He goes on to say that, 'being under claims of history and tradition rather than claims of concepts and rules is central to Gadamer's thinking, which is critical of subjectivist accounts of human understanding in ways that coincide with Levinas's project.'<sup>30</sup> These points of similarity provide part of the justification for the engagement with the two thinkers in my thesis. The differences in their concerns provide further justification for placing them in dialogue.

The central question of my thesis requires both a theory of encountering the Other and a hermeneutics that can develop a theory of relation through the mediation of literature that maintains openness to alterity. Bruns claims that 'the relation between Gadamer and Levinas is not so much one of disagreement as one of mutually illuminating differences – differences that are paradoxically coherent with one another.'<sup>31</sup> It is these illuminating differences that I hope to exploit in working through the question of how we encounter the Other in literature.

To further develop my response to the question of this thesis I will look at Edgar Allan Poe's short story, 'The Purloined Letter,' and the debate surrounding

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 121.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, 'On the Coherence of Hermeneutic and Ethics: An Essay on Gadamer and Levinas', in *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. by Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 30–54 (p. 30).

<sup>30</sup> Bruns, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Bruns, p. 41.

its interpretation which includes the work of Lacan, Derrida and Barbara Johnson. This short story, and its widened boundaries to include the academic dialogue, provided the initial motivation for this thesis. The debate surrounding Poe's story includes accusations of violence to the text and theorists framing readers and readings. These allegations led me to ask if we have certain obligations in our readings and if so what form do they take? I wanted to consider the status of the literary text and how it might factor in an ethical discussion of interpretation. The consideration of a literary text allows me to put the theoretical perspectives I develop into action.

## **Chapter Summaries**

The answer to the question 'can we have an encounter with the Other through the mediation with literature?' begins in Chapter One, where I look to Levinas's phenomenological account of the encounter with the Other. I aim to produce a reading of Levinas's ethics that will ground the discussion later in the thesis. With questions around respect towards texts it seems important to produce an interpretation of Levinas's work that stays true to the spirit of his philosophy, and in light of this desire I will focus mostly on *Totality and Infinity* and relevant sections of *Otherwise than Being*. This Chapter will provide the blueprint for the encounter with the Other that will occupy the rest of the thesis.

Chapter Two takes up the problem of literature for Levinas. Levinas considers works of art, including literary works of art, as occupying a different ontological status to objects in the real world. He is also wary of the way in which language operates in literature claiming that rhetorical language does not allow one to encounter the Other as one does not come face-to-face with the Other; rather the figurative aspect of language means that one approaches, not face-to-face, not straightforward but from an angle. In this Chapter I also consider how Robert Eaglestone attempts to resolve this problem to produce his idea of ethical criticism which draws upon Levinas's notions of the saying and the said. I suggest Eaglestone is unable to sufficiently deal with this concern whilst maintaining the spirit of Levinas's work in which the immediacy of the face-to-face is central.

In Chapter Three I begin to consider Gadamer's hermeneutics. With Levinas's ethical work suggesting the impossibility of an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature but a clear phenomenological description of what the encounter involves I turn to explore the ways in which Gadamer sees truth functioning in art and then how this applies to literature. This Chapter works to establish a basis for putting Levinas and Gadamer into dialogue to explore ways in which we might be able to encounter the Other in literature.

Chapter Four draws upon Chapter Three and places the two thinkers, Levinas and Gadamer, into dialogue. I look at the similarities that suggest compatibility of the two approaches before exploring the differences which provide a space for otherness to emerge. The discussion of the two philosophers leads me to answer one of the main sub-questions of the thesis, 'who is the Other that is encountered in literature?' The similarities and differences explored in this Chapter allow me to identify the essential features of what would constitute an encounter with the Other.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter Five, finally provides an answer to the main question of the thesis. It looks to a debate in Levinasian scholarship, namely whether the encounter with the Other is something that is experienced in everyday life or is rather something transcendental, beyond experience and primordial. To negotiate these contrasting interpretations I look to Immanuel Kant's notion of the sublime to create an analogy to better understand how Levinas's work sits 'between' the two interpretations. This hypothesis allows me to answer the question of the thesis positively, with qualification.

Chapter Six builds upon the answer established in Chapter Five and applies it to a concrete literary example, 'The Purloined Letter' by Edgar Allan Poe. In this Chapter I explore the relation between reader and text as well as the ways in which secondary texts work to expand the horizon of the original by considering the famous debate between Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Barbara Johnson. This Chapter aims to look at how we can, in fact, read and say something about a text whilst maintaining its otherness.

# Chapter One: The Encounter with the Other

## Introduction

Levinas is notoriously difficult to read. Most introductory books on Levinas and his philosophy include a section on ‘how to read Levinas’ or at least a few cautionary words for the unsuspecting undergraduate. They point to ways in which his works resist logical or narrative structures. Jacques Derrida likened Levinas’s writing to waves lapping against the shore.<sup>1</sup> By this he is suggesting that Levinas’s work tends to be repetitive and perhaps insistent though many would go so far as to label his writing circular. Levinas introduces an idea and returns to it again and again, slowly changing or modifying it. Once familiar with Levinas’s main ideas, tropes and themes one feels that they can almost dip into any section of his work and get a sense of the whole. The uncanny feeling that you have ‘read this before’ is common as you encounter ideas introduced a section back reintroduced. Where most philosophers give premises that lead to conclusions, Levinas, on the other hand, uses familiar terms in unusual ways, constantly seems to modify ideas, and does not offer arguments for his claims nor definitions for his terms. He approaches ideas from a distance, circles around them; he comes closer then spirals out again before coming from the opposite direction to circle around the term again.

It would be dismissive to think Levinas is difficult for the sake of being difficult. His writing style, with all its repetitions and changing terminology, is carefully constructed to serve his philosophical project. I will discuss the reasons for his difficulty later in this chapter but for now it is enough to understand that we commit a certain violence, ironic considering the thesis question, when we try to offer a straightforward summary of Levinas’s view of the encounter with the Other. It is unsettling how easy it is to offer such a summary and for the purposes of the thesis a sketch of Levinas’s main ideas is helpful. In what follows I attempt to give an outline of the encounter with the Other whilst paying attention to ways in which we commit injustices to Levinas’s work. I will begin with giving some

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 312.

background to Levinas's philosophical point of view to set the scene of his overall project in which the encounter with the Other is central. I will then move on to discuss the encounter as described in *Totality and Infinity* before discussing in brief the progression of this encounter in Levinas's later work, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*.

## **Ethics as First Philosophy**

One of Levinas's major goals, especially in the *Totality and Infinity* era, was to provide a critique of Western Philosophy's traditional metaphysics, which he saw as a privileging of Ontology. Ontology, for Levinas, 'reduces the other to the same' (*TI*, p. 42). He also says, that 'Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being' (*TI*, p. 43). Levinas's critique is that the subject of Ontology does not encounter anything in its otherness but rather systematically looks to beings as instances of Being. The focus and interest has been on understanding Being, which Levinas refers to variously as 'the One, the Same, or totality'.<sup>2</sup> Being, in this traditional metaphysics, is taken as the starting point, the foundation for other understanding, and hence everything could be understood as a part of the totality of Being. Put more simply, if you fully understand Being you could understand everything you encounter, as an aspect of that totality. Levinas likens this philosophical project to Ulysses' adventures which are, in the end, always a journey home.<sup>3</sup> The philosopher only looks to the world to find how it fits back into the totality of Being, how the pieces of the puzzle fit to allow us to see the complete picture.

Levinas's two greatest influences, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, are included in the criticism of Western philosophy as Levinas argues that they too minimise alterity and in doing so help him mount his critique of Ontology and his response to the problem of reducing otherness to the same. Colin Davis argues

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other', in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Mark Taylor, trans. by A. Lingis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 345–59 (p. 346).

that Husserl's notion of intentionality, on the one hand, provides an account of an openness to what is outside the self.<sup>4</sup> Intentionality says that consciousness (and here we are speaking about perception rather than sensation<sup>5</sup>) is always conscious of something and thus hints at objects outside the conscious self. Paul Gorner describes this aspect of intentionality by saying that consciousness 'intrinsically refers beyond itself.'<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, intentionality is not so straightforward. Husserl's phenomenological reduction aims to bracket off<sup>7</sup> anything that can be doubted and this can be seen as including the external world. I may be conscious of something but the object of my consciousness is not guaranteed. It could be a hallucination or I could be mistaken. More importantly, if we remain in the natural standpoint, which takes objects of experience as given, we find ourselves unable to confirm *a priori* truths and face a vicious circle in which 'the natural standpoint takes its own validity for granted.'<sup>8</sup> Take for example mental events. In the natural standpoint it makes sense to think of bodily causes for these events but we face a vicious circle when we realise our experience of bodily events is always via our mental events, which in turn are seen as caused by bodily events, and so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>9</sup> After his phenomenological reduction, Husserl is left with the certainty of consciousness, a position reminiscent to that taken by René Descartes.

The extent and implications of this reduction are subject to different interpretations but the important feature for understanding Levinas's critique of Husserl is that the focus turns to the consciousness and the discovery of the transcendental Ego. This reduction 'reveals a transcendental Ego which is not a part of an objective natural order, but which actually constitutes the knowable world through its intentional acts.'<sup>10</sup> Husserl finds in bracketing off the external, natural world that 'there are the objects of consciousness itself – intentional objects', and that it is only through these objects of consciousness that we know

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<sup>4</sup> Davis, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Gorner, *Twentieth Century German Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Gorner, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> The terminology is important here. Husserl does not deny the existence of the external world but rather calls for it to be put aside or bracketed as something that we cannot be completely assured of. "We do not actually doubt the existence of everything; we simply 'bracket' existence as inessential to experience as such," Robert C Solomon, *Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Solomon, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Solomon, p. 135.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, p. 11.

about objects in the external world.<sup>11</sup> The transcendental Ego, which is not the empirical me, a 30-something year old female from New Zealand, but rather the ‘I’ who thinks or consciousness itself, helps create the knowable world. From his early readings of Husserl, Levinas raises concerns that the transcendental Ego cannot be sure of the existence of others.<sup>12</sup> If the transcendental Ego is the only certain knowledge and constitutes all other experience, we cannot know for sure that other egos exist. Levinas initially raised these concerns without much elaboration but as he began to develop his own thought he continued to struggle with the possibility of the transcendental Ego encountering anything other than itself. If consciousness constitutes the external world or the lesser claim, if we can only know the external world through the transcendental Ego, then ‘consciousness cannot experience, perceive or learn anything that it did not already contain.’<sup>13</sup> The transcendental Ego, then, is blind to otherness.

Heidegger is Levinas’s second teacher, after Husserl. Initially Levinas finds in Heidegger a useful resource for questioning the centrality of consciousness for Husserl.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger draws attention to *Dasein*’s (being-there) situatedness. While Husserl’s transcendental Ego ‘gazes at the raw matter of life from a disinterested, uninvolved, ahistorical position’ and is ‘responsible only to itself’<sup>15</sup>, Heidegger’s historically situated, thrown *Dasein*, on the other hand, ‘is neither free nor absolute, he is no longer entirely responsible for himself’.<sup>16</sup> Levinas sees Heidegger replacing Husserl’s transcendental Ego with this historically situated *Dasein* which is firmly rooted in the world and cannot be understood as anything but part of that world.

Michael L. Morgan argues that Levinas inherited his critical stance towards Western philosophy from Heidegger, amongst others. Morgan claims that Heidegger questions the Western philosophical tradition by searching for a ‘more fundamental or primordial investigation into the being of beings in order to place science, philosophy, and more in terms of deeper dimensions of reality’ rather than positing a transcendence to account for aspects of the human condition that

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<sup>11</sup> Solomon, p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Levinas cited by Davis, p. 16.

require special kinds of access.<sup>17</sup> Robert Solomon puts it more simply, when he says that Heidegger complains ‘that Western metaphysics had ‘forgotten’ about Being ever since Plato’; he goes on to say ‘we once had a sense of the inviolate reality of ourselves in the world but this has been falling away from us since ancient times’.<sup>18</sup> Heidegger wants to reinstate the question of Being as the central question of metaphysics. Levinas, however, criticises the Western philosophical tradition, not for a forgetting of Being, but rather for reducing all otherness to instances of the same/Being/totality. He states, ‘to affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom’ (*TI*, p. 45).

Levinas argues that ethics, the ethical relation, is the proper focus of metaphysics. By ethics Levinas does not mean normative laws nor a study of the virtues. Rather, he posits the encounter with the Other as the fundamental aspect of philosophical endeavour.

## **The Encounter with the Other; an initial view**

The encounter with the Other<sup>19</sup> is taken up with vigour in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas’s first major work, published in 1961. It is in this work that the encounter with the Other is given its most full consideration and this is the justification for my focus on this text. It is also this from text that most critics who utilise Levinas’s philosophy construct their critiques, which gives a second reason for the emphasis on this book in this thesis. My purpose in outlining the encounter with the Other, as discussed by Levinas, is twofold. The first is to understand Levinas’s account well enough to be able to construct a notion of an encounter with the

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<sup>17</sup> Michael L Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Solomon, p. 152.

<sup>19</sup> I use a capital ‘O’ for Other when speaking about the Other in a strictly Levinasian sense, unless quoting someone who uses a lower case ‘o’. From Chapter 6 onwards I begin to employ a lower case ‘o’ to distinguish the empirical encounter with the other from the transcendental encounter with the Other.

Other that can be applied to literary texts. The second is to work out if I am justified in using Levinas's work for this purpose, which I will turn to in Chapter Two.

To begin to summarise and construct a clear account of Levinas's notion of the encounter with the Other one finds oneself wanting to give a notion of the whole in order to be able to understand the individual terms but at the same time one needs to grasp the particular concepts and terminology to get a sense of the full picture of the encounter. Levinas himself is not much help. Davis notes the 'misleading' structure of *Totality and Infinity* which professes, through chapter and section headings, to have a clear and logical structure, 'a preface, a first section sketching out the general themes of Same and Other, a second section on the Same, a third on the Other, a fourth which endeavours to go a step further in the description of the relationship with alterity, and a fifth concluding section'.<sup>20</sup> In reality, as noted above, Levinas's writing (at least at first glance) appears repetitive, circular and sometimes strange. He does not outline in a neat little section what he means by 'Same' or 'Other' but rather offers a sense of the concept and then returns to expand or modify this sense. Morgan argues, despite these difficulties, that in *Totality and Infinity* (as well as an earlier work, *Time and the Other*), Levinas does indeed offer an account that can be described as a 'narrative'.<sup>21</sup>

It is tempting to equate or at least compare Levinas's 'narrative' of 'same' and 'Other' and the encounter of the same with the Other to a state of nature type scenario reminiscent of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel or Thomas Hobbes. The fable or mythical aspect of Levinas's account raises questions about the status of the encounter with the Other which will be discussed later. The development of Levinas's ethics, which centres on the encounter with the Other, can be seen as beginning with the world of existing things, a pure existence without the mediation of consciousness. This beginning point in Levinas's story of same and Other is established in *Time and the Other* but not discussed in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas calls existence prior to consciousness *il y a* or 'there is'. The very thought 'existence prior to consciousness' is problematic. How can we possibly

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<sup>20</sup> Davis, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, p. 37.

grasp the idea of existence that has not already been interpreted, intended or understood? Michael J. Brogan argues that Levinas finds justification for the *il y a* from Heidegger's notion of thrownness.<sup>22</sup> If we are thrown into being then 'it is as if the existent appeared only in an existence that precedes it, as though existence were independent of the existent.'<sup>23</sup> We can grasp the idea that there is a world that exists independent of our existence, one that is prior to our (human) existence and hence that exists independently of our intentions and conscious thought. We might be able to imagine the apocalyptic end of the world but the idea of being persists; 'there is', *il y a*. Levinas, in true phenomenological style, looks to experiences of fatigue and insomnia to describe this pure existence. The insomniac is aware of the relentlessness of existence as they lie unable to sleep. Brogan draws a correlation between Levinas's notion of *il y a* and Jean-Paul Sartre's 'nausea', a concept developed in his novel of the same name in which the protagonist, Roquentin, is overcome by a sense of nausea as he intuits the undifferentiated nature of all existence. Pure existence is loaded with 'foreboding,'<sup>24</sup> it is 'impersonal,'<sup>25</sup> 'abhorrent' and 'terrifying.'<sup>26</sup> The horror attached to *il y a* stems from its impersonal or undifferentiated nature. The thought of slipping into such an impersonal existence is terrifying because 'it is to be rendered completely powerless, deprived of all initiative, plunged into anonymity'.<sup>27</sup>

Levinas's narrative then turns to consciousness which emerges from the *il y a*. Consciousness can be seen as a 'standing out from'<sup>28</sup> the anonymity of the *il y a*. Levinas, in *Time and the Other*, talks about 'the appearance of a "something that is"' and 'a rupture of the anonymous vigilance of the *there is*'.<sup>29</sup> Levinas characterises consciousness as a hypostasis, in which something 'as yet unidentifiable acquires separate existence.'<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the depiction of *il y a*

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<sup>22</sup> Michael J Brogan, 'Nausea and the Experience of the "Il y a": Sartre and Levinas on Brute Existence', *Philosophy Today*, 45 (2001), 144–53 (p. 147).

<sup>23</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the other and additional essays* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Brogan, p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> Brogan, p. 147.

<sup>28</sup> Morgan, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas, *Time and the other and additional essays*, p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Davis, p. 23.

as insomnia, consciousness is the ability to sleep. Consciousness can withdraw from the indistinct mass of pure existence. Levinas says the hypostasis ‘refers to a situation where an existent is put in touch with its existing.’<sup>31</sup> It can reflect upon itself. Levinas continues his investigation of consciousness from his earlier texts into *Totality and Infinity*.

The self or ‘same’ finds itself in a world filled with things which are at its disposal. Levinas characterises the primordial way the self relates to the world of things as *jouissance* (enjoyment),<sup>32</sup> as opposed to a Heideggerian ‘at hand’ (*TI*, p. 110). Levinas says, ‘enjoyment is the ultimate consciousness of all the contents that fill my life – it embraces them’ (*TI*, p. 111). The self is at home in the world; it dwells in the world and finds satisfaction in the things around it. The self eats, moves and plays in the world in which it lives. The self’s encounters with the world are first and foremost the experience of ‘living from’ (*TI*, p. 110) rather than representations of things in the world. We enjoy the breeze for the coolness, not for its ability to create power. At this point the self has a sense of mastery; existence is its attribute and it thus has a sense of freedom. In a world full of things, there is nothing that challenges the self’s sense of mastery of its world. Levinas points out that anything that the self enjoys in the world is ‘reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor’ (*TI*, p. 33).

Everything the self encounters, at this point of Levinas’s narrative, are things that can be assimilated into its own sense of self. I eat a plum, the plum is for me, and it literally becomes a part of me. I enjoy sunshine at the beach, these are things *I* enjoy, they are easily described in terms of my sensation of warmth, sand under my feet, the smell of salty air I perceive and so on. Nothing challenges the conception that the world is a unified place in which I dwell. I can make sense of everything whilst keeping a firm sense of my identity, through which I can intuit, perceive, sense and conceive the things around me. Levinas puts it thus:

To be I is, over and beyond any individuation that can be derived from a system of references, to have identity as one’s content. The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in

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<sup>31</sup> Levinas, *Time and the other and additional essays*, p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> John Wild, ‘Introduction’, in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1994), pp. 11–20 (p. 12).

identifying itself in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it  
(*TI*, p. 36).

To summarise the story so far: Levinas can be seen as beginning by considering existence prior to consciousness. This is an abhorrent, terrifying unindividuated existence, akin to Sartre's description of nausea. Levinas then relates the emergence of consciousness. The self appears and finds itself in a world there for its enjoyment. The self is able to greet everything it meets as a part of *its* world. Nothing challenges the self's mastery of its own world. At this point, the self is alone. It is the master of its own world but this world is the world of things, not others.

Levinas's account of the self does not end with consciousness in the world of things, in fact, it barely begins there. With nothing to restrict its freedom or mastery over the world, nothing to challenge its sense of completeness, the self is not really a free and individual self. The freedom it experienced up until this point is 'arbitrary and unjustified'.<sup>33</sup> The self is free by default, with nothing that has the ability to challenge this feeling of freedom and mastery it is meaningless. Levinas does not literally envisage a world where someone is completely alone. Rather, Morgan argues that these are aspects of our existence; he says, 'there are these features in our existence or these dimensions of our inhabiting the world, living within and from it, becoming aware of it and coming to know it and ourselves in it.'<sup>34</sup>

The self thus far has not encountered anything truly other to itself. As we have seen, the self is able to turn everything it encounters in the world into 'the same'. The food that I eat, the air I breathe, the views I see are all things I can incorporate into the totality of my world, 'everything is here, everything belongs to me' (*TI*, p. 37). The self only finds something truly other when faced with the Other. The Other is absolutely Other; its alterity cannot be reduced by becoming a representation or a concept. Levinas does not outline exactly what the Other is, for to do so would be to reduce the alterity of this Other but he does offer glimpses of the Other or the encounter with this Other. I will now turn to some of these

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<sup>33</sup> Davis, p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> Morgan, p. 39.

formulations of the Other to develop a fuller understanding of what Levinas may mean when he speaks of the Other. Later in this chapter and the next I will add a further complication to these depictions of the Other when I ask *who* is the Other encountered if we apply Levinas's work to literature.

Levinas says the Other 'and I do not form a number' (*TI*, p. 39). The Other is not something, like a tree, that can be accounted for in relation to myself. To see the Other as a 'you' which can be spoken about as a 'we' would be to imply a totality in which we are essentially the same, it would reduce the otherness of the Other by setting it in opposition to the self. To suggest a relation with the Other is like seeing the self and Other as separate sides of a coin; they are opposite but still part of the same coin, 'they would complete one another in a system visible from the outside' (*TI*, p. 35) and hence, consist in an enclosed relation.

Another glimpse of the Other is revealed by Levinas when he describes him, at least six times in *Totality and Infinity*, as identified by Lisa Guenther in her article, 'The Ethics and Politics of Otherness: Negotiating Alterity and Racial Difference'<sup>35</sup> as 'the stranger, the widow, and the orphan' (*TI*, p. 77). Guenther explains that Levinas is drawing on these figures of social vulnerability to represent the singular ethical vulnerability of the Other. She continues to explain that it is not these particular others that I am responsible for but rather 'I am responsible for the impoverished, abandoned, and naked face of *anyone*, no matter who they are or what they have done'.<sup>36</sup>

Levinas has added another layer to his description of the Other. The Other is not simply the negation of me. In fact, I cannot understand the Other in relation to myself. We now see that the Other is particular in its singularity. The Other is not a member of a group that I must bear responsibility for, depending on who they are or what they have done but rather the Other is the face that stands before me. In discussing the Other as Stranger Levinas expands his notion of the Other. The Stranger is one who disturbs my sense of being at home (*TI*, p. 39). As we have noted above, before encountering the Other, the self was able to characterise everything as for itself. It could understand the world as a totality of which it is a

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<sup>35</sup> Lisa Guenther, 'The Ethics and Politics of Otherness: Negotiating Alterity and Racial Difference', *philoSophia: A Journal of Continental Feminism*, 1 (2011), 195–214 (p. 207).

<sup>36</sup> Guenther, p. 207.

part. The Other is one who disrupts this totality in its particular singularity that cannot be reduced to an instance of 'the same'. The stranger is 'the free one' and 'over him I have no *power*', I cannot reduce his alterity and 'have no concept in common' with him, he (and I) are 'without genus' (*TI*, p. 39).

Levinas offers another approach to the Other; 'the infinite is the absolutely other' (*TI*, p. 49). Levinas refers to René Descartes throughout *Totality and Infinity* and is particularly interested in Descartes' Third Meditation. To quickly summarise, Descartes believed he had found an indisputable or *a priori* truth: he exists. This is famously known as the Cogito and Descartes comes to this foundational truth by taking a path of extreme scepticism. He doubts the truth of anything coming from the senses as he could be misled or mistaken. As he doubts he realises that he cannot doubt that he thinks. He can think wrong but regardless of any deception or misunderstanding he cannot deny that there is an 'I' that thinks. This line of thinking led to Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am. From this *a priori* truth Descartes set out to prove the existence of God. In the Third Meditation Descartes muses on the idea of God. He argues that he has the idea of the infinite but is himself finite and something cannot contain something larger than itself hence something infinite (God) must have placed the idea of the infinite in his mind. Levinas, argues Davis, identifies these two main movements (the confirmation of the existence of the 'I' and the proof of the existence of God) and adapts them for his own purposes.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned above, Levinas finds both aspects of Descartes' proof of the existence of God useful for his own ethical thinking. Our interest at this point is how Descartes helps us understand Levinas's notion of the Other and his statement that 'the infinite is the absolutely other' (*TI*, p. 49). Perhaps the first question that arises is: is the Other God? The infinite was associated with God in Descartes, whose argument Levinas is borrowing and throughout *Totality and Infinity* Levinas speaks about the height of the Other, he speaks of desire for the 'Other and of the Most-High' (*TI*, p. 34) and claims 'the idea of infinity designates a height and a nobility, a transascendence' (*TI*, p. 41) and he speaks of the Other as he 'whom one approaches... in a dimension of height' (*TI*, p. 75).

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<sup>37</sup> Davis, p. 39.

These statements certainly make it sound like the Other could be God. Ryan Urbano argues in his 2012 article, '[a]pproaching the Divine: Levinas on God, Religion, Idolatry, and Atheism', that access to God is granted through encountering the Other, not God herself; he claims that Levinas 'believes that God is revealed as a trace through the face of the Other to whom the self is called to serve and love' and that 'the Divine can only be accessed through the human other to whom the self is infinitely responsible.'<sup>38</sup> Urbano's argument is by no means uncontroversial. Levinas even goes so far as to say 'God is the other' (*TI*, p. 211). We can, however, accept Urbano's argument or bracket the question of God at this point. Even if God is the Other for Levinas, the theoretical framework can still stand as a model for an ethical encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature. If we accept Urbano's argument here, that the Other as infinite, for Levinas, is not God, but rather that which gives access to God, or bracket the question of whether the Other is God, what then is this infinite Other?

My earlier characterisations of the Other draw an image of a distinct singular presence that interrupts my being at home with myself. The statement that the Other is the infinite certainly seems to muddy the waters. The infinite, in contrast to 'the stranger, the widow and the orphan,' conjures abstract concepts, like God, as explored above. We can note that the Other, as infinite, is one who exceeds any attempts to reduce his alterity. The presence that stands before me as the Other is not able to be understood with reference to the totality, with reference to the world as I know it. I cannot capture the otherness of the Other in terms I know, as the Other's alterity will overflow all these concepts. The Other is, like the infinite, non-representational. Any attempt to represent the Other will reduce his otherness and destroy his alterity. Levinas uses the notion of the infinite Other to draw out the separation of the self and Other. There is a distance between the self and Other; the Other is a transcendent being 'infinitely removed from its idea, that is exterior, because it is infinite' (*TI*, p. 49). The notion of the infinite Other gives us a fuller understanding of the difficulties in trying to explain what the Other is for Levinas. The Other, as infinite, is undefinable. It will exceed any attempt to limit it by concepts or terminology. The infinite Other is infinitely

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<sup>38</sup> Ryan Urbano, 'Approaching the Divine: Levinas on God, Religion, Idolatry, and Atheism', *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 15 (2012), 50–81 (p. 50).

removed or separated from the self yet presents itself as the Stranger. For all this, we are yet to understand why Levinas draws upon Descartes' *Cogito* in his discussion of the infinite. At this point we need to consider the *relation* with the Other.

For Levinas, argues Davis, 'the significance of the Cartesian discovery lies in the encounter with the infinite as something beyond knowledge and utterly resistant to the solipsism of the transcendental Ego.'<sup>39</sup> The infinite is something beyond anything the self could understand for to understand is to bring the Other into familiar terms, to destroy its alterity. The essential genius of Descartes' thought, according to Levinas, is the way in which he is able to establish a relation between the self (Descartes' 'I') and the Other (God) that does not annihilate either party nor reduce the distance between them. The Cartesian model of relation with the infinite proves a useful prototype for Levinas's own description of the encounter with the Other. Descartes finds a way for the self, the 'I' to relate to this unknowable infinite whilst maintaining both the unknowable aspect of God and also without losing the self in the relation. Levinas states: 'The Cartesian notion of the idea of the Infinite designates a relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it. It designates the contact with the intangible, a contact that does not compromise the integrity of what is touched' (*TI*, p. 50).

I will now turn to one of Levinas's best-known descriptions of the Other and one that is crucial to understanding the encounter with the Other: *le visage*, 'the face.' The face provides Levinas a figure that gives a 'concretization' (*TI*, p. 50) of the notion of infinity. It allows Levinas to show how the Other reveals itself. The encounter with the Other, in Levinas's philosophy, happens face-to-face. The Other, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the infinite, absolute Other, faces. The Other presents herself. She does not stand as a representation for me but rather I find myself face-to-face with her. 'The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face' (*TI*, p. 50). The Other is there and overflows any attempt I make to reduce her to my conception of the Other. Davis claims that Levinas's purpose for employing the term 'face', is that

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<sup>39</sup> Davis, p. 39.

he needs to develop an understanding of the relationship between the self and Other that ‘does not imply that the Other is *with* me (therefore fundamentally like me) or *against* me (therefore opposed to me and dialectically part of the same totality).’<sup>40</sup> The term ‘face’ denotes a presence, ‘the Other is simply there, present to me in an originary and irreducible relation.’<sup>41</sup>

The description thus far of the face is careful not to equate *le visage* in a simple, straightforward way with an actual human face composed of eyes, nose, mouth, dimples, eyebrows, et cetera. One difficulty in Levinas’s work is that the face both does and does not refer to actual faces.<sup>42</sup> At times he refers to it as ‘sensible’ (*TI*, p. 197) and as a ‘living presence’ (*TI*, p. 66). However, Levinas is clear that the face should be understood as that which overflows, goes beyond its plastic form. He talks about ‘the manifestation of the face over and beyond form’ and the ‘undoing’ of form (*TI*, p. 66). Levinas speaks about the ‘nudity’ (*TI*, p. 74) of the face. By this he means that the face does not belong to a signifying system, a system of references, ‘it *is* by itself and not by reference to a system’ (*TI*, p. 75). ‘The face does not point beyond itself; it simply is what it is.’<sup>43</sup> If the face were simply the form of a face in its everyday sense, representing the actual person, then the Other would be brought into the realm of the same. Something that belongs to a system, a face that represents a person or signifies some *thing*, is something that can be *understood*. Understanding, recall, involves fitting the thing to be understood into a system or totality. In doing so, the alterity of the thing is reduced to the same of the totality.

To help explain how the face appears in a relation without relation, how it is able to maintain otherness, Levinas emphasises that the face is ‘expression’ (*TI*, p. 66). ‘The face is a living presence; it is expression,’ ‘[t]he face speaks’ (*TI*, p. 66). In doing so Levinas ties the face closely to discourse or language. Davis argues that the face is a source of meanings as opposed to a perceived meaning given to something by me.<sup>44</sup> The face as expression, the face that speaks or the face as a source of meaning does not refer to the exact words spoken. Levinas

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<sup>40</sup> Davis, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup> Davis, p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, p. 46.

does not mean the everyday sense of expression or language, such as the small talk you might engage in with a stranger on the bus. This kind of language, expression, or meaning falls within the realm of the totality; it can be understood and perceived. The idea of an expression that does not totalise, that cannot be accounted for by referents and concepts is not easily comprehended, in fact, by definition it cannot be comprehended.

The face is not meaning as such but rather it is the origin of meaning. The face is the source of meaning; the beginning of discourse. Before the self encounters the Other it is the master of its own world. There is nothing in the space in which it dwells that cannot be understood and perceived intentionally. We mentioned earlier that one problem with Husserl for Levinas is that the kind of intentionality he discusses leaves no room for otherness. The face performs a special role in interrupting the self's enjoyment. The Other casts the self into question.<sup>45</sup> The Other, by being infinitely other, is able to oppose me. It does not challenge me to a fight but by facing me as an other resists my power by instituting language as *interpellation*. Levinas claims that it is through language that the relation with Other is revealed, that the Other appears as something that resists my power and he goes on to argue '[i]n this revelation only can language as a system of signs be constituted' (*TI*, p. 73). He continues the argument by noting that '[l]anguage presupposes interlocutors, a plurality,' (*TI*, p. 73) and argues that this relation between interlocutors is formed in language and this is marked by the ethical. The face speaks but expresses only its own singularity in an imperative not to kill.<sup>46</sup> Levinas says 'this infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: "you shall not commit murder"' (*TI*, p. 199). The Other, as face, as expression, calls upon the self. The self finds itself wholly responsible for the Other who singles it out by this imperative which is not spoken but rather by facing, by being present, the Other 'expresses a summons'<sup>47</sup> which resists the self's power by urging it not to kill but also the Other makes a plea 'something like "make room for me" or ... "share the world with me."' <sup>48</sup> The self encounters

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<sup>45</sup> Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other', p. 350.

<sup>46</sup> Guenther, p. 201.

<sup>47</sup> Morgan, p. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Morgan, p. 68.

the Other who calls the self to responsibility; the self is singled out and finds herself completely responsible for the Other in ways in which the Other is not responsible for her. The relation with the Other is asymmetrical; the self is wholly responsible for the Other that singles her out, but the Other has no reciprocal responsibility. At the base of all meaning, all discourse is this primal ethical encounter which makes discourse in general possible.

A picture of what the Other is and is not is emerging. I have traced a few of Levinas's formulations of the Other culminating in the notions of infinity and the face. I have shown that it is difficult to talk about the Other divorced from the relation between self and Other. To fully understand the idea of the Other as infinite and to engage with the implications of the face of the Other this relation must be discussed. An important aspect of the encounter with the Other for this project is that this relation with the Other is made possible by language. It is language that allows contact with the Other without reducing her otherness. This summary of Levinas's work on the Other is, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, only a sketch. There are many nuances and complications that are beyond the scope of this project. For now it will suffice to accept the preliminary outline of the Other given here and move to look at how language operates for Levinas in the encounter with the Other more closely.

### **Language; the saying and the said**

We have already seen that language occupies a special status for Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity* he identifies language as an essential aspect of ethics. For an ethical relation with the Other to take place there must be a way that the self can relate to the Other which is not totalising; there must be a way of being aware of the Other without making her an object of my knowledge. For Levinas language holds the key to this encounter. We have already discussed language as expression as we described *le visage*. The face, Levinas argues, *is* expression. The face issues a plea; it asks the self to be allowed to share the world with it and, at the same time commands the self not to kill. Language begins when the self responds to the summons of the Other. The response of the self to this plea is in giving, 'to

recognise the Other is to give' (*TI*, p. 75). The self gives the world, previously solely there for her enjoyment to the Other. Morgan identifies two aspects of language that Levinas thinks are essential for language and that are 'grounded' in the face-to-face encounter: the first is that there is an Other, a separate person with whom to speak; the second is that there must be universality or community.<sup>49</sup> It is through the face-to-face encounter that we are able to establish this universality; Levinas says that 'language accomplishes the primordial putting in common' (*TI*, p. 173) and that language 'puts in common a world hitherto mine' (*TI*, p. 174). In establishing language as based in the face-to-face encounter, Levinas is able to ground language in the ethical.

Levinas is acutely aware of the difficulty language poses for his project despite it maintaining a central position in his ethical theory. The major problem is that whenever we think something in language we thematise it. It becomes an item of knowledge and hence in the realm of the same/the totality. When we focus on language as 'coherence', rather than its 'revealing function,' Levinas argues, 'the function of language would amount to suppressing "the other," who breaks this coherence' (*TI*, p. 73). Further compounding these problems is that Levinas tries to escape traditional ontology but is unable to give up the language of ontological investigation.<sup>50</sup> Jacques Derrida, in his essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics: an Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,' draws out this very problem. Étienne Feron argues 'the essential point of Derrida's argument [in "Violence and Metaphysics"] consists in recognising that philosophical discourse can only say the Other in the language of the Same.'<sup>51</sup> Derrida observes that Levinas cannot free himself from philosophical discourse and that to move beyond the realm of ontology would be a move beyond such a discourse which cannot happen through language. 'The attempt to achieve an opening toward the beyond of philosophical discourse, by means of philosophical discourse, which can never be shaken off completely, cannot possibly succeed *within* language'.<sup>52</sup> Levinas is faced with the difficult problem of having to express ideas in a language and tradition which require a radically different understanding of

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<sup>49</sup> Morgan, p. 73.

<sup>50</sup> Davis, p. 38.

<sup>51</sup> Feron, cited by Davis, p. 66.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 110.

language and breach with tradition. Robert Bernasconi sums the problem up concisely: ‘in the course of articulating his claim that ethics is beyond being and so unthematisable, [Levinas] makes a theme of the unthematisable.’<sup>53</sup>

Levinas, in 1974, published his second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. *Otherwise than Being* continues the main threads of *Totality and Infinity* and Levinas’s earlier work but also takes up language as a major line of inquiry. Some thinkers, such as Davis, Bernasconi and Feron, argue that *Otherwise than Being* can be seen as a response to Derrida’s critique, but Davis notes, Levinas does not refer explicitly to Derrida’s essay once throughout the work. A full discussion of this work is well beyond the scope of this project but we will look at an aspect of language that features strongly in *Otherwise than Being* which represents Levinas’s attempt to overcome the problems he faced in *Totality and Infinity*: the saying and the said. These are important concepts for addressing the thesis question and are utilised by Robert Eaglestone and Adam Zachary Newton in their Levinasian ethical readings.

The saying is, like *le visage*, one of Levinas’s most unexplainable terms. The face cannot be easily explained in words because it is exactly that which is beyond words. It is the condition of the possibility for language itself. Likewise, the saying evades meaning; it slips from thematisation and is only present as a trace. It is exactly that which cannot be defined in language. To begin to engage with this ~~concept~~ it is perhaps wise to look at the less complicated said first.

The said is our common understanding of language. It is that aspect of language that allows theses to be proposed, propositions to be put forward and for conclusions to be drawn; it is the system of signs that allows me to communicate my thoughts, fears, dreams and hopes to another person. Morgan defines the said as ‘the form and content of linguistic systems, of systems of symbols.’<sup>54</sup> Davis offers a similar definition; he says the said ‘comprises statements and propositions about, for example, the world, truth, protocols of dispute, verification or

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Bernasconi, ‘Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy’, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, Studies in Continental Thought (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1991), pp. 149–61 (p. 149).

<sup>54</sup> Morgan, p. 135.

disproof.<sup>55</sup> Guenther also offers a comparable summary of the said, ‘the said refers to the form and content of any utterance; it can be represented, analysed, contextualised, and so forth.’<sup>56</sup> It is the said that allows two speakers to communicate ideas and for fields like philosophy to function. Levinas says ‘the birthplace of ontology is in the said.’<sup>57</sup> Through the system of signs of the said entities are able to be fixed in time and their essence or being is able to be theorised about.

Levinas claims that there is another aspect of language not accountable for by the said. This, he terms, as the ‘saying’. Levinas describes the saying as ‘the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.’ (*OBBE*, p. 5) We see then, that the saying is the ethical relation with an Other, but Levinas’s description here does not fully explain what the saying is and how it differs from the said nor how this other aspect of language is actually connected to the encounter with the Other. What exactly does ‘proximity of one to the other’ have to do with language? Guenther addresses the issue of proximity in her summary of the encounter with the Other. She points out that an essential aspect of language, which is drawn out in Levinas’s thoughts on the said and the saying, is that one speaks ‘to someone’. She ties the fact of the saying to the notion of the face. The ‘face is singular precisely in its expression *to someone* of the command not to murder or negate singularity.’<sup>58</sup> The saying describes the fact that I am called by an Other and in being called I find myself irreducibly responsible for this Other. Recalling Levinas’s description above, I become ‘one for the other’. Levinas also speaks of ‘responsibility of one for the other,’ and goes so far as to describe a ‘substitution of one for the other’ in which one is a ‘hostage’ in his discussion of the saying (*OBBE*, p. 6).

In his explanation of the saying Morgan puts forward the idea that language is more than a system of signs (the said) but is also ‘a vehicle that allows

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<sup>55</sup> Davis, p. 75.

<sup>56</sup> Guenther, p. 201.

<sup>57</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 42. Hereafter cited in line as *OBBE*.

<sup>58</sup> Guenther, p. 201.

us to respond and to call out to one another'.<sup>59</sup> Language is not just the words we speak and the grammatical forms that allow meaning and sense to be constructed; it is also a way of sharing our world with another. A way of saying, 'I will make room for you'. Before words are said there need to be two people in proximity to one another and each with an openness toward the Other. Morgan goes on, '[t]he social, concrete context for language is the interpersonal setting in which it is employed, and the ethical core of that interpersonal setting is the call of the other person to the self to accept and acknowledge it, to respond with a linguistic "piece of bread," so to speak to share a word with it.'<sup>60</sup>

The saying then, is the condition for the possibility of language.<sup>61</sup> The said, the dimension of language that comprises signs and systems, can only emerge as a result of the ethical saying. There must be proximity and responsibility for utterances to be made, heard and understood. Levinas calls the saying 'pre-original' (*OBBE*, p. 5). He argues that 'the responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to anything said' (*OBBE*, p. 43). Davis interprets Levinas as arguing that the saying 'does not chronologically precede the Said' as the saying is only accessible through the said.<sup>62</sup> The saying underlies the said but is not 'fully represented' by it.<sup>63</sup> This interpretation sees the said and saying as correlatives but the question of whether they are merely correlative remains. Levinas himself ponders the relation of the saying and said. He muses, 'if saying is not only the correlative of a said, if its signifyingness is not absorbed in the signification said, can we not find beyond or on the hither side of the saying that tells being the signifyingness of diachrony?' (*OBBE*, p. 38).

Levinas is, throughout *Otherwise than Being*, trying to find expression for that which is beyond Being, not simply a being otherwise, but the absolute Other which is not simply another *type* of Being. It is through the saying that Levinas thinks we catch glimpses of this otherwise than being. He later acknowledges that 'to expose an otherwise than being will still give an ontological said' (*OBBE*, p. 44). The minute one tries to grasp, understand or speak the otherwise than being it

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<sup>59</sup> Morgan, p. 135.

<sup>60</sup> Morgan, p. 135.

<sup>61</sup> Davis, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, p. 75.

<sup>63</sup> Davis, p. 75.

is brought back to the realm of the said, it is fixed as Being. The said requires the saying, as a condition of its possibility, but Levinas also claims that the saying is antecedent to the said. Levinas asks, '[w]hat does saying signify before signifying a said?' (*OBBE*, p. 46) He also says that the 'saying...signifies prior to essence' (*OBBE*, p. 45) which indicates, if not a chronological priority, then the precedence of the saying. He is offering a complication to the simple idea of saying as correlative to the said and securing the saying as a condition of the possibility for language. Levinas phrases his question a third time, asking 'what does saying signify before signifying a said?' and answers, 'saying signifies otherwise than as an apparitor presenting essence and entities' (*OBBE*, p. 46). We see with his incessant questioning of the signifyingness of saying and its relation to the said that the saying presents extreme difficulty for Levinas's project. He is faced with a similar problem to that he struggled with in *Totality and Infinity*; how to speak the unspeakable. Whenever one tries to clarify what the saying is one find oneself reducing it to a said. Likewise, whenever the saying signifies it congeals in the form of the said but one is left with a trace or echo of the saying that exceeds the said.

In response to these difficulties we can note that the entirety of *Otherwise than Being* struggles with and performs the work of the saying. Davis devotes some time to the textuality of *Otherwise than Being*. He describes the work as 'intensely self-conscious' and claims the strange new terminology Levinas employs is an attempt to avoid the problems Derrida had criticised him for in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>64</sup> Levinas, as Davis notes, begins *Otherwise than Being* with an opening note about his use of the term, 'essence' in the title of the work. He claims he 'dare' not spell essence '*essance*' (a nod to Derrida's *différance*) and clarifies that the use of the word refers to 'the process or event of being'. He claims he is using it in the sense of *Sein* rather than *Seiendes* indicating he is referring to being (in general) rather than particular instances of being (existents), so is trying to find expression for that which is beyond being in general (*OBBE*, p. 186, FN1). Davis argues this demonstrates a preoccupation with language from the beginning. He goes on to argue that this 'foregrounding of language does not point us beyond the text to the being or essence named by *essence*', but rather that

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<sup>64</sup> Davis, p. 69.

words are encountered as *words*, not signs representing something outside of marks on a page, but ‘interconnected and interchangeable links in a vast textual chain which never quite succeeds in capturing that which lies beyond the text or beyond Being.’<sup>65</sup>

Davis is trying to make a case for Levinas’s entire work illustrating the work of the saying in its ability to disrupt the meaning-ridden said, to leave a trace which is not reducible to the meaning expressed by the words on the page. He points to several ways in which Levinas’s work twists and turns as it tries to discuss how language is more than a system of linguistic signs without reducing the saying aspect of language to a theme or concept to be understood as a part of totality. Davis mentions idiosyncratic use of dashes and commas, paradox, use of synonyms rather than definitions and collapsed oppositions as some of the textual features that make *Otherwise than Being* strange, difficult and, I argue, at times performative expression of saying.<sup>66</sup> The performative aspect of Levinas’s work, the fact that his language and how he uses it is an essential part of the meaning of the text, is a main thesis in Tina Chanter’s article, ‘The Betrayal of Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being*’ in which she states: ‘To fail to pay attention to the *way language is put to work* in Levinas’s philosophy is also to fall short of understanding the claim that his work makes for itself.’<sup>67</sup> [My italics.]

The question arises then, how does language operate to expose the trace of the saying? What does the performative aspect of *Otherwise than Being* help us understand about the encounter with the Other? If our goal is an ethical encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature, then we must explore the trace of the saying in the said of the written word. We will need to put the question of literature aside for now and look at what the role of philosophy is for Levinas to understand the operation of the saying. Levinas, it was noted in the Introduction, does not offer ethical rules or prescriptive statements about how we should act. We do find, in *Otherwise than Being*, a gesture toward a *way* of doing, reading and writing, philosophy. Levinas claims, ‘Everything is shown by indeed betraying its meaning, but philosophy is called upon to reduce that betrayal’

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<sup>65</sup> Davis, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> Davis, p. 72.

<sup>67</sup> Tina Chanter, ‘The Betrayal of Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas’s “Otherwise Than Being”’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 23 (1997), 65–79 (p. 67).

(*OBBE*, p. 156). I now turn to examine what Levinas means by betrayal and how philosophy can reduce it.

We already have enough information to understand the betrayal of the otherwise than being in the said. The otherwise than being, the infinite, the saying, proximity is unknowable, and unsayable by definition. It is exactly that which escapes thematisation, that which is beyond concepts and linguistic expression. The instant the otherwise than being shows itself, to use a recurring phrase from *Otherwise than Being*, the instant it becomes intelligible, it is betrayed, it becomes a being otherwise, reduced to part of the totality, or an object of my knowledge and comprehended. Ethics, the ethical encounter, is subsumed by ontology. Søren Overgaard describes the betrayal as ‘the price we have to pay if we are to speak (or write) at all’.<sup>68</sup> Levinas is well aware of the necessity of the betrayal but proposes, like Husserl before him, a reduction. Levinas’s notion of the saying has an inherent resistance or potential site of resistance to complete sublimation by the said. Although Levinas readily admits that the saying ‘expires, or abdicates’ in writing, that ‘it is necessary’ that saying is ‘thematised’ (*OBBE*, p. 43) he also states that ‘the saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said’ (*OBBE*, p. 44). The fact that the said is always to someone, always also a saying provides ‘the ethical interruption of essence that energizes the reduction’ (*OBBE*, p. 44).

Overgaard describes the reduction as ‘a procedure of “going back” from the said, in which saying is absorbed and frozen, to the saying that issued in the said – a movement back from being to the “otherwise than being”’.<sup>69</sup> This may be well and good, but in real terms, how can one ‘go back’ from the said? Surely any attempts to reduce the said will require language, and in doing so create another said, and will that said itself then need to be reduced? How does one complete the reduction, a goal Levinas identifies for philosophy, without forming statements, propositions, and drawing conclusions, all of which take place in the said? Levinas, Davis argues, is engaged in a project which is ‘bound to fail’<sup>70</sup> as he tries to explain the otherwise than being in terms which are inevitably ontological. Levinas himself describes the reduction in linguistic terms; he says: ‘the reduction

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<sup>68</sup> Søren Overgaard, ‘The Ethical Residue of Language in Levinas and Early Wittgenstein’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 33 (2007), 223–49 (p. 228).

<sup>69</sup> Overgaard, p. 229.4e

<sup>70</sup> Davis, p. 85.

of this said unfolds in stated propositions, using copulas, and virtually written, united anew into structures' (*OBBE*, p. 44).

Levinas, argues Overgaard, faces a similar objection to the sceptic who may claim 'there is no such thing as truth' which points out that the statement is put forward as a true statement, hence a counter-argument to the sceptic's claim. Likewise, Levinas posits philosophy, words, the said, as the mode of the reduction to the saying *from* the said and hence creating another said that will need to be reduced. Levinas clearly states that the reduction can only take place through 'what shows itself,' the manifestation of being in the said. He is not suggesting, 'a passage from some apparent world to a more real world,' for what presents itself as true or meaningful in the said is true and meaningful. The essence apparent in the said *is* the essence. Rather, the reduction 'is reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being' (*OBBE*, p. 45). What lies beyond being is the 'one-for-the-other involved in responsibility,' the ethical relation with an absolute Other for whom I am singularly responsible (*OBBE*, p. 45).

The saying remains as an 'echo' in the said and it is this 'truth of what does not enter into a theme... is produced out of time or in two times without entering into either of them' that the reduction seeks to go back to (*OBBE*, p. 44). The saying, although a correlative of the said, is not merely correlative. The saying is not like one side of a coin with the said as the other but is pre-originary, a condition for the possibility of language, the saying 'animates, refuses the present and manifestation, or lends itself to them only out of time' (*OBBE*, p. 44). The saying belongs in a split time, what Levinas refers to as diachrony. The saying echoes every said, the saying is that which makes the said possible, the fact that the said is spoken *to someone* but it is also primordial, originary, and as such is out of time, retained as 'a fading echo' and it is this that makes the reduction possible (*OBBE*, p. 44).

A return to Overgaard's comparison of Levinas's predicament to that of the sceptic will allow us to understand Levinas's response to such a claim and further our conception of the idea of the saying and said belonging to different times or orders. Levinas observes, according to Overgaard, that despite the standard objection to scepticism it keeps returning, undeterred. Levinas describes

scepticism as ‘insensitive to the refutation, as though the affirmation and negation did not resound in the same time’ (*OBBE*, p. 167). So, Overgaard claims, that the ‘perpetual return of skepticism testifies to the circumstance that saying and said belong to different levels and orders, to different “times”.’<sup>71</sup> Overgaard thinks Levinas is able to admit that the saying reduces the said and also unsays itself, but he is also able avoid the sceptic-type objection by arguing that the saying ‘belongs to a different order’ and hence remains ‘unaffected by this deconstruction.’<sup>72</sup> This means that Levinas can call for the said to be reduced to the saying and in doing so create another said without having to admit an inherent contradiction. Philosophy does operate in the realm of the said but it is, at the same time, able to admit the saying which simultaneously is lost in the said and calls for the said to be reduced. Davis explains how this relates to the task of philosophy for Levinas, by arguing that philosophy is unable to ‘totalise’ the world because it is itself a part of the world.<sup>73</sup> As a part of the world, the philosophical text is comprised of both saying and said. It thematises the world and this finds expression in the said, but the saying, which is both a correlative of the said and also something which belongs to another time or realm, remains as an echo or trace. Philosophy’s task, according to Levinas, is to be aware of this trace, this echo that exists beyond being and that resists philosophy’s attempts to totalise the world.

We have seen that Levinas can respond to the objection that in calling for a reduction to the saying he is in fact creating another said, itself to be reduced but the question of how exactly the said can be reduced, how the saying can be acknowledged, remains. Levinas, it has already been noted, does not offer clear propositions leading to conclusions, nor does he offer clear definitions or prescriptive statements. Instead, he revisits ideas, slowly expanding them; he works with paradox and contradiction. We should not be surprised that he does not change his style when it comes to the reduction of the said to the saying. Levinas, does however, talk about two elements with regard to the reduction of the said to saying: interruption and interpretation.

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<sup>71</sup> Overgaard, p. 230.

<sup>72</sup> Overgaard, p. 230.

<sup>73</sup> Davis, p. 90.

Interruption comes from the fact that language is always a saying (as well as a said). Every utterance is addressed to someone, to an Other outside or beyond being, a proximity or relation to the Other underscores all language events and this ethical relation cannot be thematised in a said. Levinas speaks of ‘silences, failure or delirium’ which interrupt the dialogue (*OBBE*, p. 170). He compares these interruptions to knots in the thread of discourse, ‘the interruptions of the discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again’ (*OBBE*, p. 170). There is a constant movement from said to saying and back to said. The saying interrupts the said, the fact of language occurring between speakers, the fact of an interlocutor, disrupts language as simply a system of signs or propositions that can be true or false. The interruption to the said draws attention to language as saying, the condition for the possibility for language at all, the ethical relation in proximity to an otherwise than being. Levinas includes his own text as open to interruption, ‘[a]nd I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are stated, in saying to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes’ (*OBBE*, p. 170). The saying simultaneously finds expression in a said which itself is open to interruption but according to Levinas the interruptions, which we have seen belong to another order, are ‘conserved’ in the said in which they find expression. Levinas claims, ‘[t]he reference to an interlocutor permanently breaks through the text that the discourse claims to weave in thematising and enveloping all things’ (*OBBE*, p. 170). The reduction of the said to the saying is a movement from said to saying and in the process another said is created but the break, the interruption, remains as a knot in the thread of discourse.

The second and related element that plays a part in the reduction of the said to the saying is interpretation. The fact of language, as a saying, as said *to someone* means that it is open to interpretation and this is especially the case when the language is written.<sup>74</sup> Chanter claims that philosophy must take the risk of being misunderstood otherwise it ‘reverts to a communication that takes itself to be equivalent to information, to knowledge, to a said.’<sup>75</sup> Philosophy commits its

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<sup>74</sup> More will be said in the following chapter about Levinas’s views about written language.

<sup>75</sup> Chanter, p. 72.

task to paper where the speaker does not face the interlocutor nor hear the interruptions but still must attend to the saying, to the interruption of the one who listens; failing to acknowledge the saying, to mark the text as pure said would be to deny the ethical relation that not only marks the condition for the possibility of the text but also underlies all human relations. Levinas is aware of the difficulties of committing his ideas to paper, of the possibility of his work being interpreted as pure said:

books have their fate; they belong to a world they do not include, but recognise by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forewords. They are interrupted, and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said (*OBBE*, p. 171).

Levinas, argues Davis, wants the philosophical text to be understood as not simply that which ‘transmits pre-established knowledge’ but rather that which expresses ‘its own Enigma’ and claims that if it can express this Enigma it becomes ‘a site where something happens; where my own responsibility for the Other – and for the Other’s text which I am reading – comes into play.’<sup>76</sup> The philosophical text is charged with the difficult task of being aware of its own secrets, the underlying proximity to a neighbour of the saying, its Enigma, and in doing so must attempt to attend to interruptions that mark the saying and relation with the Other.

Levinas, as mentioned earlier, can be seen to be offering a kind of performative description of the reduction of the said to the saying in *Otherwise than Being*. It has been noted that Levinas’s work is difficult to read and one reason for this is that he is not just trying to explain something unexplainable (the saying which is beyond language, or the otherwise than being which is beyond being) but he is, arguably, attempting to write a philosophical text which is both philosophical and, at the same time, a text which is aware of its function as an address, a text which attends to the interruption of the saying.<sup>77</sup> It is hard to separate the content from the form in Levinas’s work. Seán Hand makes a similar point in his article, ‘The other voice: ethics and expression in Emmanuel Levinas’.

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<sup>76</sup> Davis, p. 91.

<sup>77</sup> Davis, p. 92.

Hand claims that *Otherwise than Being*, partially as a response to Derrida's critique of *Totality and Infinity*, operates as 'testimony that is irreducible to a thematising knowledge.' He continues, 'what saves this saying [*Otherwise than Being*] from becoming in its turn another theme is that in addition to its acting in the text, it acts *upon* and *as* the text.'<sup>78</sup>

The ambiguities, paradoxes and enigma of *Otherwise than Being* continually interrupt the text's position as philosophy (when philosophy is understood as the objective search for truth). The points of occlusion, uncertainty, or frustration serve to remind the reader that the text is an address, an act of saying, as well as a said. Davis offers a similar analysis of the difficulty of Levinas's work; he claims that, 'the difficulty of the work and the problems of understanding that it poses are not tangential to the point; they *are* the point.'<sup>79</sup> Davis points to the text's 'intense reflection on its own status, limits and ambiguities' and claims this reflection happens alongside 'the ethical urgency of an address to the Other.'<sup>80</sup> To illustrate his point Davis quotes a lengthy passage from Chapter V of *Otherwise than Being* in which Levinas draws attention to the text as address to someone, 'The very discussion which we are at this moment elaborating about signification...' and goes on to question its status, 'a discourse that means to be philosophy'. Levinas then questions his own thesis by raising the skeptic-type objections discussed earlier, '[b]y the very fact of formulating statements, is not the universality of the thematised, that is, of being, confirmed by the project of the present discussion...Does this discourse remain then coherent and philosophical? These are familiar objections!' (*OBBE*, p. 155). The intense self-reflection of the above passage works to unsettle the straightforward communication of statements and their claim to truth which one would usually associate with philosophy. By calling attention to the work as an address, communicated to someone, and anticipation of objections raised by that someone, and the questioning of the work's status as philosophy, Levinas is trying to mark his work with the trace of the saying.

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<sup>78</sup> Seán Hand, 'The Other Voice: Ethics and Expression in Emmanuel Levinas', *History of the Human Sciences*, 10 (1997), 56–68 (p. 59).

<sup>79</sup> Davis, p. 91.

<sup>80</sup> Davis, p. 91.

The following passage, from Chapter II, is characteristic of Levinas's writing style and will be shown to work in similar ways to the passage Davis quotes:

But it is not necessary to take literally the metaphor of the interpellation of the subject by being which manifests itself. The manifestation of being, the appearing, is indeed the primary event, but *the very primacy of the primary is in the presence of the present*. A past more ancient than any present, a past which was never present and whose anarchical antiquity was never given in the play of dissimulations and manifestations, a past whose *other* signification remains to be described, signifies over and beyond the manifestation of being, which thus would convey but a moment of this signifying signification (*OBBE*, p. 24).

The first sentence begins with a conjunction, 'but', which acts to interrupt the previous statement. He immediately offers a contradiction, telling us we need not take literally a metaphor which by definition is not usually taken literally. Levinas then repeats the term 'manifest', at first being 'manifests itself' then becomes the 'manifestation of being' which is interrupted by a clause, 'the appearing'. The listing of synonyms is a recurring stylistic point of Levinas's writing and often serves to subtly shift or modify the meaning of the preceding terms. He also frequently uses terms which are not usually recognised as synonyms and in doing so he takes everyday words and stretches and skews their meaning, Davis describes Levinas's work as having 'terminological proliferation'.<sup>81</sup> In the above passage he repeats the word 'primary/primacy' three times and 'present' twice to create the tautological statement 'the very primacy of the primary is in the presence of the present' which itself interrupts the beginning of the statement with the repetition of the conjunction, 'but'. Language here folds back over itself, like the folding of steel, creating layers of meaning but meaning that does not progress forward in the manner of propositions and conclusions but rather a strengthening and eventual undermining of sense.

The repetitions and slight alterations or modifications of meaning point to the interruption of the said; the trace of the saying can be seen to operate in the

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<sup>81</sup> Davis, p. 91.

insistent desire to be heard and understood marked by the repetition but which at the same time undermines the reader's ability to understand. Repetition continues in the following sentence of the usually-opposite terms 'past' and 'present'. He presents a paradox 'a past more ancient than any present, a past which was never present' again, stopping the reader in her tracks. Through the folds of language the original subject of the sentence becomes lost. One must back-track and ask 'what this past refers to?' and is perhaps surprised to find that we began talking about the manifestation of being and we can then track the manifestation of being through the passage. This appearing of being is a 'primary event' which is a 'past more ancient than any present' and this appearing of being was 'never given in the play of dissimulation and manifestation'. The apparent contradiction of a manifestation (of being) which was never given in manifestation (and the play between revealing and concealing) is not helped greatly by the following statement that it is a 'past whose *other* signification remains to be described, signifies over and beyond the manifestation of being, which thus would convey but a moment of this signifying signification.' Levinas again bombards the reader with repetition in his attempt to speak the unspeakable, to give voice to the echo of the saying in the said. Passages like the one we have turned our attention to here are common throughout *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas's language is exact, deliberate and stretches meaning to its limits in its attempt to both give voice to the otherwise than being and to produce a reduction of the said to the saying.

The result of Levinas's textuality is a lot of work for the reader. Sentences are so frequently interrupted by secondary clauses, lists, repetitions and words used out of their usual contexts that the reader must keep returning to the beginning of the sentence and trace the progression of the subject through its modifications to the conclusion. The reader is asked to take a leap of faith when Levinas speaks of that which cannot find expression in words, the unthematizable. Both Davis and Hand address the result of the work for the reader. Davis argues that 'interrogating Levinas's text becomes a process of self-interrogation'.<sup>82</sup> He claims that as the reader struggles with specific issues of understanding of particular passages she finds herself also confronted 'with more fundamental questions: "What does Levinas mean by responsibility?" slips into "[w]hat is my

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<sup>82</sup> Davis, p. 91.

responsibility, how am I responsible for my neighbour?'"<sup>83</sup> The claim he is making is that as the reader works to produce meaning with the text she also is forced to reflect upon how this is applicable to her. The reader is forced to take a position of responsibility for Levinas's text as she is confronted with trying to understand Levinas's description of responsibility for the Other. Hand makes a very similar point when he says, 'The vocabulary, form of composition and mode of address of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* strain against their inherited limits. And the work this obliges the reader to undergo is, of course, an ethical necessity, given the work's message.'<sup>84</sup>

### **Encountering the Other: A summary and application to literature**

Levinas has provided us with a phenomenological description of what an encounter with the Other looks like. It is useful at this point to briefly highlight the main features of this encounter as a summary before we sketch out how it could be applied to literature. Levinas has developed an ethical account that he places at the centre of philosophical enquiry. He identifies the Other with the infinite. The Other is infinitely Other, the absolute Other. By this we understand the Other to be unknowable. Levinas explains that for the Other to be absolutely Other she cannot become a theme or item of my knowledge; to know the Other is to reduce her to an object of knowledge, to bring her back into the realm of what Levinas calls 'the same' which is the totality of my world. This leads to the question about how any kind of encounter can occur without the Other being reduced to an instance of the same. Levinas finds an answer in discourse.

The Other manifests itself as 'face', which Levinas characterises as expression. The face appears as a command and plea. On the one hand it commands not to kill and on the other pleads for the one to share her world with it. Levinas argues that the one who encounters the Other becomes singularly responsible for that Other. I cannot choose whether to become responsible to this Other or not, I am elected. This creates an unequal relationship where I am fully

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<sup>83</sup> Davis, p. 91.

<sup>84</sup> Hand, p. 59.

responsible for the Other but she is not responsible for me. I respond to the face of the Other with generosity, by recognising the Other I give up sole possession of my world and share it with her. I may, of course, decide to respond with violence and even kill the other before me but I realise I can never kill the Other. Levinas develops his understanding of language in his later work where he formulates the terms saying and said. He argues that language is comprised of these two aspects with the said naming language as we usually think of it – grammatical rules, syntax, statements that can be true or false. The saying is the other aspect of language and one which is forgotten. The saying is proximity, the fact that language is spoken to someone. It is the condition for the possibility for language at all and as proximity to the Other it is ethical in nature. The saying always finds itself congealed into a said and because of this the saying is overlooked, it can only ever be an echo or a trace in the statements, phrases and discourse it provides the condition for the possibility for. Levinas argues that the goal for philosophy is to reduce the said to the saying. He thinks attention should be paid to the traces of the saying, philosophy ought to be aware of the interruption of the saying which disrupt the discourse's claims to universal truth.

With the outline above we can now apply Levinas's description of the ethical encounter to interpretation of texts to sketch a phenomenological description of an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature. There appears to be some definite points of correspondence between Levinas's ethical work and the interpretation of literature which is evident in the increasing number of critics who apply Levinas's work to literature. More will be said in the following chapter about the application of Levinas's work by other critics, but for now I will simply sketch what the encounter with the Other in literature will look like from a Levinasian point of view and raise questions that will need to be addressed at a later point in the thesis.

The first step in applying Levinasian ethics to literature involves asking who the Other is. The question, at first glance, might seem unnecessary but we have at least three possibilities: the characters in the text; the author; and the text itself. The question will be taken up later in the thesis and at this stage it will suffice to assume that *at least* one of the above options *could* stand in the position

of the Other. This is a controversial claim and many objections can be raised to each option but for argument's sake these will be put aside for now. So, there is an Other to be encountered, be it character, author or text. This Other must speak to me, call me and imbue me with responsibility toward it. This is less controversial. When I pick up a book I find myself in a position in which I must respond. Sure, I can put the book down but this in itself is a response and like Levinas's subject who finds she could kill the other who stands before her, she can never kill the Other and will find herself changed by each and every encounter with others. The characters, author and text make demands upon me. The characters and text require my interpretation to bring them to life, to make meaning of the words on the page. To interpret the text, to respond to this Other, I must be willing to be open to its otherness and share my world with the world of the characters or text. If the Other is the author, which would be a rather unfashionable position in this post-post-modern context, I still find myself responsible and feel the author's demands. The author requires me to read the words she is not present to speak. To interpret and complete the meaning of her work and I am still required to respond with generosity in sharing my world as I work with the author's words to create meaning. The responsibility I am bestowed with by the literary text/character/author is, like Levinas's description of the ethical relation, asymmetrical. I am completely responsible for the text I am reading and interpreting but the text has no responsibility toward me.<sup>85</sup>

The focus on discourse and language in Levinas's account of the encounter with the Other only strengthens the argument for borrowing his phenomenological framework and applying it to literary interpretation. Recall that the encounter with the Other is only possible through language. It is language that allows the one to be in proximity to the Other without destroying her alterity. The text, like the face, is expression. My only experience of the Other in literature, be it text, character or author, is through language. My access to the text is purely through the words on the page and the nature of literature means that there is always something that escapes definition as I work to interpret these words. Whether we think of language in Levinasian terms of the saying which leaves its

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<sup>85</sup> For ease of expression I will refer to interpretation of the text (rather than list all three options – text, character, author) in this section but it should be noted that the question of 'who is the Other I encounter in literature?' is far from answered at this point.

trace on the said of the written words but at the same time exceeds that trace and works to interrupt the straightforward meaning of the said with an ethical dimension or Jacques Derrida's *différance* in which meaning is never present but rather infinitely deferred and marked by difference, current thinking about language involves a sense of alterity inherent within language itself.

This alterity can be seen in the way meaning overflows or goes beyond all interpretation, there is always something (the saying for Levinas; or the absent terms that give the expressed signifier meaning or the chain of signifiers for Derrida) that goes beyond attempts to express understanding or meaning, and for Levinas this is the absolute Other. So, the text bestows me with responsibility through language and I respond to the call of the text (to read, interpret, make meaning) through language. I interpret the text by writing a response, an article, essay or another literary text. I discuss the text with friends, students, colleagues, or strangers. An ethical interpretation, using Levinas's phenomenological description, would open my world to the text, make room for it and would not attempt to *understand* the text and make it a theme and as such an object of my knowledge. The demand here is huge. One must take full responsibility for the text and in doing so must *respond* but, at the same time, the text cannot be *understood*, to understand the text would be to make it a theme and destroy its alterity. At this point most theorists, readers and lovers of literature would object. Understanding the text is one of our major goals, it is what drives interpretation and is explicit in the meaning of interpretation. Chapter Three will go into more detail about whether we can conserve the alterity of the text whilst still producing a response or interpretation and further investigate the ethical demand of this theory as a tool for assessing literary interpretations. Levinas, in his prescription for philosophy, offers a possible method for reading texts without reducing their otherness. Levinas argues that the goal for philosophy is to reduce the said to the saying; to read paying attention to ways in which language, as proximity or address, interrupt the said. So, an ethical interpretation of a literary text may be one that looks for the ways in which the text is an address, ways in which the text as proximity is beyond understanding.

This is a basic phenomenological framework that will form the benchmark for the continued investigation into the thesis question. We must identify *who* the Other is that is encountered through the mediation of literature but we have established that the encounter must not destroy this Other's alterity. The level of demand is high with the one who reads taking full responsibility for the textual Other, a responsibility that cannot be delegated. The literary text designates the responsibility by calling the reader, electing her and bestowing her with the responsibility for reading and bringing the work to life. Like Levinas, we face the problem of trying to say something about that which cannot be understood. If we are to encounter the Other through literature, then we cannot turn the Other into an object of our understanding because then we would only encounter our own consciousness, our own knowledge. Levinas's view of the goal of philosophy, to reduce the said to the saying, gives a possible point of departure for a way to approach literary texts without reducing the Other to another instance of the same. Chapter Three will take up the hermeneutical question of *how* we can interpret or respond to the literary text without making it an object and reducing its alterity.

## Chapter Two: The problem of literature

### Introduction

The previous chapter outlined a phenomenological framework for an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature based on the philosophical writings of Emmanuel Levinas. I have drawn attention to the many points of correspondence between Levinas's work and literary interpretation, such as the centrality of language, the asymmetrical relationship between self and Other, and the sense of responsibility toward the Other, and how these points of confluence have resulted in many critics turning to Levinas to provide a theoretical basis for ethical reading. This chapter will discuss how some of these critics use Levinas in their interpretations or theoretical writing. The focus will be on how these theorists have appropriated Levinas's writing and the limitations of these approaches to Levinasian readings of literary texts.

I argue that there are two ways in which Levinas has been adopted by theorists. The first, and most common, is as a tool to explore themes or explain characters, relationships, and motives. This approach involves texts being explored in a Levinasian sense; the goal is to produce a Levinasian reading of the work. The second is to *read* in a Levinasian way. The themes need not be typically Levinasian but the way in which the text is approached will be ethical. The second approach has been considered to some extent by philosophers in their reading of philosophical texts but is much less common in literary studies. I will turn my attention to the first approach before discussing the second.

The second half of this chapter will be concerned with the problem of literature for Levinas. Levinas takes a view of representation and rhetorical language that results in his assertion that works of art, and we include literary works of art in this, have a different ontological status to objects in reality. Levinas considers artworks as pure representation and argues that they signify the absence of that which they represent. This means that Levinas sees works of art as having a lesser ontological status than objects in the real world. Works of art are argued to be mere replicas that rely upon their signified for their truth value. The

mediated relation to truth that marks works of art precludes them from the encounter with the Other, which is characterised by immediacy and presence. I then look at Robert Eaglestone's argument aimed at justifying the application of Levinas's philosophy to the study of literature. Eaglestone is unique in literary criticism for acknowledging that there is a problem to be dealt with but I move on to argue that Eaglestone's argument does not meet the challenge. I suggest that Eaglestone mistakenly draws a break between the Levinas's early work, namely texts produced up to *Totality and Infinity* and the later *Otherwise than Being*<sup>1</sup>.

### **Levinas and literature thus far**

Levinasian ethics have emerged as a popular theoretical base for reading works as diverse as Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Janet Frame's *The Adaptable Man*. There are common threads to Levinasian readings of these diverse works. The most obvious and common step theorists take, to produce their Levinasian readings, is to identify a character who occupies the role of the Other. The Levinasian Other is one that escapes definition, she cannot be understood, or grasped as an object of knowledge and inspires a sense of infinite responsibility in those she faces. This understanding of the Other provides a theoretical basis for looking at characters in new ways. Previous definitions for 'the other' relied upon the relation to hegemonic power structures, as in the case of the post-colonial, feminist, queer or Marxist other; the other is demarcated as other because of its difference to the powerful or centre. Levinas's Other is not defined by what it is *not*, in which the focus is as much upon the powerful or the centre as it is upon the Other but rather the Levinasian Other is remarkable for the way in which it resists simple binary oppositions; the Other is Other independent of its relation to the central power structures. For Levinas, rather than being defined by the centre, the self only emerges as a result of contact with the Other.

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<sup>1</sup> I am restricting my treatment of readers of Levinas considerably. Several philosophers have given the connection between Levinas and literature considerable thought, particularly Jill Robbins, Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley and although they provide insight into my reading and discussion there is not space to engage with them in depth. Likewise, Maurice Blanchot is probably the most important reader of Levinas but for this project his work is placed to one side to allow a fuller exploration of the possible connection between Levinas and Gadamer's hermeneutics.

James Kearney, in his 2012 essay, “‘This Is Above All Strangeness’: *King Lear*, Ethics, and the Phenomenology of Recognition’ draws upon Levinas to explain the effect of Edgar as Poor Tom in the play; Poor Tom is a character Kearney identifies as borrowed from romance but one, Kearney argues, who occupies the role of the Levinasian Other. Kearney identifies Poor Tom’s effect as that of the stranger or the abject, which are terms used by Levinas to describe the Other. Kearney notes that the dramatic irony accompanying Lear’s first encounter with Poor Tom where the audience knows that there is more to the figure on stage than Lear recognises, has a similarity to Levinas’s notion of the infinite with regard to the Other; the Other exceeds what I can know of him. Lear sees an abject creature but the audience is aware that this creature is no other than Edgar, rightful heir to the Earl of Gloucester.

Kearney here illustrates a common theoretical move in producing a Levinasian reading. He aligns a character with the Other. Kearney identifies two aspects of Poor Tom/Edgar as fitting Levinas’s characterisation of the Other; Poor Tom is a stranger, abject and there is more to him than meets the eye, the audience knows that he is really Edgar in disguise. The identification of a character with these superficial types of descriptions of the Levinasian Other can almost be seen as an essential move in producing Levinasian readings of literary texts. Francesco Bigagli identifies Bartleby as representing the Other in his reading of Herman Melville’s ‘Bartleby, a scrivener: a Story of Wall-Street’. In his article, “‘And Who art Thou, Boy?’: Face-to-Face with Bartleby; Or Levinas and the Other’ Bigagli draws upon Levinas to provide a theoretical framework for his reading, building upon Jeffrey A. Weinstock’s claim that it is Bartleby’s ‘otherness’ that is crucial to understanding the ethical obligations one has towards Bartleby. In the second section of his article, ‘The Guest,’ Bigagli focusses his attention on the figure of Bartleby and tries to make a case for Bartleby occupying the role of the Other. Bigagli talks about Bartleby as inviting and eluding interpretation or knowledge, which he attributes to his status as Other. Bigagli also characterises Bartleby as occupying the role of the face, ‘Bartleby’s face speaks to the lawyer. It calls out to him.’<sup>2</sup> Bigagli names Bartleby as Other and justifies this by aligning

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<sup>2</sup> Francesco Bigagli, “‘And Who Art Thou, Boy?’: Face-to-Face with Bartleby; or Levinas and the Other’, *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, 12 (2010), 37–53 (p. 41).

his strangeness and incomprehensibility with Levinas's description of the Other as infinite and unknowable.

Josephine Carter also begins her reading with this common theoretical move and distinguishes a Levinasian Other figure in Janet Frame's *The Adaptable Man*. Carter argues that the ghost of Botti Julio embodies the role of the Other. Carter's reading establishes Frame's novel as a reversal of typical ghost-story narratives in which the ghost appears as a temporary fissure in the everyday world. In this traditional type of ghost story the focus is on the person who is haunted and how they are able to 'restore order'<sup>3</sup> once the haunting is resolved. Frame's story, by contrast, involves a ghost that cannot be understood or grasped, much like the Levinasian Other. Traditionally the ghost interrupts the everyday world of its hauntee to complete some unfinished business, but a ghost, like Frame's, that is beyond comprehension, ungraspable, cannot be understood and therefore cannot be placated. Carter claims, 'Janet Frame's ghost cannot be comprehended, appeased or eradicated once for all.'<sup>4</sup> Carter also draws attention to the fact that Julio's ghost, like the Levinasian Other, is especially characterised by the face, is neither absent nor present.

Simple Levinasian readings may not move beyond establishing a character as Other, Kearney's reading of *King Lear* is one that does not progress much beyond this kind of reading. Kearney takes a few central terms and concepts from Levinas's work, particularly from work up to, and including, *Totality and Infinity*, to explain the role of Poor Tom as well as Lear's reaction upon meeting Poor Tom. Kearney borrows from Levinas the terms 'abject', 'stranger' and 'Other' and applies them to Edgar disguised as Poor Tom. At first glance these seem to describe Poor Tom well. He is disguised as a beggar and Lear's Fool initially does not recognise him as of this world and fears him as 'a spirit!' (III, 4, 41). Poor Tom appears as completely Other before Kent encourages him out of the shelter. Poor Tom appears as in need. Lear recognises Poor Tom's impoverished state, asking 'and art thou come to this?' (III, 4, 47) Lear also observes that Tom would be better off dead, '[t]hou wert better in a grave' (III, 4, 98). Although not

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<sup>3</sup> Josephine Carter, 'An Other Form of Ghost Story: Janet Frame's *The Adaptable Man*', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory*, 13 (2011), 45–60 (p. 45).

<sup>4</sup> Carter, p. 45.

discussed by Kearney, further strength to the argument of Poor Tom as Other could be given by his rambling speech, ‘O do, de, do, de, do, de. Bless thee from whirlwind, star-blasting, and taking!’ (III, 4, 56). Poor Tom speaks; he addresses the party of Lear, the Fool and Kent, but does not offer a coherent Said. A case could be made for some of his rambling and ranting to be read as examples of Saying in which proximity is experienced but meaning remains evasive.

Kearney identifies Poor Tom as occupying the role of the Other as there is more to him than Lear sees. At the same time, Kearney correctly notes that Lear is unable to see Poor Tom at all, seeing instead merely a reflection of himself, ‘[d]idst thou give all to thy daughters?’ (III, 4, 47) ‘What, has his daughters brought him to this pass?’ (III, 4, 60) And, even after being reassured that Poor Tom has no daughters, Lear still asserts, ‘[n]othing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters.’ (III, 4, 67). Lear does not experience Poor Tom as the infinite Other but as a mirror to his own suffering. When Lear does *see* Tom he sees not an infinite Other but ‘a poor, bare, forked animal’ (III, 4, 104) which he identifies as ‘the thing itself’ and ‘unaccommodated man’ (III, 4, 103). Lear does not see an unknowable Other who exceeds definition but rather a stripped bare creature which presents itself as knowable, ‘the thing itself’, a thing or object that is exactly as it appears. Kearney would respond to remind us of the dramatic irony of the scene. Lear may not see Edgar as he looks upon Poor Tom but the audience is well aware that there is more to the beggar than meets the eye. Does the fact that Poor Tom is Edgar, and as such overflows the figure of Poor Tom, mean that the audience experiences him as an infinite Other?

The audience is aware that the apparent madman is in fact the dispossessed heir of Gloucester as they witnessed Edmund’s ruse to frame him and his ensuing banishment. Shakespeare’s audiences, both those contemporaneous with the work and subsequent, would be familiar with the trope of disguise and mistaken identity. The audience does experience dramatic irony, they know something those on stage do not, but it is more likely that they experience Poor Tom as Edgar/Poor Tom, a single character, than as some unknowable, infinite Other. The fact that the audience *knows* something the players do not confirms the *identity* of Poor Tom/Edgar. The sense of knowing the *truth* behind the figure of Poor Tom gives the audience a sense of power in their knowledge; they know the secret and

in knowing this they feel they know the character fully. It is not an experience of an unknowable Other but almost the opposite.

Kearney's identification of Poor Tom as fulfilling the role of the Other, in a Levinasian sense, has further problems and these kinds of problems are applicable to other Levinasian readings. Kearney's main arguments for associating Poor Tom with the Other are his appearance as a beggar, 'abject,' and 'stranger' and that he exceeds the appearance as he is really Edgar, son of Gloucester. I have raised problems with the latter argument above, and relying on appearance is overly simplistic and depends upon a very literal reading of Levinas.

Bigagli and Carter both put forward a more sophisticated and thorough Levinasian frame for their readings. Bigagli draws upon the notion of hospitality from both Levinas and Derrida. Bigagli wants to explore the relation between Bartleby as Other and guest and the lawyer-narrator as self/same and host. Bigagli develops his case for Bartleby occupying the double, though related role, of Other and guest by considering the first contact between the scrivener and the lawyer. The lawyer initially sees Bartleby in much the same way he sees all people, in terms of his utility, which is noted by Bigagli: '[l]ike Turkey and Nippers, Bartleby is perceived through the lens of utility'<sup>5</sup>. This is in conflict with Bigagli's assertion that Bartleby represents the face, in the Levinasian sense. If the story strictly followed Levinas's ethical account the lawyer would have immediately found himself responsible for Bartleby, and found his sense of self questioned. He would have felt Bartleby's demand not to kill and plea for the lawyer to share his world with him, instead we discover that the lawyer sees Bartleby as a tool and attempts to minimise contact by placing him behind a screen. Bigagli draws upon Derrida at this point to explain the apparent problem. For hospitality to be possible, the argument runs, a distance must be maintained between the host and the guest, 'retaining mastery of the house prevents hospitality from turning into its direct opposite.'<sup>6</sup> The host cannot exhibit hospitality unless she is in control of the house, unless the house is hers to give. Bigagli goes on to query whether hospitality is not, in fact, the complete 'giving up the whole of oneself to the

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<sup>5</sup> Bigagli, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Bigagli, p. 41.

stranger?’<sup>7</sup> The conclusion Bigagli reaches in his contemplation of hospitality is that the narrator, as host, must welcome Bartleby ‘without expectation of any return.’<sup>8</sup>

Bigagli, in his characterisation of Bartleby as Other, face and guest, illustrates some common problems with these types of Levinasian readings. He tries to skew the text to fit the interpretation he wants to give. Bartleby does not comfortably fit the description of Levinasian Other in the early stages of the story yet Bigagli insists that Bartleby occupies the role of the face, ‘Bartleby’s face speaks to the lawyer. It calls out to him.’<sup>9</sup> When Bigagli admits that the lawyer attempts to restrict the ‘mobility’ of the face<sup>10</sup> it is clear that Bigagli sees that the lawyer, at least initially, does not respond to the Other. Rather than abandon this line of investigation, Bigagli employs another theorist, Derrida, to attempt to explain how the apparent contradiction can be resolved. Although apt, the discussion regarding hospitality does not help explain why the encounter between the lawyer and Bartleby, at least initially, does not entail any responsibility from the lawyer to Bartleby. Even if the lawyer needs to maintain control of his house, so to speak, to be able to offer hospitality to the stranger, he must recognise the stranger as an Other rather than a tool. The lawyer, at least initially, certainly does not welcome Bartleby ‘without expectation of any return,’ in fact, quite the opposite is true. The narrator meets Bartleby after placing an advertisement requesting applicants for employment. Bartleby is not a guest, he is an employee. He states that he hoped Bartleby’s ‘sedate’ nature would ‘operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers’<sup>11</sup> and moreover places Bartleby’s desk nearby ‘in case any trifling thing was to be done.’<sup>12</sup> The narrator is singularly interested in what Bartleby can do for him. Bigagli brushes over the aspects of Melville’s text that do not fit his interpretation and hides apparent problems with more theoretical framings.

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<sup>7</sup> Bigagli, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Bigagli, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Bigagli, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Bigagli had earlier identified the restriction of the mobility of the face as rendering the face ‘mute’, in Levinas’s words.

<sup>11</sup> Herman Melville, *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (New York: The Modern Library, 1952), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Melville, p. 11.

Carter can also be seen to emphasise aspects of the text that fit her interpretation and minimise those that may cause problems. Her argument has two strands; the first looking at a form of haunting she claims is caused by spectral disturbances of vision. She is inspired by Robert Eaglestone's notion of 'humanism beyond humanism' which links this to the questioning of the ego by the Other in Levinas. Carter's assertion is that the visual disturbances mark a change in the way the characters see the world and in doing so interrupt the ego's self-identity. The point of Eaglestone's first strand, and Carter's argument here, is to create a different notion of the ego and its relation with others to construct a humanism beyond humanism or an account of justice centred on the Other, based on Levinas's ethics. She maintains 'these metaphors of disruption reveal the vulnerability of the ego's presence.'<sup>13</sup> Carter asserts that these metaphors disrupt the characters' self-identity with a reorientation towards the Other but does not attend to ways in which the novel presents the characters as secure in their self.

Aisley features twice in Carter's argument. Neither visual disturbance has much effect upon Aisley's sense of self. The shadow on his lung *confirms* rather than questions his identity as someone who fails to 'move with the times' his illness being described as unfashionable and he is rebuked by his sister-in-law as being 'out of touch' as 'no-one these days suffered from t.b.'<sup>14</sup> The second 'haunting' Aisley experiences is a speck in his vision that occludes his vision of God. Does the movement of God, or the recognition of the speck as stain, rather than God, cause a disruption to Aisley's ego, or challenge his identity? One could imagine a significant identity crisis as a result of a failure of faith but this does not seem to be the case with Aisley Maude. Aisley, at times, claims that he is more concerned with his apparent tendencies to be old-fashioned than God and at others times he considers himself depressed, obsessed with God and ill at ease. Throughout the novel he continues to give the appearance of continued faith and apart from the occasional sense of depression Aisley does not seem to question his own sense of self. In fact, he seems *more* focussed on his identity and what others think of him. One gets the impression that Aisley has a clear sense of self, one that

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<sup>13</sup> Carter, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Frame, *The Adaptable Man* (Auckland: Vintage, 1993), p. 16.

he feels others do not know or understand; depths that are hidden by his collar. He ponders:

What would Jenny and Alwyn think, he wondered, if they knew I read *Wordsworth*? I, who have lived in the city, walking beside houses, parked cars, railway lines, bridges, factories; and not once thinking, when a car passed, driven erratically, ‘Ah, the Ford is happy, full of delight.’... Surely it is curious, Aisley thought, to argue that hares, roses, trees are alive while cars, factories, television aerials are not?<sup>15</sup>

Aisley concedes to himself that his ‘fondness’ for Wordsworth is a part of his old-fashioned nature<sup>16</sup> and looks to what others, Jenny and Alwyn, would think about him if they knew more about his personal life, likes and dislikes; looking to others brings Aisley back to his self, to a confirmation of his ego rather than an interruption by an unknowable Other. Rather than suffering a sense of a fractured or interrupted ego, Aisley is very aware of his self and sees it as a unified whole. He may not like or be comfortable with every aspect of himself but he does not struggle to say ‘I’ to indicate a complete and present ego. This is more evident later in the novel when the family is discussing Alwyn’s impending twenty-first birthday. Aisley finds himself ‘longing to talk – not of Alwyn, but of himself when he was Alwyn’s age.’<sup>17</sup> Aisley wants to assert his identity and does not seem to find it questioned, fractured or disrupted but perhaps considers others do not see his full identity:

If only I hadn’t become so determined, Aisley thought. Everybody listen, listen to me, I’m not going to preach a sermon, I’ve lost the urge to preach, I want you to know, here, now, that when I was twenty-one I thought I’d be a poet. *I* have been twenty-one in my life as well as you, Alwyn. *I* was a young man. *I. I.* Life was not much fun, but who wanted fun, I, I, I.<sup>18</sup>

Aisley repeats the first person personal pronoun, asserting *his* identity, *his* ego, even in the light of his loss of faith. This is reminiscent of the novel’s prologue in

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<sup>15</sup> Frame, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Frame, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> Frame, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Frame, p. 131.

which each character introduces herself with ‘I, ...’<sup>19</sup> culminating in the repeated pronoun:

I, I, I, I, I, I, ...

I, I, I, I, I, I, ...<sup>20</sup>

Each character firmly states ‘I’, each assert their identity, their ego whole and uninterrupted in the single letter, ‘I’. Each character, like Aisley in the above section, clamours to assert their part of the world, their ego, to others likewise consumed with their own lives, details that Carter omits to strengthen her argument.

Many more examples, from texts considered here as well as others, could be given of readings that either overly-simplify Levinas’s theory or that omit or skew aspects of the literary work being read to produce a stronger argument or reading. Of course, this is not just the case with Levinasian readings. I will consider the series of omissions surrounding Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’ in Chapter Six. I would go so far as to claim that I cannot think of any theoretical reading, based upon writings from another discipline, be it political, (for example Marxism), feminist (such as Julia Kristeva or Luce Irigaray) or psychoanalytic (Freudian or Lacanian) that could not face the same charges. Jacques Derrida calls these ‘violent’ readings and this very claim, that one reads violently, is in part what inspires my line of questioning, how *do* we read ethically?

### **Reading: some problems and thoughts**

The standard Levinasian reading attempts to apply features of Levinas’s ethics to literary works. I claim that this kind of reading results in a violent or unethical reading insofar as either Levinas’s ethics must be overly simplified or taken too literally or the text being read must be manipulated by omissions or exaggerated significance of certain details to fit the theory, or both. I have already noted that this is not a problem that is specific to Levinasian readings. Anytime a theoretical

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<sup>19</sup> Frame, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Frame, p. 6.

framework is applied to a text a negotiation occurs between the text and the framing by the reader. Unless a literary text has been written specifically to illustrate or explore the ideas of the theorist there will never be a perfect match.

If this is a common concern for all readings based on a theoretical perspective, is it really a problem? I contend the answer to this question depends on the *purpose* of the reading. I see the potential purposes of reading a literary text from a certain theoretical perspective as falling under one of two categories: to illustrate the theory itself or to explore new, previously hidden interpretations or meanings of the literary text. If one reads with the former purpose then the skewing of the literary text may not matter. If the purpose is to give an accessible and concrete illustration of an abstract concept then taking a section of the literary text out of context, omitting sections that do not mesh with the theory or otherwise twisting the text will not necessarily affect how well the piece of literature demonstrates the theory under consideration. On the other hand, one could imagine a philosophical argument that *relies* upon a reading of a literary text, and in this case an honest<sup>21</sup> or comprehensive reading of the literary text would be necessary.

The more common purpose of reading with a theoretical lens is to bring new, previously overlooked, meaning, significance or interpretations to the text. The definition of literary theory is fiercely debated, and by implication so is its purpose, which is subject to less direct discussion. Literary theory is generally accepted to include attempts to understand ‘how language and other systems of signs provide frameworks which determine how we read, and more generally, how we make sense of experience’.<sup>22</sup> By employing a theoretical framework, readers are making a choice and statement, at least implicitly, about how we can understand or perhaps, best read, a given work. I contend the problems identified with common applications of theory to literature are a concern for those interested in this end. If one wants to offer an interpretation of a text, omitting sections that do not mesh with the theory, without acknowledgement, will not provide a comprehensive interpretation or understanding of the text in question. Even if one

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<sup>21</sup> For want of a better word.

<sup>22</sup> *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 1.

adheres to the view that there is not a fixed meaning to any text, but rather all literary works are open to multiple interpretations, keeping in mind the pluralist nature of literary theory itself, each interpretation or perspective of the text ought to work with the text's frame and be attentive to ways in which the work may resist the reading if they are to say anything of worth about the text or about how it should be read. One can imagine limiting the application of a theoretical point of view to one aspect of the text but if that reading is contradicted by other elements in the work then most would agree the reading is compromised.

There is a further concern with the application of Levinas's ethics in a way that results in the skewing of the text, by exaggeration of some features and omission of others. The very process of fixing meaning with reference to a known point is analogous to reducing the Other to the same. The theoretical perspective that frames the reading can be seen to act like Levinas's notion of the same or the ego. The reader attempts to understand everything in the text in terms of the theoretical point of view. Elements that appear 'other' are either omitted or made to fit the schema in spite of their resistance to this reduction. If one comes to read with a theoretical framework then one cannot help but look for elements that fit the frame and attempt to minimise the features that seem Other.

This raises another concern when utilising a theorist, such as Levinas to help interpret literary texts. There is an implicit reading of the theorist in every interpretation. In much the same way that a literary text can be skewed to fit a theorist's work, the interpretation also risks a violent reading of the theorist. In order to mesh the literary text with the theoretical frame, one may exaggerate, misinterpret or omit sections of the theorist's writing to build a stronger interpretation. This, of course, raises further questions. Does the reader of literature have the same obligations to produce an honest or ethical reading of the theorist they employ as we contend they have toward the literary text? What relation do we see between the theorist's work and the application of this work to a literary text and the resulting interpretation? These, I argue, are very important questions that have not yet been considered at length in the field of literary criticism.

## Reading like an ethical philosopher

The beginning of this chapter stated that there are two ways of applying Levinas's ethical work to the field of literary criticism. In the above sections I have considered ways in which Levinasian themed readings are produced, primarily identifying aspects of literary texts that resonate with Levinasian ethics. I have demonstrated a couple of problems that this kind of reading faces. Bearing in mind the considerable problems for those wanting to apply Levinas to literary criticism I now turn to the second approach I outlined in the introduction to this chapter which is to *read* in a Levinasian way.

In Chapter One I gave a summary of Levinas's philosophical account of the encounter with the Other and I return now to develop the notion of reading in a Levinasian way. Chapter One draws mainly upon Levinas's phenomenological account of the encounter with the Other in *Totality and Infinity* and his deepening preoccupation with language and its role in the ethical encounter in *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*. To date, most writers look to the later work and the concepts of the saying and the said when considering the project of reading in a Levinasian style. Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being*, I argued, offers something close to a goal for philosophy, to reduce the said to the saying. He urges philosophy to perform a reduction and attend to ways in which the saying echoes in the said.

Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, in their introduction to the collection of essays, *Re-Reading Levinas*, ask the same question that guides this thesis. They ask if the response and responsibility that arise from the face-to-face encounter with the Other 'apply beyond the face-to-face, understood empirically, to the relation a reader might have with a text?'<sup>23</sup> They ponder the possibility that the 'reinscription' of the encounter with the Other in the saying could suggest the prospect of a Levinasian hermeneutics, a way of reading and understanding texts in a way that is true to the spirit of Levinas's ethical project. They propose that the

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, 'Introduction', in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *Studies in Continental Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1991), pp. xi – xviii (p. xi).

mode of this hermeneutics would be the ‘readiness’ to re-read.<sup>24</sup> The desire to re-read suggests an unending process, where one does not simply read to *understand*, to gain the one true meaning of the text, and then stop, ‘satisfied that one had finished reading.’<sup>25</sup>

Bernasconi and Critchley’s purpose is not to answer this question, their interest lies in re-reading Levinas and justifying why Levinas needs to be re-read, but they do hypothesise about what a re-reading of Levinas might involve. The first impulse is to contemplate a reading that ‘tries to maintain an ethical space’ and attempts ‘not to betray this ethical responsibility’.<sup>26</sup> This requires an impossible reading in which one does not read to produce a *said*, an understanding or interpretation. To do any of these things, to say anything about the text, necessarily encroaches on the ethical space, reduces the alterity of the text and thus betrays the ethical responsibility in its very response. Bernasconi and Critchley then consider whether a reading that betrays Levinas might actually be necessary. They ask if a reading that works with the economy of betrayal, a reading that is self-reflexive about the necessary violence it commits and ‘tries to respond responsibly to the responsibility produced by Levinas’s work’<sup>27</sup> is the way to respond ethically to Levinas. If all readings will commit violence to the text then perhaps the only way to ethically respond is to be aware of that violence, to acknowledge the ways in which your response is betraying the ethical space.

Michelle Boulous Walker asks the question, from and directed to the field of philosophy, ‘what is it to read?’<sup>28</sup> She draws upon Levinas to explore ‘reading in ethical terms.’<sup>29</sup> She notes Levinas’s concern that philosophy *knows* by reducing all otherness to ‘its own categories or understandings’<sup>30</sup> and she argues that this implicates the way philosophy *reads*, again demolishing any trace of the Other. She goes so far as to use words like ‘stand-over technique’ and ‘intimidation’<sup>31</sup> to describe the way in which philosophical reading performs the

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<sup>24</sup> Bernasconi and Critchley, p. xi.

<sup>25</sup> Bernasconi and Critchley, p. xi.

<sup>26</sup> Bernasconi and Critchley, p. xi.

<sup>27</sup> Bernasconi and Critchley, p. xi.

<sup>28</sup> Michelle Boulous Walker, ‘An Ethics of Reading: Adorno, Levinas, and Irigaray’, *Philosophy Today*, 50 (2006), 223–38 (p. 223).

<sup>29</sup> Walker, p. 223.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, p. 224.

act of abolishing alterity, colonising the Other in the name of absolute truth and objective knowledge. She then looks to how one might read in a way that is open to otherness that is based on encounter rather than conquest and with an orientation toward the Other.

Walker locates the possibility of ethical reading in Levinas's notion of the saying. The saying opens itself to this application for two reasons. The first, it is ethical. An ethical reading clearly requires an ethical component and Walker describes the saying as 'the risk of exposure to the other that is... the indication of sincerity. And this is ethics.'<sup>32</sup> The second reason the saying offers a potential line of inquiry for ethical reading is the way it invites a reorientation and openness to the Other. Walker describes the saying as, 'an attitude of openness or goodness that occurs despite oneself'.<sup>33</sup> She contrasts the saying with philosophical speech 'that presents itself as finished and complete'.<sup>34</sup> This type of speech discourages critique, whereas Levinas's saying invites openness, connection with others and, as a result of this openness, critique. Walker draws upon Bernasconi and Critchley's identification of re-reading, connected to the openness of saying I have just discussed, as well as Levinas's practice itself, as the site for a potential ethical reading. Walker is interested in the way Levinas's ethics of proximity, and philosophical approach, is always ready to re-read but not to find a univocal meaning, nor to complete the text.<sup>35</sup> This approach is likely to sit comfortably with the reader of literature in the twenty-first century but is more controversial in the field of philosophy where the primary concern is truth. Walker investigates the question of ethical reading with a (re)reading of Luce Irigaray. She suggests that Irigaray's readings of Levinas can be seen as attempts to open a dialogue rather than find the truth in Levinas's work. Walker identifies questioning as an important component of this kind of reading. 'The question arguably approaches the other/text in a way that opens out any reading toward a space of encounter or dialogue.'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Walker, p. 225.

<sup>33</sup> Walker, p. 225.

<sup>34</sup> Walker, p. 225.

<sup>35</sup> Walker, p. 225.

<sup>36</sup> Walker, p. 228.

Bernasconi and Critchley open the debate regarding a Levinasian way of reading. They locate the readiness to re-read as the potential site of an ethical reading. It is the notion of an unfinished reading, the willingness not to pin down meaning and put the text aside that opens the possibility of an engagement with the otherness of the text, that looks to capitalise on the reinscription of the face-to-face encounter from *Totality and Infinity* in the notion of the saying in *Otherwise than Being*. They do not develop a Levinasian hermeneutics but ask what kind of reading would not betray the ethical space, how one might read in such a way to avoid the violence of the obliteration of alterity. They suggest that this violence is impossible to avoid but that one might read ethically within the economy of betrayal, that the only way to respond responsibly to Levinas may be to be self-aware of the violence and betrayal of the response. Walker takes Bernasconi and Critchley's musings and asks, 'what is it to read?' Her interest is to develop a way of approaching philosophy that is not reductive, that does not seek to annihilate the Other and alterity in the name of knowledge or understanding but rather as encounter. Like Bernasconi and Critchley she emphasises re-reading as a key component of an ethical approach to reading but also stresses the importance of the question in reading to open the reading to dialogue.

Levinas's reduction of the said to the saying lends itself to this endeavour. He acknowledges the necessary betrayal of the otherwise than being, saying, in language. He claims that the 'astonishing saying, comes to light through the very gravity of the questions that assail it' (*OBBE*, p. 44). He recognises that the saying, to be thought, questioned or demonstrated 'must spread out and assemble itself into essence, posit itself, be hypostatized, become an eon in consciousness and knowledge, let itself be seen, undergo the ascendancy of being' (*OBBE*, p. 44). But, he claims that the 'philosopher's effort... consists, while showing the hither side, in immediately reducing the eon which triumphs in the said and in the monstrations, and, despite the reduction, retaining an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity, of diachronic expression' (*OBBE*, p. 44). Levinas identifies ambiguity and diachronic expression as ways in which the philosopher may 'let the otherwise than being be as an eon' (*OBBE*, p. 44). Both these notions do suggest a type of open-ended dialogue or reading. This is further suggested

when he describes the saying, that which escapes knowledge or understanding, is produced ‘as an endless critique, or scepticism’ (*OBBE*, p. 44).

Levinas’s discussion of the reduction of the said to the saying is strongly connected to philosophy. He speaks about it as philosophy’s ‘astonishing adventure,’ he describes the ‘philosopher’s effort’ and ‘unnatural position,’ and claims the endless critique that produces the saying makes ‘possible the boldness of philosophy’ (*OBBE*, p. 44). Likewise, Bernasconi and Critchley’s musings on a Levinasian hermeneutics come from a philosophical perspective and seek to introduce the reader to the concept of the collection of re-readings of Levinas’s later work. Walker’s interest in the question, ‘what is it to read?’ is, more specifically, ‘how might philosophy read?’<sup>37</sup> She is primarily interested in finding a way of engaging with philosophical texts in ways that do not seek to reduce otherness but instead open dialogue, embrace ambiguity and reorient the reading towards encounter. This naturally raises the question of whether this kind of reading is only relevant to the field of philosophy.

The goal of philosophy, stated or implied, has traditionally been to come to an understanding of the truth (in absolute terms or of the matter in question). Philosophy also generally assumes an uncomplicated view of authorship. Philosophers write texts that argue for their understanding of the truth (of metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics and so on) and the texts are received as representing the views, beliefs and opinions of the author. Even postmodernist philosophers, writing in the post-Barthesian death of the author era, maintain a type of ownership of their ideas, or are consistently returned to as the authority on their work, on the meaning of their work. Take, for instance, Jacques Derrida, one of the best known philosophers of the twenty-first century, who questions almost everything philosophy had taken for granted – the idea of an origin, the self-presence of identity, even meaning itself, to name but a few – but who gave many interviews throughout his life and even starred in a documentary.

Questions put to Derrida during interviews are wide-ranging but include inquiries that assume that he is the origin of his work, questions that presuppose that he holds the key to the meaning of the work marked with his signature, such

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<sup>37</sup> Walker, p. 224.

as, ‘you have often repeated that deconstruction is not a method, that there is no “Derridean method.” *How, then, is one to take account of your work?*’<sup>38</sup> [my italics]. There are, it should be noted, a majority of questions that do not assume this straightforward correlation, but the very fact that people are driven back to the source of the work, the philosopher himself, hints at the perception that the author of the work/s holds a privileged position with regard to the meaning of the text/s. It implies there is, least controversially, a preferred reading, or at the extreme, a univocal answer to the question.

Derrida frequently deconstructs the interview as he participates in it and an argument can be made for much of what he says being under erasure or deliberately ambiguous, however, he still comments upon his work from the position of author or creator. He refers to his work, explaining and developing the ideas, for instance, ‘... As for the *déjà* {already} of the “I am already dead,” which is something like the general siglum or acronym of the book, it is set moving again, reinterpreted (with reference to *Speech and Phenomena*, and to Hegel and Genet), particularly, at least, on pages 76-86...’<sup>39</sup> Here Derrida refers back to one of his works, even citing page numbers as he addresses (answers would not be the correct term) the interviewer’s question. Likewise, he comments on the increasing importance of the signature for his work, ‘[y]ou are right, it is a question that traverses most of the latest texts or that in any case has become more precise since “Signature Event Context,” the last essay in *Margins*, which ends, as does therefore the whole work, with *my* handwritten, reproduced, and translated signature. It is a forgery, of course...’<sup>40</sup> Derrida can be seen giving clear indications about the importance of the signature in his work and a seemingly clear interpretation of the status of signature in *Margins*. Although, as I have already said, most, if not all, of what Derrida says during interviews should be viewed as under suspicion, nothing should be taken as clear, univocal or unambiguous, he still assumes the role of author and his readers look to him for clarification, explanation and meaning.

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *There is no ‘one’ narcissism*, 1986

<<http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/narc.html>> [accessed 13 July 2015].

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994*, Meridian : Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Points . . .*, p. 25.

Philosophy's search for truth, the general belief that there is a truth to be found combined with a transparent and straightforward view of the connection between the author's intention and the meaning of work seem to have dictated a way of reading. These two beliefs suggest a reading that seeks to produce a univocal meaning, a reading that seeks to unify the work into a coherent whole, a reading that cannot allow otherness. The combination of the assumption of truth and transparent connection between the author's intention and the words of the page has resulted in the type of reading that looks to finish reading, to master the meaning of the treatise and place the book back on the shelf (perhaps after composing a response that details ways in which the text fails to achieve the coveted truth). This typical approach to philosophical texts is why Walker (and Levinas in his critique of traditional western metaphysics) claims that the goal of philosophy is to return otherness to the same; to bring anything in the text that appears as other under control in the name of truth, or knowledge. If some aspect of the text reveals alterity, appears contrary to understanding, philosophers try to turn the otherness into concepts or fit it into categories of understanding that already exist. With this account of the philosophical project it is easy to see why Levinas calls for a reduction of the said to the saying. We can see that Walker's development of Bernasconi and Critchley's musings on a possible hermeneutics based on Levinas's later work attempts to provide an alternate way of reading philosophical texts. But what of other texts? And, how might this apply to the study of literature?

### **The problem with literature**

Levinas is uncharacteristically clear about his distrust of art works. His early work, up to and including *Totality and Infinity*, is primarily focussed on his particular conception of ethics, but he does touch on aesthetics in its relation to his concerns with ethics in these early works, and even has an essay, 'Reality and its Shadow,' (1948) which takes aesthetics as its main theme. In the early texts on ethics Levinas rejects the possibility of an ethical encounter with the Other via the mediation of a work of art, including literature. He is dismissive of literature and art in general. This ambivalence has generally been ignored or overlooked by

theorists applying Levinas's work to literature. Eaglestone argues in *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* that in Levinas's 'understanding of ethics, art is treated with such great suspicion as to make using his thought in relation to any artistic discourse highly problematic.'<sup>41</sup> He also claims that the application of Levinas's work to literary discourse often oversimplifies his work.<sup>42</sup>

I have already raised questions about the literary reader's obligations in producing a faithful, or non-violent 'reading' (be it explicit or implicit) of the theorist being utilised in the reading of the literary work. For those who are not concerned with the authenticity of the theoretical reading, but only in exploring new ways of looking at texts, this may not be a problem. However, I suggest that the attraction of employing a philosophical perspective and applying it to literary readings lies in the promise of discovering some kind of truth that relies upon the overall coherence of the philosophical approach and its application to the work in question. Even if one does not believe in a single, universal truth, or a 'correct' approach to texts, the very use of a theoretical perspective suggests an interest in both, the ways in which it might apply to the literary work, and what the theoretical framework says (about human nature, ethics, language, et cetera.). To ignore Levinas's stated suspicions regarding applying his ethical work to the study of art, including literature, in some kind of Levinasian ethical criticism would be, as Eaglestone succinctly puts it, 'unfaithful to Levinas's work and lacking critical rigor ("not Levinasian, not ethical, not criticism").'<sup>43</sup> I turn now to explore Levinas's concerns with literature and more particularly, his denial that the ethical encounter can occur through the mediation of literature.

Levinas's relationship to literature is complicated. He frequently uses literary examples to illustrate points, and has produced readings of literary works but at the same time he dismisses literature as rhetoric, mere representation and pure said. Eaglestone is one of the few critics who considers Levinas's suspicion of literature and its connection to his concept of ethics. Eaglestone is interested in developing an ethical base for criticism in light of what he sees as the erosion of the ethical foundation of criticism as the field of English has developed in the

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<sup>41</sup> Eaglestone, p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> Eaglestone, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> Eaglestone, p. 7.

twentieth century, he asks '[w]hat is ethical criticism after "literary theory"?'<sup>44</sup> Eaglestone identifies two connected areas that Levinas bases his objections to literature on, in works up to and including *Totality and Infinity*, and the ways in which these objections make application of his work to literature at the very least, deeply problematic and at worst, impossible. The first objection is the ontological status of literature and the second is the problem of representation. I agree with Eaglestone's characterisation of Levinas's concern with art and will provide a summary of his argument before considering an element Jill Robins explores that Eaglestone does not consider.

Eaglestone argues that Levinas rejects the view of art that claims for it a privileged ontological status which permits access or knowledge of the absolute, or which would hold art as prior to ethics or truth in some kind of transcendent way, or any view of art as constituting an origin.<sup>45</sup> Eaglestone begins his discussion of Levinas's problem with literature with the 1948 essay, 'Reality and its shadow,' which Eaglestone argues is an investigation into the 'non-truth of being' despite the essay generally being read as a work on aesthetics.<sup>46</sup> Eaglestone works his way from this early essay to *Totality and Infinity* which he claims 'offers a series of interlinked arguments against the achievement of transcendence through the aesthetic... Each argument is related to the argument of "Reality and its Shadow" but is subtler and more complex'.<sup>47</sup> Levinas's goal of establishing ethics as first philosophy requires aesthetics to be secondary to ethics as Levinas wants to maintain that ethics is the only way to achieve transcendence.

Eaglestone quotes Levinas discussing the 'primacy of the ethical' which is 'an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest (and in particular all those which *seem* to put us primordially in contact with an impersonal sublimity, *aesthetic* or ontological).'<sup>48</sup> (Eaglestone's italics). Although I agree with Eaglestone's identification of the ontological status of art (and its relation to ethics) as a concern for Levinas, I contend that this concern with the ontological status of art is a truth that Levinas wants to argue *for* rather than put forward *as* an

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<sup>44</sup> Eaglestone, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Eaglestone, p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Eaglestone, p. 104.

<sup>47</sup> Eaglestone, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> Eaglestone, p. 112.

argument against art in itself, at least in 'Reality and its Shadow'. Eaglestone struggles to say more about this 'direction' – the thread of Levinas's thought that questions art based on its ontological status – than what is stated here but contends that the second 'direction,' the issue of representation, is 'interlinked' with this question. The issue of representation in artworks is the major argument or analysis that Levinas works through in 'Reality and its Shadow' and through into *Totality and Infinity* on the question of aesthetics.

The problem with art, for Levinas, can be summarised as a problem with representation due to a privileging of presence. Recall that, for Levinas, ethics resides in the face-to-face encounter with an Other. This presupposes the presence of both parties for one to stand face-to-face. An artwork is the representation of something else; when one stands before an artwork (or reads a literary work of art) one faces but is not faced. Eaglestone argues that, in his early work, Levinas 'insists that all art is mimetic.'<sup>49</sup> Art is simply re-presentation of a presence; the copy of reality.

Levinas is most explicit in his discussion of art and representation in 'Reality and its Shadow'. Levinas states at the beginning of the essay that he is intending to question the 'generally, dogmatically' held view of the function of art as something that 'prolongs, and goes beyond, common perception.'<sup>50</sup> It is here that we can see the connection between art as representation and the denial of a privileged ontological status of artworks. Art has traditionally been valued as something which is 'more real than reality' and 'sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute.'<sup>51</sup> Artworks have been valued as a means of transcendence, a portal to absolute knowledge or knowledge of ultimate reality but Levinas rejects this notion and argues that 'the most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image.'<sup>52</sup> Levinas constructs his essay in a kind of parallel to Martin Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' orientating his arguments to questions concerning the relationship between art, truth and being.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Eaglestone, p. 99.

<sup>50</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', in *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford, UK: Wiley, 1989), pp. 129–43 (p. 130).

<sup>51</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 130.

<sup>52</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 132.

<sup>53</sup> Eaglestone, p. 105.

Heidegger discusses artworks as opening a world, such as Van Gogh's painting of peasants' shoes which he shows reveal the world of the peasant woman – her daily 'trudge through the far-spreading and ever uniform furrows of the field'.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, Levinas undertakes a phenomenological exploration of art as representation which leads him to consider the idea of resemblance. Eaglestone argues that Levinas questions the commonly held opinion that resemblance is the link between the object and its image which holds that the image resembles the object and this ties the two together. In this line of thought the image can be seen as transparent – it leads directly to the 'real' object.<sup>55</sup> Levinas likens it to a window through which one can go directly to the image 'into the world it represents,'<sup>56</sup> a reference to Heidegger's notion of art opening a world.

Levinas argues, on the other hand, that 'resemblance is not...the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but... the very movement that engenders the image.'<sup>57</sup> Eaglestone understands this as saying that 'resemblance is not the comparison between object and image, but the grounds of the image existing at all.'<sup>58</sup> Levinas expands his idea by claiming that reality would also be 'its shadow, its image.'<sup>59</sup> Eaglestone argues that this discussion of resemblance is a result of the parallel argument Levinas is developing with Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art.' Levinas develops a distinction between non-art items and artistic images. The idea that reality is both itself and its shadow or its image posits the object and its image as phenomena. With non-art objects, Eaglestone argues, the relationship between the object and its image is such that when put to use, its truth as 'ready-to-hand,' again borrowing from Heidegger, causes the *appearance* of the image to slip away. The classic example, used by both Heidegger and Eaglestone, is the hammer. When one is hammering the hammer as object is concealed and the hammer as equipment, or ready-to-hand, is revealed.

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies, 12 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 182–211 (p. 189).

<sup>55</sup> Eaglestone, p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 135.

<sup>57</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 135.

<sup>58</sup> Eaglestone, p. 105.

<sup>59</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 135.

Art images have a different relationship to their objects. Levinas states that 'the consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there.'<sup>60</sup> Unlike non-art objects in which the object and its image are present, in artworks 'we are aware of the absence of the object: the object has abandoned the image.'<sup>61</sup> Art-images are pure image. They are pure representation and signal the absence of the object. Levinas describes the art-image as like 'old garments'<sup>62</sup> of the object. He speaks of the art-object, which is signalled as absent by its image as having 'died', been 'degraded' or 'disincarnated'<sup>63</sup> by the artwork. His language in these descriptions hints at his antipathy towards artworks.

Eaglestone explains that art as objectless images are not concerned with truth, and certainly not the kind of privileged access to absolute knowledge mentioned earlier by Levinas, but rather Levinas sees art as pertaining to 'a strange non-truth.'<sup>64</sup> Levinas talks about art as 'shadow' and speaks of it as 'obscuring'.<sup>65</sup> For Heidegger, recall, art reveals the world but for Levinas it is a 'doubling of reality by its image' which creates an ambiguity.<sup>66</sup> Levinas says the work of art 'does not lead us beyond the given reality [of the artwork], but somehow to the hither side of it. It is a symbol in reverse.'<sup>67</sup> The work of art does not lead us to reality beyond the image, it is its own reality, 'a painting has a density of its own,'<sup>68</sup> the work of art takes us further from the object of the representation, not closer. Aesthetics, and art in general, can be seen as a secondary concern for Levinas. Artworks do not reveal truth; they do not give a special insight into reality. They are pure representation, the shadow of reality, 'the caricature, allegory or picturesque element which reality bears on its own face'<sup>69</sup> and mark the absence of their object.

Added to the problem of representation of artworks is Levinas's understanding of time. Eaglestone argues that 'it is the relationship between art

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<sup>60</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 136.

<sup>61</sup> Eaglestone, p. 107.

<sup>62</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 136.

<sup>63</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 136.

<sup>64</sup> Eaglestone, p. 107.

<sup>65</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 132.

<sup>66</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 136.

<sup>67</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 136.

<sup>68</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 136.

<sup>69</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 137.

and time which, in addition to the non-truth of art' that 'leads Levinas to his aversion to the aesthetic.'<sup>70</sup> Eaglestone traces the issue of time back to *Existence and Existents* written during the Second World War and thus fairly contemporaneous to *Reality and its Shadow*. Levinas's understanding of time is related to his concept of *il y a*, discussed in Chapter One. Levinas traced the notion of the 'there is,' a state of undifferentiated existence through the experience of insomnia and fatigue where he argues it is felt and is hence open to a phenomenological investigation. In Chapter One, I explored the *il y a* as existence prior to consciousness and likened it to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of nausea. Eaglestone draws out the implications of the 'there is' for an understanding of time. Temporality, he argues, is 'created by an entity taking up being, from out of this anonymous state.'<sup>71</sup> Temporality, according to this argument, is something that *begins* when a consciousness emerges from the undifferentiated existence of the *il y a* rather than an objective reality. Time is inaugurated by the existent and this existent takes up being in every instant. Additionally, and most importantly, the consciousness must attend to its historical self, who has existed in previous instances, and foresee a future in which they will continue to emerge.<sup>72</sup> Without a past or a future there is no hope or freedom, the self must be able to 'carry on the self-reflexive relationship with oneself'<sup>73</sup> in which freedom is responding to the historical self and foreseeing a future in which it can continue to emerge.

Levinas connects his understanding of time to art in 'Reality and its Shadow' in his discussion of art as statue. He claims that all artworks, in the end, are statues. Artworks, for Levinas, involve the 'stoppage of time'.<sup>74</sup> The work of art is trapped in an instant but unlike an existent that takes up being, in an instant, from the 'there is,' the work of art does not gain life for the 'instant' in which it is trapped is 'impersonal and anonymous' and without future (a necessary component of a present instance). All artworks involve 'the paradox of an instant that endures without a future.'<sup>75</sup> The artwork exists in a kind of extended instant, Levinas explains, 'Mona Lisa will smile eternally'; '[e]ternally, the smile of the

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<sup>70</sup> Eaglestone, p. 107.

<sup>71</sup> Eaglestone, p. 107.

<sup>72</sup> Eaglestone, p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> Eaglestone, p. 107.

<sup>74</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 137.

<sup>75</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 138.

Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden'<sup>76</sup>; but it is not simply the physical, enduring existence of the work of art that Levinas is referring to. The Mona Lisa has no future. She will never broaden her smile, she does not take responsibility for a past 'I', nor does she project forward to future presents. Levinas again uses language with rather negative connotations when he discusses the life given to a work of art by an artist, he claims it is 'a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life.'<sup>77</sup> He goes on to describe the instant of the work of art as a 'nightmare.'<sup>78</sup>

Levinas anticipates the counter-argument that some art forms, such as music or narratives, introduce an element of time into their form but responds that characters in novels, for instance, are fated to repeat the same tasks, they are trapped in the non-time of the narrative. We can see here that the way in which artworks exist, as somewhat trapped in a timeless, eternal, instant means that, for Levinas, they merely mimic or 'parody'<sup>79</sup> life. Eaglestone sums up the problem: 'The time of art is not our time and, as a consequence, the shadow non-being of art is not like our being. A work of art is literally "time-less", trapped outside time.'<sup>80</sup> The work of art is both non-truth, it is a shadow of reality and hence does not exist like people exist and it is of a different time, the work of art cannot take up a position in time but rather exists in an eternal non-time. So, 'for Levinas, there is nothing art... can teach about the real world.'<sup>81</sup>

Levinas does not deal with aesthetics or art thematically or systematically in *Totality and Infinity* but the concerns raised in 'Reality and its Shadow' are echoed throughout the work. Eaglestone goes so far as to argue '*Totality and Infinity* offers a series of interlinked arguments against the achievement of transcendence through the aesthetic'.<sup>82</sup> The aesthetic is not a major theme of the work, however, as Eaglestone intimates, Levinas is concerned to establish ethics, as he sees it, as the only way to achieve transcendence and this involves arguing

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<sup>76</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 138.

<sup>77</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 138.

<sup>78</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 139.

<sup>79</sup> Eaglestone, p. 108.

<sup>80</sup> Eaglestone, p. 108.

<sup>81</sup> Eaglestone, p. 108.

<sup>82</sup> Eaglestone, p. 111.

against other possible areas that have traditionally been seen as routes to transcendence, aesthetics having been a major contender for this role historically.

Eaglestone identifies a passage in Section I.B.5: 'Discourse and Ethics' as a parallel to Levinas's argument in 'Reality and its Shadow'. In this section Levinas discusses the representation of objects, agreeing with Heidegger's claims about the form of the object disappearing as it is put to use or rather, disappearing 'beneath their form' (*TI*, p. 75). Levinas can here be seen as making a similar argument to the earlier account of the hammer. When the hammer is being used as a hammer, when it appears as 'ready-to-hand' in Heideggerian terms, the representation of the object as object is 'absorbed in the accomplishment of the function for which [it] is made' (*TI*, p. 74). He here introduces the ideas of finality as that function that allows the object to disappear beneath its form; and nudity which 'is the surplus of [an object's] being over its finality' (*TI*, p. 74). Levinas frequently describes the face as naked. It is only when one encounters the object as an object, not in use, that it stands out as a thing in itself.

Levinas then goes on to consider the beautiful. The beautiful object is clothed in its form. It does not have a use other than its form, beauty 'introduces a new finality, an internal finality, into this naked world' (*TI*, p. 74). The work of art is problematic because it reclassifies the object by its form alone. Art requires 'bringing form to light and drawing the object through its form into a totality.'<sup>83</sup> Levinas thinks artworks, as objects disclosed and reclassified by their forms, require fitting the object as artwork into a 'totality' in which it is apprehended by its beauty. This echoes the problem with art as non-truth that Levinas explored in 'Reality and its Shadow'. The work of art is pure representation, defined by its form and secondary to reality. The argument in *Totality and Infinity* adds the issue of art placing objects into a totality in which they are defined by reference to the same and hence incapable of producing transcendence.

Eaglestone draws out an important distinction Levinas makes in this section between the aesthetic and language. The work of art places the object in relation to a totality whereas language is relation with the nudity of the face 'disengaged from every form' (*TI*, p. 74). Language allows access to the ethical,

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<sup>83</sup> Eaglestone, p. 113.

to the transcendental relation with the Other whereas art results in the same, totality. Eaglestone claims this ‘distinction between form and what lies beyond but through form’<sup>84</sup> is continued in section III of *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas, in section III, reflects on the manifestation of the face, which he wants to maintain is not representation. He needs to establish the face as operating in some other way than representation to explain how the face is the key to transcendence as opposed to mere representations. Levinas, we have already seen, has concerns with representation; he aligns it to non-truth and establishes it as of a secondary order, unrelated to reality. Eaglestone claims that in section III we can see Levinas’s problems with representation very clearly.

In order to speak about the manifestation of the face as *not* representation he is forced to use awkward and strange phrases to describe it such as ‘true representation,’ ‘nudity’ and ‘very straightforwardness’.<sup>85</sup> Eaglestone claims that Levinas is trying to show that although the face is made manifest in the way objects are made manifest it is also ‘beyond manifestation’.<sup>86</sup> To carve out the special ontological status of the face and its relation to infinity and ethics, Levinas must distinguish its representation from the type of representation of artworks, otherwise the aesthetic would give access to transcendence in the same way ethics does for, ‘it would not masquerade as infinite, like a person, but actually be “equivalent” to a person’.<sup>87</sup> Levinas is careful to limit the ethical relation with the Other to the face-to-face encounter ‘without the intermediary of any image’ (*TI*, p. 200). This provides a clear problem for my concern with the ethical encounter mediated through literature.

Eaglestone continues his earlier argument that Levinas’s problem with art can be seen as a two-stranded one; a problem with representation and the problem of the ontological status of art. I maintained that the problem with representation is best seen as an attempt to justify the ontological status Levinas wants to prescribe to art in ‘Reality and its Shadow’. A stronger case for artworks as having a particular ontological status can be seen as being made in *Totality and*

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<sup>84</sup> Eaglestone, p. 114.

<sup>85</sup> Eaglestone, p. 114.

<sup>86</sup> Eaglestone, p. 114.

<sup>87</sup> Eaglestone, p. 114.

*Infinity*. Eaglestone claims that Levinas speaks about artworks as objects like any other. He quotes:

Aesthetic orientation man gives to the whole of his world represents a return to enjoyment ... The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image. All art is plastic ... They are playthings: the fine cigarette, the fine car. They are adorned by the decorative arts; they are immersed in the beautiful, where every going beyond enjoyment reverts to enjoyment.<sup>88</sup>

Eaglestone reads this as Levinas arguing that works of art have the same status as other objects, such as cigarettes and cars. The work of art, like all objects, is to be enjoyed but does not give access to the transcendent. Eaglestone does not, at this point, consider the ways in which artworks have been established as different to regular objects in ‘Reality and its Shadow’ and elsewhere in *Totality and Infinity*. On the one hand, a work of art is an object, a painting on a wall, a book on a shelf or a statue in a town square but on the other hand it differs to objects like cigarettes and cars in the way it exists as pure form or pure representation. It doubles reality, signifying the absence of its object and creates a non-truth in ways that regular objects do not.

Eaglestone, in the above quote, makes two omissions<sup>89</sup>, the second of which is slightly concerning. The full passage is as follows with the omitted sections in Italics:

The aesthetic orientation man gives to the whole of his world represents a return to enjoyment *and to the elemental on a higher plane*. The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolised in the finite, but sufficient image. All art is plastic. *Tools and implements, which themselves presuppose enjoyment, offer themselves to enjoyment in their turn*. They are playthings: the fine cigarette lighter, the fine car. They are adorned by

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<sup>88</sup> Eaglestone, p. 115.

<sup>89</sup> Eaglestone also misses the word ‘lighter’: ‘fine cigarette’ as opposed to ‘fine cigarette lighter’.

the decorative arts; they are immersed in the beautiful, where every going beyond enjoyment reverts to enjoyment (*TI*, p. 140).

The comparison to ‘tools and implements’ suggests the focus of this excerpt is not so much on art or aesthetics as on a kind of aesthetic mode of being. Levinas begins with the phrase ‘aesthetic orientation’ which results in enjoyment which he has characterised as the way people *are* in the world, our primary mode of being. The use of the word ‘orientation’ here suggests he is concerned with the way in which people approach the world. The idea of an aesthetic orientation or aesthetic consciousness is a common theme in aesthetics and philosophy of art. Immanuel Kant, for instance, proposed an aesthetic consciousness of disinterestedness in which works of art should be viewed in a completely disinterested way, to the point where the existence of the object should not be a consideration of its beauty.

Levinas seems to be arguing in this passage that an aesthetic mode is the way in which people approach, not just artworks but the world itself, ‘[t]he aesthetic orientation *man gives to the whole of his world*’ [my italics] (*TI*, p. 140) clearly indicates this notion. The passage occurs in ‘Section 2B: Enjoyment and representation’ which further supports the suggestion that the emphasis is on an aesthetic mode of being rather than actual works of art as Levinas is interested, in this section, in specifying the relationship between ‘the life I live and the fact of living’ (*TI*, p. 122). Eaglestone’s omission of the sentence regarding tools and implements makes the passage seem more squarely focussed on the aesthetic with regard to works of art. Recall that Eaglestone is trying to find support for Levinas’s relegation of works of art to the same ontological status of objects. Levinas does not want artworks to give access to transcendence, to the ethical relation with the Other or the idea of infinity, which has been a traditionally held view. By omitting the sentence about tools he is able to directly connect the idea that ‘all art is plastic’ with the statement ‘they are playthings’. Eaglestone makes the connection explicit, ‘[a]rt is simply a thing – a “plaything” – and nothing more.’<sup>90</sup> In the end, I agree with Eaglestone, that Levinas is treating art and other objects as having the same ontological status in this passage but rather than dealing with works of art and establishing their particular status as resulting in

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<sup>90</sup> Eaglestone, p. 115.

immanence rather than transcendence, he instead uses aesthetic consciousness to discuss the way in which objects are encountered in the mode of enjoyment.

Eaglestone claims that the two strands he has been following through Levinas's work, the problem of representation for works of art and the ontological status of the work of art, are brought together in the first part of Section III, 'Sensibility and the Face'. Levinas, Eaglestone maintains, asks a key question, the answer to which comprises 'the core of his account of the aesthetic' in *Totality and Infinity*: 'how can "the epiphany as a face" be different from "that which characterises all our sensible experience"?'<sup>91</sup> The face holds a special position in Levinas's work. In Chapter One I discussed the enigma of the face in some detail – the face is expression, nudity, the encounter with the other, it is epiphany, and the face does not belong to a signifying system. As infinite or absolutely Other, the face cannot signify in the same way as other sensible objects. To be a part of a system of references it would mean the face could only ever signify the same, totality. Levinas's question, then, is how can the face be made manifest, how can we experience the face-to-face encounter when the face does not signify, it is not a representation, it does not appear like other objects?

Eaglestone traces the argument Levinas makes for the difference between how the face appears compared to regular objects. Despite a slightly different focus to the other sections in which art or aesthetics is discussed Eaglestone discovers the same conclusions regarding Levinas's views on art. The work of art is defined by its form and representation. Eaglestone argues, that like other sensible objects, the work of art is made manifest, according to Levinas, through light, 'vision presupposes the light' (*TI*, p. 189). The light, however, is not a 'something' that can be made manifest, it is the horizon upon which we are able to enter into relation with 'something'. Light allows us to see objects, it allows relations between objects but it 'opens nothing that, beyond the same, would be absolutely other' (*TI*, p. 191). Eaglestone describes light as 'the horizon of form and thus of representation'.<sup>92</sup> Light is seen as the way in which objects are made manifest; it allows objects to become sensible, to be seen and touched with reference to other objects, Levinas claims,

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<sup>91</sup> Eaglestone, p. 116.

<sup>92</sup> Eaglestone, p. 116.

Light conditions the relations between data; it makes possible the signification of objects that border one another. It does not enable one to approach them face to face. Intuition, taken in this very general sense, is not opposed to the thought of relations. It is already relationship, since it is vision; it catches sight of the space across which things are transported toward one another. Space, instead of transporting beyond, simply ensures the condition for the *lateral* signification of things within the same (*TI*, p. 191).

Following Eaglestone's argument we can see that objects are portrayed as part of the signifying system of the totality; they appear in light as form and representation. Things come to light, are made manifest, as a result of their relation to totality; objects do not come from nowhere but rather, everything sensible is defined by its form and is recognisable and able to be enjoyed as part of the totality in which things appear in relation to others. By contrast, Eaglestone argues that Levinas claims that light is itself not an object; it is not *something* that appears or that can be made manifest and the light does not reveal anything that is beyond totality. He cites Levinas, 'a light is needed to see the light' (*TI*, p. 192). Eaglestone argues that light is the 'horizon of form and representation' and only appears or represents itself, 'in the horizon of the other.'<sup>93</sup> Unlike objects that are made manifest in the horizon of form and representation, the Other is 'beyond form and light.'<sup>94</sup> The Other appears as a 'primordial' horizon, according to Eaglestone, which is to say, it presents itself not through form or representation but rather 'it is that by which light appears.'<sup>95</sup>

Eaglestone argues that Levinas sets up a contrast between alterity – the light needed to see the light – and art which is pure form, seen as a result of the light. He claims, for 'Levinas, form betrays itself in "its own manifestation, congealing into a plastic form" (*TI*, p. 66): form "alienates the exteriority of the other" (*TI*, p. 66) because, in contrast to form, the "face is a living presence; it is expression" (*TI*, p. 66).'<sup>96</sup> Art is aligned to the idea of the *façade*. Levinas claims that 'it is art that endows things with something like a *façade*' (*TI*, p. 192). *Façade*

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<sup>93</sup> Eaglestone, p. 116.

<sup>94</sup> Eaglestone, p. 116.

<sup>95</sup> Eaglestone, p. 116.

<sup>96</sup> Eaglestone, p. 116.

is claimed to establish the beautiful, to which Levinas attributes the following qualities: ‘indifference’, ‘cold splendour’ and ‘silence’. He also claims it ‘captivates by its grace as by magic, but does not reveal itself’ (*TI*, p. 193). Eaglestone argues that this assessment of artworks – the beautiful and façade – is a continuation of the argument begun in ‘Reality and its Shadow’ with Levinas ascribing a kind of non-truth to works of art, ‘the beauty of an object’s form does not relate back to anything but its form, it has no ontological status save as form.’<sup>97</sup> The work of art is pure representation; it signals the absence of the object and does not give access to transcendence.

Eaglestone’s assessment of Levinas’s conclusion is a good reading but I think he puts more emphasis on art than Levinas does in this section. Levinas essentially raises different possibilities for transcendence; the connected concepts, drawn from classical philosophy, of vision, the light or sun. The sun features famously in Plato’s metaphor of the sun as the form of the Good. Levinas posits the common understanding of the sun as light as something which gives access to knowledge and a possible route to transcendence. He claims the sun ‘is the figure of every relation with the absolute’ (*TI*, p. 191) suggesting the sun has been seen as that absolute (knowledge, God, the Good) which would give access to transcendence when one is in relation with it, but he goes on to say, ‘[b]ut it is only a figure. The light as sun is an object’ (*TI*, p. 192). He suggests that rather than being that which allows us to see reality, to enter into a transcendental relationship with an absolute, the sun or light is analogous to ‘the same’ or ‘totality’. Rather than giving access to an infinite Other, or something absolutely exterior, it reveals what we already know. Levinas then asks if scientific or mathematical thought, *a priori* or idealist (he cites Léon Brunschvicg the idealist philosopher), provides something outside the sensible, some knowledge that does not appear as sense data and hence defined by form and representation but concludes that the ‘realities physico-mathematical science reach derive their meaning from procedures that proceed from the sensible’ (*TI*, p. 192). In the end, this kind of knowledge is based upon the sensible world and as such cannot give access to the transcendent. Levinas concludes the section with a quick investigation of the façade which he connects to the beautiful which has been

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<sup>97</sup> Eaglestone, p. 117.

explored above. Levinas's final assessment is that 'the relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence' (*TI*, p. 193).

Levinas's intention in this section is to establish that the face of the Other, revealed in speech, is the only access to transcendence as it 'cuts across sensibility' and 'its vision is the vision of the very openness of being, it cuts across the vision of forms' (*TI*, p. 193). Every other type of knowledge or experience is grounded in sensibility and part of the same or totality. The argument in this section is clearly, as Eaglestone argues, a problem for those wanting to develop a way of reading literary texts based on Levinas's ethics but is not specific to artistic works. Levinas is attempting, first and foremost, to establish the face as having a special ontological status that allows it to 'cut across sensibility' and the implication for artworks (and all other objects and sense data) is that it holds a 'secondary, derivative and essentially superficial position.'<sup>98</sup> Eaglestone does a good job of drawing out the implications for art from this section but I think it is a stretch to say that within this section is 'the core of [Levinas's] account of the aesthetic.'<sup>99</sup> Levinas's stated project is to establish ethics as first philosophy and the clear implication of this is that other types of knowledge or experience are secondary and this is explored elsewhere in *Totality and Infinity*,

the establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man – signification, teaching, and justice – a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest (and in particular all those which seem to put us primordially in contact with an impersonal sublimity, aesthetic or ontological), is one of the objectives of the present work (*TI*, p. 79).

His argument in Section III A is primarily regarding the face, not the status of art *per se*. Eaglestone aptly notes that Levinas 'does not, in fact, argue for this [the face as that which cuts across sensibility] – rather, he just asserts it.'<sup>100</sup>

I have already noted Eaglestone's claim that Levinas struggles with explaining how the face is made manifest whilst maintaining it does not belong to

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<sup>98</sup> Eaglestone, p. 117.

<sup>99</sup> Eaglestone, p. 116.

<sup>100</sup> Eaglestone, p. 117.

the same structure of representation as objects, including artworks. Levinas, to be sure, is clearly antipathetic towards artworks and the occasions when he speaks about artworks in *Totality and Infinity* echo the same arguments centring on the role of representation and the ontological status of works of art raised in the earlier essay, 'Reality and its Shadow'. Eaglestone considers the arguments outlined here as a somewhat scathing attack on artworks, however I think that the argument against art is rather an attempt to argue for the relation with the Other, characterised by the revelation of the face in language, by showing how other possible ways of achieving transcendence lead only to the totality or the same. Eaglestone is correct in claiming that Levinas does not put forward an argument for how or why the face cuts across sensibility and I suggest that he engages in a rather ironic rhetorical situation where he masks the lack of argument for the privileged position of the face by throwing up and knocking down other potential sites of transcendence. I think the problems raised with art are a strategic move on Levinas's behalf – he is able to set up a model of what transcendence is not and makes it seem like the face, a strange and ambiguous term, is the only way to encounter something truly exterior.

There is, however, a more positive and specific argument against art present in this section and carried on in the following section, 'IIB Ethics and the Face'. Levinas, when speaking of the façade, claims that it 'captivates by its grace as by magic' (*TI*, p. 193). This is reminiscent of his description of the aesthetic in 'Reality and its Shadow'. Discussing the idea of an image and its connection to passivity Levinas claims, '[t]he exceptional structure of aesthetic existence invokes this singular term magic'.<sup>101</sup> He relates the effect of poetry to 'captivation or incantation'.<sup>102</sup> Levinas is here concerned with the way in which the work of art charms the art-consumer/observer. The 'I' enters a state of being which is 'neither the form of consciousness... nor the form of unconsciousness'.<sup>103</sup> Levinas argues that when beguiled by the charm or rhythm of poetry the description of the state of being of the art-consumer as consciousness no longer applies to the I as it loses mastery, it is 'stripped of its prerogative to assume, its power.'<sup>104</sup> Similarly, it

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<sup>101</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 132.

<sup>102</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 133.

<sup>103</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 133.

<sup>104</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', p. 133.

would not be correct to ascribe the mode of being to unconsciousness as the ‘whole situation... is *present*.’<sup>105</sup>

The I is present to the captivation of poetry, it may be drawn in by the rhythm of the poetry but this does not happen in an unconscious state in which the I is unaware of the relation to the artwork. Levinas finds artworks, which he sees as beguiling, and objects that charm by magic, problematic, as the I ‘is among things as a thing, as part of the spectacle.’<sup>106</sup> The subject is drawn into the non-truth of the representation of the work of art, that is marked by its object’s absence, and in being drawn in, charmed or beguiled, no longer operates as a self but rather the self assumes a position toward the artwork that is analogous to the way things relate to other things. This clearly stands in marked contrast to the face-to-face encounter in which the self is put into question by the unknowable Other but at the same time becomes aware of itself as a self, the subject. An analogy used by Levinas, and drawn out by Eaglestone, to characterise the difference between works of art and the face-to-face ethical encounter is to equate the face with the icon and works of art with idols, ‘[a]rt is constituted by idols, ethics by icons.’<sup>107</sup>

An interesting distinction arises from consideration of the way in which poetry (and other art forms, particularly literary artworks and musical works) is marked by rhythm that charms or beguiles the subject, and the ethical encounter with the face, made possible through language, which is marked by ‘rupture’ and ‘breaking of rhythm’ and ‘dispels the charm of rhythm’ (*TI*, p. 203). Levinas can be seen as distinguishing between the language of ethics and the rhetorical language of artworks. Jill Robbins gives a good account of the problem in her important work *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. She claims that:

This ethical language is repeatedly characterised as having an exceptional *droiture*, that is, straightforwardness, uprightness, justice; he [Levinas] also calls it “sincerity,” “frankness.” In privileging such an ethical language, Levinas quite explicitly...excludes rhetoric – as a form of language that is devious, that is not straight, that does not face – and with it, implicitly, any language that is figured or troped; he denounces rhetoric

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<sup>105</sup> Levinas, ‘Reality and Its Shadow’, p. 133.

<sup>106</sup> Levinas, ‘Reality and Its Shadow’, p. 133.

<sup>107</sup> Eaglestone, p. 119.

as violent and unjust. The ethical language relation is to be found only in a vocative or imperative discourse, face-to-face. It is not then surprising that Levinas excludes from his conception of the ethical language relation to the other all forms of poetic speaking.<sup>108</sup>

The importance of language for Levinas has already been noted in Chapter One. It is language that allows the self to encounter the Other, to stand face-to-face without engulfing the Other, without reducing the infinity of the Other to the totality of the same, '[I]anguage, which does not touch the other, even tangentially, reaches the other by calling upon him or by commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness of these relations' (*TI*, p. 62). Robbins' assessment of Levinas's argument, on the surface, suggests that the ethical language of the face-to-face encounter is straightforward, upright and just. The face somehow inaugurates an ethical language in contrast to poetic language which is devious in the way it is figurative, it does not mean what it says. Levinas repeatedly refers to the face-to-face encounter as marked by straightforwardness but does not specifically call language straightforward except in the quote above.<sup>109</sup> Robbins' extrapolates from the face-to-face encounter which is marked by presence and immediacy, it is 'straight' and 'faces,'<sup>110</sup> to the language that makes this encounter possible, the way in which the self can 'reach' the Other without 'touching' her.

Ethical language is privileged over poetic language by Levinas for similar reasons; he distrusts artworks themselves. Poetic language, characterised as figurative, is indirect and symbolic. Instead of addressing face-on it approaches from an angle. A straightforward statement might be 'you shall not commit murder'<sup>111</sup>: it says what it means. It is a direct address between two people who look at each other, one issuing a command and the other realising the impossibility of murder. A poetic statement, one that does not face but rather

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<sup>108</sup> Robbins, p. 77.

<sup>109</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, pp. 62, 78, 183, 200, 202, 203, 214, 262 and 264.

<sup>110</sup> Robbins, p. 76.

<sup>111</sup> This would be the quintessential ethical statement for Levinas as what the face expresses in the face-to-face encounter. Questions of whether it is in fact free of any rhetorical features will be put aside for the argument's sake.

approaches from an angle might be, '[a] coughball of laughter leaped from his throat dragging after it a rattling chain of phlegm.'<sup>112</sup> Or

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.<sup>113</sup>

Or perhaps, 'Maybe she's born with it. Maybe it's Maybelline.' These kinds of poetic statements do not seek to directly express, in fact they stand in the absence of the actor and author; they operate within a system of signification and reference. Levinas may argue they beguile with their rhythm and seek to charm the audience, the line from Joyce describes the unpleasant image of a man coughing up phlegm in a lyrical, and beautiful way, perhaps working its magic with alliteration, onomatopoeia and metaphor. Churchill famously seeks to win over the English public in the face of great military losses and the very real possibility of invasion with parallel structure and the personal plural pronoun 'we'.<sup>114</sup> And, of course the Maybelline Company hopes to bewitch the consumer public into believing their product will produce the desired effect that may not come naturally to all.

Levinas, arguably, sees poetic language as having the same structure as works of art themselves; poetic language, like a work of art is indirect, marked by absence, mediation and representation and exists purely in the realm of sensibility. It cannot lead beyond this world to exteriority whereas ethical language is inseparable from the ethical encounter in which it occurs. Language, as expression,

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<sup>112</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), p. 36.

<sup>113</sup> Winston Churchill, 'We Shall Fight on the Beaches'  
<<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches>> [accessed 24 August 2015].

<sup>114</sup> Churchill.

is written into the very structure of Levinas's ethics. The ethical encounter can only eventuate as a result of the language that allows the self to reach the Other without reducing her to the same.

Levinas does not discuss ethical language specifically in a kind of binary opposition to poetic language as Robbins suggests in the earlier extract, but rather holds 'ethical' language in a special position due to its work in the ethical encounter. Levinas goes to lengths to criticise poetic language, on the other hand, to help further his argument that one cannot encounter exteriority through works of art. Levinas seems to acknowledge the intuition many have that works of art offer an experience that could be characterised as transcendent but needs to prove this is not the case if he wants to maintain the face as the only access to exteriority. I suggest one of the ways he does this is by arguing that an intrinsically ethical language exists in the face-to-face encounter which somehow excludes the possibility of rhetoric or figurative language. By interweaving language, as expression, with the face, Levinas is able to reserve the ethical as the only site for transcendence.

It is not, however, clear that Levinas is successful in his argument. His argument relies upon the immediacy of the face-to-face and the claim that the face, as expression, only expresses the imperative, 'do not commit murder' or perhaps it only expresses expression itself. Levinas explains, 'the first content of expression is the expression itself' (TI, p. 51). Levinas conflates expression with the notion of ethical language, with *droiture*, straightforwardness. The face does not seek to deceive, nor trick, beguile or charm. Remember that the face-to-face encounter can be seen as the structure Levinas's concept of the saying is built around. The ethical language is expression itself, the fact that something is said to someone, the desire to communicate. If this is the case, then all language, including rhetorical or figurative utterances, as said, contains the possibility of the ethical saying.

### **Eaglestone's response**

Eaglestone completes his consideration of Levinas's views on aesthetics, which he centres around 'Reality and its Shadow' and *Totality and Infinity*, with the conclusion that '[f]or Levinas in these works, it is impossible to speak ethically about art, save to say that art is unethical'<sup>115</sup> and that 'to look for an ethics of criticism in Levinas's work would appear to be a dead end.'<sup>116</sup> The picture, according to Eaglestone, looks bleak for any attempts to develop an ethical criticism based on Levinasian notions. He does not, however, stop with these texts. Eaglestone identifies what he refers to as Levinas's 'linguistic turn'<sup>117</sup> which he situates in Levinas's 1974 work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which can be seen as Levinas's response to Derrida's critique of *Totality and Infinity*. Eaglestone traces Derrida's critique of representation in *Totality and Infinity* and Levinas's 'answer' to the problem: he turns to language and the development of the saying and the said. The reduction of the said to the saying, which I discussed in Chapter One, and the sense in which the saying overflows and interrupts the said, marks the site in which Eaglestone sees potential for a theoretical framework for his development of an ethical criticism. Despite the seemingly rich textual possibilities that Levinas's writing on language opens for readers of literature and more specifically for Eaglestone's project of an ethical criticism, he admits that Levinas continues to resist admitting artworks into the ethical realm.

Eaglestone claims that Levinas's account of aesthetics, even in *Otherwise than Being*, makes application of the saying and said to works of art 'highly problematic'<sup>118</sup> Levinas states that '[a]rt is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition...' (*OBBE*, p. 40) maintaining that artworks are pure said, or, to recall the terms of 'Reality and its Shadow' and *Totality and Infinity*, works of art are pure representation, they belong to a signifying system and the world of sensibility. Artworks do not transcend, as Eaglestone puts it, '[a]rt comprises only essence, it does not go over into the otherwise than being: it exists only as said.'<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Eaglestone, p. 124.

<sup>116</sup> Eaglestone, p. 125.

<sup>117</sup> Eaglestone, p. 138.

<sup>118</sup> Eaglestone, p. 152.

<sup>119</sup> Eaglestone, p. 152.

Eaglestone argues that despite Levinas's apparent continued antipathy towards art in *Otherwise than Being* this work, with its intense focus on language, does allow the development of an ethical criticism. Eaglestone puts forward three arguments against Levinas's claim that works of art are pure said and as such do not partake of the ethical. The first argument Eaglestone makes is to claim Levinas contradicts himself when he casts literary language as only comprising of the said and unable to interrupt the said with the saying. He states that the saying and the said, for Levinas, are the elements that make up language. Levinas sees language as consisting of both the said and the saying which can be seen as the condition for the possibility of language itself. Levinas wants to maintain that only philosophical discourse can interrupt the said and reveal the saying but if all language is composed of the saying and the said then it follows that literary language will also be 'comprised of the saying and the said, the condition of language, and it, too, should exhibit the amphibology of language.'<sup>120</sup> Eaglestone cites several occasions of Levinas talking about language or discourse in general with reference to the revelation of the saying, which supports his claim that *all* language and *every* discourse contains the saying with the possibility to interrupt the said. He does, however, consider a possible problem with this argument.

On the face of it, all language is comprised of the saying and said and as a result all language, including the literary language of literary works, can be seen as holding the potential for the ethical, the interruption or overflowing of the said by the saying. Eaglestone admits that this may not be the case for Levinas's account. He considers the possibility that the 'referent' of literary works may not be the Other but rather they may 'open up' to the *il y a*.<sup>121</sup> Eaglestone says, 'if this is the case, if literary language opens to this anonymous insistent neutrality which is the bare experience of existence and not to the other, to the horizon of ethics, then literature has no access to the saying.'<sup>122</sup> Eaglestone does not refer back to *Otherwise than Being* to support this supposition and allows it to appear as if from nowhere. Instead, he refers to the novel, *Thomas the Obscure* written by Levinas's contemporary and friend, Maurice Blanchot, and claims that Blanchot tries to evoke the *there is* at the being of the novel. The connection between art and the

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<sup>120</sup> Eaglestone, p. 157.

<sup>121</sup> Eaglestone, p. 158.

<sup>122</sup> Eaglestone, p. 158.

*there is* has been noted by Gabriel Riera in his essay, “‘The Possibility of the Poetic Said’ in *Otherwise than Being* (Allusion, or Blanchot in Lévinas)’ where he argues that the work of art gives access to the *il y a* as ‘existence without a world’<sup>123</sup> but limits this construction of the aesthetic to Levinas’s earlier work, particularly, *Existence and Existents*.<sup>124</sup> The idea that literature opens, not onto the Other but rather the *there is* has been argued as creating the space for literature by Michael Fagenblat who claims that Blanchot ‘saw the *il y a* as the very space of literature, the occasion when writing betrays its marriage to meaning in search of a life of its own.’<sup>125</sup> Levinas does not explicitly connect the *il y a* with works of art in *Otherwise than Being* but the concept remains an important one in this later work; near the end of the book he asks, ‘does poetry succeed in reducing the rhetoric?’ (*OBBE*, p. 182) and responds ‘... Everything that claims to come from elsewhere, even the marvels of which essence itself is capable, even the surprising possibilities of renewal by technology and magic... all this does not deaden the heartrending bustling of the *there is* recommencing behind every negation.’

Levinas carries on to state, ‘[o]nly the meaning of the other is irrecusable, and forbids the reclusion and re-entry into the shell of the self. A voice comes from the other shore. A voice interrupts the saying of the already said’ (*OBBE*, p. 183). This suggests that Levinas does want to maintain the encounter with the Other, or proximity, in the vocabulary of *Otherwise than Being*, as the only access to the ethical. It is the voice of the Other, coming from the absolutely exterior, that interrupts the said whereas poetry seems to remain on the hither side. It is hard to tell if Eaglestone considers the argument that literary language does not partake of the ethical because of its connection to the *there is* seriously as he simply suggests it as a counter-argument and concedes that if it is true then ‘the words of a work of literature, resounding as the essence of words, could only serve either to recall us to our essence in the world of essence formed by the said, or to a strange

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<sup>123</sup> Levinas cited in Gabriel Riera, “‘The Possibility of the Poetic Said’ in *Otherwise than Being* (Allusion, or Blanchot in Lévinas)’, *Diacritics*, 34 (2004), 14–36 (p. 17).

<sup>124</sup> He goes on to argue a shift from this understanding of the aesthetic to an ethical orientation in *Otherwise than Being*.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Fagenblat, ‘Back to the Other Levinas: Alain P. Toumayan’s Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of Difference in Blanchot and Levinas’, *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique*, 10 (2005), 298–313 (p. 301).

“suspension” of the ethical<sup>126</sup> before outlining two further arguments for why he thinks Levinas’s later work marks a movement that opens literature to the ethical.

Eaglestone makes two arguments for why *Otherwise than Being* provides the theoretical background he is looking for in the development of his ethical criticism (and that *Totality and Infinity* definitively did not allow): the first argument is that Levinas uses literature in his philosophical discussion and the second is that *Otherwise than Being*, itself, can be seen as a work of literature. Eaglestone hopes to use these arguments to counter the objection raised above and demonstrate that literature does in fact open to the ethical saying rather than return to the *il y a*.<sup>127</sup>

Eaglestone maintains that by appealing to literature, Levinas implies that literary works pertain to the saying as much as to the philosophical discourse which Levinas explicitly privileges. He identifies two uses of literature in *Otherwise than Being*: literary examples and appeals to literature as ‘authority’ or ‘expert witnesses’ and claims that they act to disrupt the said, echoing Levinas’s project for philosophy.<sup>128</sup> Eaglestone singles out a sentence from Dostoyevsky as an example of Levinas’s use of literature as an appeal to authority or expert witness to his argument. Levinas writes:

The subjectivity of the subject, as being subject to everything, is a pre-originary susceptibility, before all freedom and outside of every present. It is accused in uneasiness or the unconditionality of the accusative, in the “here I am” (*me voici*) which is obedience to the glory of the Infinite that orders to me to the other. “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others,” writes Dostoyevsky in *Brothers Karamazov*. The subjectivity of the subject is persecution and martyrdom (*OBBE*, p. 146).

It is open to interpretation as to whether Levinas is using the quote from Dostoyevsky as an example, an illustration of his point, or some kind of truth or appeal to authority to further his argument. Regardless, Eaglestone maintains that

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<sup>126</sup> Eaglestone, p. 158.

<sup>127</sup> Eaglestone, p. 158.

<sup>128</sup> Eaglestone, p. 160.

Levinas's use of literature in *Otherwise than Being* differs substantially from references to literary works in *Totality and Infinity*. This is a necessary point for Eaglestone's argument as he concludes at the end of his investigation of *Totality and Infinity* that Levinas closes the door for ethical criticism but a shift in *Otherwise than Being* makes the project of a Levinasian ethical approach to literature tenable.

I do not think Levinas's use of literature differs significantly in his later work; take the following passage from *Totality and Infinity*, for example:

Suicide is tragic, for death does not bring a resolution to all the problems to which birth gave rise, and is powerless to humiliate the values of the earth – whence Macbeth's final cry in confronting death, defeated because the universe is not destroyed at the same time as his life. Suffering at the same time despairs for being riveted to being – and loves the being to which it is riveted (*TI*, p. 146).

In both appeals to literature, *Brothers Karamazov* and *Macbeth*, Levinas illustrates his point and uses the literary example to continue or expand the argument. Whether they are primarily illustrative, providing concrete examples with which most people would be familiar, or somehow used to witness or provide authority, I do not think Levinas is required to change his view that literature is pure representation or pure said. If art is mimetic, representations of the world of sensibility, then surely works of art can illustrate the ethical without partaking of the ethical. The work of art can represent or illustrate an idea without going beyond to the idea, for example, I can behold the Mona Lisa without going beyond the image to fourteenth century France and the world of Lisa Gherardini or Leonardo da Vinci. Levinas might maintain that I cannot say, having gazed upon her ambiguous smile, fixed for all time, that I have known her or encountered her or discovered some truth about human nature. I do not think Levinas's use of literature, as examples or 'expert witnesses' means he considers them as providing access to the ethical saying. As mimesis works of art can illustrate the ethical but it does not follow that they go beyond the sensible world to give access to the transcendent, to the absolute exteriority of the Other.

Eaglestone's second argument for literature opening to the ethical saying in *Otherwise than Being* rather than the *there is*, is that the work itself is a work of literature. This argument stems from Derrida's critique of *Totality and Infinity*, 'Violence and Metaphysics' and Blanchot's musings on Levinas and philosophy. Eaglestone takes Derrida's observations about the difficulty of language in and for Levinas's project and Blanchot's notion of a 'gift of literature'<sup>129</sup> and tries to argue that Levinas's work, especially *Otherwise than Being*, is a work of literature that performatively enacts the interruption of the said by the saying. He enumerates literary aspects of Levinas's writing. The first of these is the use of metaphors, particularly those related to speech and language, including the use of linguistic terms. Eaglestone claims that, Levinas's 'writing lays metaphor on dizzying metaphor.'<sup>130</sup> He notes that Levinas's style of writing, the extensive use of metaphors without 'strict terms' contrasts his work with common understandings of philosophical discourse.<sup>131</sup> Eaglestone also points to Levinas's habit of 'writing in questions' as another way *Otherwise than Being* can be seen as situated in the realm of literature, rather than philosophy. Earlier in this chapter I discussed Michelle Boulous Walker's response to Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi's call to 're-read' Levinas. Walker was interested in reading philosophical works in such a way as to not colonise alterity in the name of truth. The question was of central importance to her project as to question opens up meaning, dialogue and perhaps creates a space for otherness. Likewise, Eaglestone sees Levinas's use of questions as a refusal to 'close off philosophical discussion'<sup>132</sup> and more, a performative act in which he 'opens up his discourse to interruption.'<sup>133</sup> Finally, Eaglestone claims that Levinas is constantly redefining the ideas in his work. Levinas does not let meaning settle; Eaglestone argues this is to disrupt conventional philosophical discourse and the fixed, materiality of the said.

## **My response: why literature is still problematic**

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<sup>129</sup> Blanchot cited in Eaglestone, p. 161.

<sup>130</sup> Eaglestone, p. 161.

<sup>131</sup> Eaglestone, p. 161.

<sup>132</sup> Eaglestone, p. 162.

<sup>133</sup> Eaglestone, p. 161.

Does *Otherwise than Being* sit more comfortably under the appellation of literature than philosophy? Eaglestone, clearly, answers in the affirmative, but is a focus on language, use of metaphor and a questioning style enough to mark this work as ‘Literature’? Nietzsche makes extensive use of metaphor, as does Derrida and numerous other philosophers from the Continental tradition. One might argue that works of these types, like Levinas’s text, belong under the umbrella of literature rather than philosophy. Other, less controversial, philosophers can be found who employ metaphor, some extensively, in their writing: Plato, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hobbes, Donna Haraway and the list could go on.<sup>134</sup> The use of metaphor, even in an extended way, does not seem to result in a work acquiring the label of literature. Thinkers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and particularly in the Continental tradition place an emphasis on language and turn their attention to the ways in which language operates.

Following the revolutionary work of Ferdinand de Saussure – published posthumously as *Course in General Linguistics* in which the arbitrariness of the sign was argued for – philosophers began to think about language as a more social and active agent in the creation of meaning which is characterised by difference as well as look at ways in which language *fails*.<sup>135</sup> It is not surprising, then, that *Otherwise than Being*, written at the height of deconstruction’s popularity and as a response to Derrida’s reading of problems of representation and language in *Totality and Infinity*, takes language as a central focus. Levinas, like readers and writers such as Derrida, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricœur and Roland Barthes, sees language as inextricably connected to other aspects of human culture, thought and meaning, and specifically, in his case, ethics.

Levinas’s use of metaphor and way of redefining and returning to key terms, can definitely be seen as ‘performative,’ Levinas is aware of the impossibility of representing in language the notion of the otherwise than being, he pushes language to its limit in an attempt to describe the indescribable. As Eaglestone argues, Levinas does seem to be attempting to enact an interruption of the said or perhaps a demonstration or rehabilitation of the saying but does this

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<sup>134</sup> Admittedly not all of these figures use metaphor without problems or controversy – the point here is that metaphor is a common trope utilised by philosophers.

<sup>135</sup> Think, for example, of Derrida’s *différance* and the arbitrariness of the signified.

mark the work literature? Levinas, as I have already noted, sees the reduction of the said to the saying as the job of philosophy. Eaglestone is guilty of begging the question, assuming what he is arguing for. He has already assumed that a text that ‘tries to uncover the traces of the saying’<sup>136</sup> marks the work as literary but that is the very claim under investigation. Eaglestone states, ‘[b]y trying to escape the said of philosophy, by trying to be an ‘unheard of graphics’, the work gestures towards literature, carrying more than the implication that literary texts can also escape and rupture the said.’<sup>137</sup> He is here suggesting that the performativity of Levinas’s work, its attempts to demonstrate the difficulties of language and the reduction that Levinas advocates, not only marks it as literary but also that this means literary works give access to the saying. Eaglestone again demonstrates the assumption that performativity is correlative, perhaps a sufficient but not necessary condition, to literature, ‘[t]he text, like a work of literature, explicitly performs itself, and as a results, echoes literary writing...’<sup>138</sup> The following paragraph begins with ‘[a]s a “gift of literature”,<sup>139</sup> *Otherwise than Being* is part of literature, a literary saying and said given out...’<sup>140</sup> Eaglestone assumes that the performative aspect of Levinas’s text is one of the features that aligns it with literature but then uses this assumption to argue that literature can give access to the saying on the basis that Levinas’s ‘literary’ utterance attempts to perform the reduction of the said to the saying.

Levinas considers his project philosophical and I have already argued that he is explicit in his goal of philosophy. I quote again,

But is also necessary that the saying *call for philosophy* in order that the light that occurs not congeal into essence what is beyond essence, and that the hypostasis of an eon not be set up as an ideal. *Philosophy* makes this astonishing adventure - showing and recounting as an essence – intelligible, by loosening this grip of being. *A philosopher’s effort, and his unnatural position*, consists, while showing the hither side, in immediately reducing the eon which triumphs in the said and in the monstrations, and,

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<sup>136</sup> Eaglestone, p. 162.

<sup>137</sup> Eaglestone, p. 162.

<sup>138</sup> Eaglestone, p. 162.

<sup>139</sup> Eaglestone borrows this phrase from Blanchot.

<sup>140</sup> Eaglestone, p. 162.

despite the reduction, retaining an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity, of diachronic expression (*OBBE*, p. 44). [My italics]

It is the role of the philosopher, understood in Levinasian terms, rather than what he would consider the Western ontological tradition, to reduce the said to the saying, to be aware of the echo of the saying, the beyond essence, which necessarily congeals into an essence or sign. Artworks, including literary works, are still excluded from ethics for Levinas, he claims, '[a]rt is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined. The said is reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology' (*OBBE*, p. 40). Eaglestone, we have seen, thinks that Levinas is incorrect in his exclusion of artworks from the saying. It would seem that if language is composed of the saying and the said then *all* language should have the potential to give access to the saying, every use of language, including literary language, has a saying component and is then open to the reduction. Eaglestone also firmly characterises Levinas's work, particularly his attempts to give voice to the saying, to enact the reduction, as literary in nature.

Is Eaglestone correct in his assessment of Levinas as misguided about the saying's relation to literary works? Eaglestone's arguments relies on a significant break between Levinas's 'early' work, that up to and including *Totality and Infinity*, and his later work, particularly *Otherwise than Being*. Eaglestone, recall, had reached the conclusion at the end of his consideration of *Totality and Infinity* that Levinas's views on art make any attempts to build an 'ethical criticism' upon his work impossible. *Otherwise than Being*, on the other hand, is 'radically different'<sup>141</sup> to Levinas's earlier work and 'represents a profound shift in Levinas's thought'<sup>142</sup> according to Eaglestone. Eaglestone requires *Otherwise than Being* to represent a substantial shift in Levinas's thought to allow the objections of *Totality and Infinity* to be put aside. I maintain, by contrast, that there is not a clear break between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas introduces the concepts he discusses in *Otherwise than Being* in *Totality and Infinity* they do not mark a separation but rather they 'are bound to one another,

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<sup>141</sup> Eaglestone, p. 138.

<sup>142</sup> Eaglestone, p. 137.

companions, like two tablets, or one.’<sup>143</sup> Richard A. Cohen, in his Foreword to *Otherwise than Being* describes the book as ‘augmentation, expansion, extension, magnification, intensification, enlargement, as if Levinas’s later writings were commentaries on the earlier ones. A sentence becomes a section, which in turn expands into an entire chapter.’<sup>144</sup>

Take, for instance, the notion of the saying - this is the main aspect of Levinas’s work that Eaglestone explores – which is introduced in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas uses the term to describe the relationship with the Other, ‘[t]his "saying to the Other"—this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an existent—precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being’ (*TI*, p. 48). Later he argues, ‘[t]he mode of “saying” or of “manifesting” itself hides while uncovering, says and silences the inexpressible, harasses and provokes. The “saying,” and not only the said, is equivocal’ (*TI*, p. 260). These are clearly early thoughts on the notions of the saying and the said but embryonic versions of the later fully developed concepts. The first citation contains the idea of proximity associated with the saying – it involves a relation with the Other as interlocutor and is pre-symbolic. Likewise, in the second passage I have quoted the saying ‘hides while uncovering,’ like the later account of the saying, as soon as it is manifest it is concealed, fixed in an essence, lost in the said. The Preface is more explicit in the expression of these concepts that dominate the later work, Levinas says:

The word by way of preface which seeks to break through the screen stretched between the author and the reader by the book itself does not give itself out as a word of honour. But it belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the foreword or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights (*TI*, p. 30).

Adrian Peperzak points out that ‘this preface announces the development of Levinas’s distinction between the Saying (*le dire*), the Said (*le dit*), the Un Saying

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<sup>143</sup> Richard A. Cohen, ‘Foreword’, in *Otherwise than Being, Or, Beyond Essence*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. xi.

<sup>144</sup> Cohen, p. xi.

or denial (*dedire*) and the Saying-again (*redire*)'.<sup>145</sup> These initial glimpses of the saying and said in *Totality and Infinity* suggest that Cohen is correct in his assessment of *Otherwise than Being* as 'expansion' and 'extension' of the earlier work. This suggests that the two works are complementary; the initial thoughts of *Totality and Infinity* are not to be discounted as Levinas shifts focus to expand certain ideas in the later work. The very concepts that Eaglestone sees as a turn in Levinas's work are introduced in *Totality and Infinity* suggesting a continuation of ideas from one text to the other.

Levinas does employ a new vocabulary in *Otherwise than Being* in an attempt to give expression to the impossibility of discussing, representing or comprehending the otherwise than being, however, some echoes from *Totality and Infinity* can be heard; where the earlier work discusses the 'Other', the later shifts to describe the 'neighbour'. The relationship with the Other in *Totality and Infinity* entailed complete 'responsibility' which finds itself recast as being held 'hostage' and characterised as 'persecution'. The encounter with the Other was a key experience in the earlier text but this is replaced by 'proximity' in the later. Peperzak suggests the shift in vocabulary is due to a shift of attention from the Other to the subject,<sup>146</sup> a claim which Colin Davis rejects, arguing the change in terminology is a reflection of 'Levinas's reluctance to establish and maintain a rigid conceptual framework.'<sup>147</sup> Neither of these suggested reasons for the change in vocabulary in *Otherwise than Being* entails a break from the earlier work but rather point to an attempt to reimagine the ethical relationship that grounds philosophy in light of the specific problems that arise from that very work. Eaglestone cannot simply discount the concerns from *Totality and Infinity*. The saying and the said, the ideas that Eaglestone uses to construct his 'ethical criticism' are introduced in the earlier work, in which he sees no possibility for resolving the problem with literature. Levinas does not reject his earlier formulation of ethics but expands, reworks and reimagines it, working with the difficulties present to create the strange and difficult, *Otherwise than Being*.

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<sup>145</sup> Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *To the other: an introduction to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), p. 122.

<sup>146</sup> Peperzak, p. 17.

<sup>147</sup> Davis, p. 70.

I contend that to draw a hard and fast line between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* would also have an undesirable consequence. Although I have argued above that Eaglestone is incorrect in his assessment of Levinas's later work as different enough to the earlier work to allow for a complete shift in its relation to works of art, particularly literature, even if we were to concede the concerns from *Totality and Infinity* were no longer problematic in light of Levinas's 'linguistic turn' I think the resulting approach to literature would necessarily miss out on much of what we instinctively see as ethical in our interaction with literature. Eaglestone's 'ethical criticism' purports not to be methodological but rather picks up the call from Levinas to expose the saying congealed in the said, but nevertheless overflowing this confinement, only manifest again as said as soon as it is revealed, thought or spoken of. His approach sounds not dissimilar to Derridean-styled interpretation. An ethical criticism, according to Eaglestone will 'continually seek to be interpretation as interruption.'<sup>148</sup> One could see this as looking for points of rupture, where the saying overflows the language of the text, the sense that meaning slips between the words on the page in ever ungraspable ways. Eaglestone is emphatic that 'there can be no last word, no final interpretation beyond interruption.'<sup>149</sup> Ethical criticism is a continuous process of interrupting the ontological said by the ethical saying. On the face of it, Eaglestone's ethical criticism is more about language than ethics. The notion of interpretation as interruption is reminiscent of deconstructive readings that look for ways in which the text operates to say otherwise; the reader works with the internal logic of the text to demonstrate ways in which it denies univocal meaning or is marked by difference and deferral. Think of Derrida's reading on Franz Kafka's 'Before the Law'. He reads Kafka's story to see the ways in which it refers to itself, denies the possibility of any singular meaning; he reads the text to see how it frames itself or speaks about itself as text. Derrida claims:

The story *Before the Law* does not tell or describe anything but itself as text. It does only this or does also this. Not within an assured specular

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<sup>148</sup> Eaglestone, p. 167.

<sup>149</sup> Eaglestone, p. 168.

reflection of some self-referential transparency – and I must stress this point – but in the unreadability of the text.<sup>150</sup>

Derrida is here looking at the way the text interrupts itself to tell the story of its own unreadability – it tells the story of *différance*. The actual ethical component of Eaglestone's ethical criticism relies upon the ethical foundation Levinas creates for the saying in *Totality and Infinity*. Eaglestone claims, '[t]he ethical is in language'<sup>151</sup> and he connects this to 'the exposure of the one to the other'<sup>152</sup> which is the fundamental ethical drive of the earlier work. The ethical component of language cannot be disconnected from the idea of proximity, exposure to the Other, for it implies presence and immediacy and Levinas's concerns with representation, temporality and rhetoric do not suddenly disappear. Eaglestone, in his attempt to side-step the issues with artworks, and literature in particular and, by centring his ethical criticism on the interaction between the saying and said, risks losing the very ethical elements that make Levinas's work so enticing to readers of literature.

In the end, Levinas seems to be rejecting works of art because he wants to maintain that ethical relations should be reserved for people. The political, historical and cultural milieu to Levinas's work is not insignificant. As a young Jewish Frenchman in the 1930s Levinas experienced the horrors of World War II first-hand. He wrote the notes that were to become *Existence and Existents* as a prisoner of war and lost members of his family in the Holocaust. It is not hard to understand the impetus to carve out a special place for the human in matters of ethics. One can bring to mind multiple images of prisoners in concentration camps from the Second World War; emaciated bodies, sunken cheeks but eyes that look straight at the camera. In that look the viewer is held. The atrocities of the war are written clear upon the face that appears to plead with the viewer. It pleads for mercy, for justice, for its life and to be recognised as a person who deserves a world, a life, justice. The viewer cannot help but be moved. One's worldview shifts when face-to-face with one of these images. The viewer feels responsible. As human beings we must face the responsibility that these horrific acts were

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<sup>150</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 211.

<sup>151</sup> Eaglestone, p. 168.

<sup>152</sup> Eaglestone, p. 169.

perpetrated by our own kind. We must reassess our beliefs about what we think humans are capable of and in doing so ask deep questions about our own selves. One can only begin to imagine experiencing the concentration camps and the faces of the prisoners first hand and it is not surprising that Levinas's ethics, which is characterised by singularity, responsibility and the face-to-face encounter, emerged in the middle of the twentieth century.

It is understandable that Levinas might want to restrict the ethical to the Other, to the unknowable, infinite, to the face-to-face and neighbour. An artistic image of a prisoner does not have the same immediate effect. The mediated image does approach from an angle; the artist has an opinion, a point-of-view, an interpretation. The artist may want to convey the very thoughts that inspire Levinas's ethics but they still seek to bring understanding, comprehension and in doing so the person represented becomes a trope. They become a figure representing something bigger than themselves, or something other than themselves, the atrocities of the war, or human endurance, and so on, and in doing so the singular person is lost. The image exists because the person is absent. It is also not surprising that Levinas is suspicious of rhetoric given the significant role propaganda played during the Second World War. I am not trying here to make some kind of *ad hominem* argument. Levinas, in his own idiosyncratic way, does put forward arguments to support his claims and draws upon the philosophical tradition and other philosopher's work, such as Plato, Heidegger and Husserl and takes part in the philosophical debate. You could, perhaps, see his wartime experiences as motivation for following his line of thinking. The face-to-face encounters he had with other prisoners of war could be seen as the phenomenological experience that Levinas wants to explore. I think these experiences during the Second World War are the saying behind Levinas's philosophical works. The desire to say something, the sense of proximity and responsibility that interrupt the ontological said.

## Summary

We are left in a difficult position. We have a phenomenological framework for the encounter with the Other but it is not clear that an answer to Levinas's problem with art is forthcoming. I have spent considerable time trying to flesh out Levinas's account of the ethical as well as the problem of art and literature. If we do have a responsibility to the otherness of the text then it seems important to address Levinas's texts in their singularity, to let their strangeness be, and to avoid the temptation to brush over inconsistencies to make them fit our own purpose. The question for me now is can we make use of Levinas's account of the encounter with the Other and the reduction of the said to the saying in reading literature without destroying the alterity of his work?

## Chapter Three: Gadamer's Hermeneutics

### Introduction

I begin Chapter Three with Levinas's concern with literature, and particularly the application of the encounter with the Other to literary text, still unanswered. This means that my guiding question, can we have an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature, must still be answered in the negative at this point. In his 1961 work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is utterly clear in his belief that the transcendental experience of encountering an Other is reserved for the face-to-face encounter. The later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, with its focus on language, can be seen as muddying the waters, but Levinas is still adamant that artworks, including literary works, cannot give access to the transcendental. As he explores the ethical in language, Levinas suggests that the goal of philosophy is to perform a reduction of the said to the saying. This goal could be seen to provide an apparent contradiction, or at least a problem, for Levinas if he wants to maintain his claim that works of art cannot partake of the ethical. If all language contains both the saying and the said then it would follow that literary language, the words that make up a poem or novel, for instance, would also contain the ethical saying. If it is possible to trace the echo of the saying in a philosophical text and context then surely the ethical saying is similarly present in literature. Levinas's antipathy to artworks is also complicated by his regular referral to literature to illustrate his arguments as well as his 'literary' style of philosophy. Despite these complications I concluded Chapter Two by leaving Levinas's assertion, that works of art cannot give access to the ethical, standing, though I did suggest it was a somewhat fragile position.

There is enough continuity from *Totality and Infinity* with its unambiguous assertion that artworks, including literary artworks, are mimetic and pure representation and thus cannot give access to the ethical, to conclude that in the later work, *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas has not offered any perceptible change in his position on art. By identifying the reduction as the goal for philosophy, Levinas can maintain works of art as occupying a different role to philosophical texts; art is mimetic whereas philosophy holds a different status in relation to

reality and, by implication, truth.<sup>1</sup> At this point it is worth remembering that ethics *is* first philosophy for Levinas. Ethics and philosophy are, in a way, synonymous – philosophy is based on the ethics of the face-to-face – so the special place reserved for philosophy, especially in relation to art, is not surprising.

The question now is how to proceed? The temptation, and the route taken by Robert Eaglestone, is to try to either find a loophole to allow one to adapt Levinas for use in literary studies or to solve the apparent contradictions, and show how Levinas is incorrect to exclude literature from the ethical encounter. This is the way academic work operates in many cases. Thinker A presents a problem. Theorist B shows how the problem is not really a problem or solves the problem. B may employ another thinker, C, to help fix the issue. It is especially the case when you are presented with an apparent contradiction or inconsistency in a theorist's work. Philosophy cannot tolerate these contradictions and inconsistencies; logical consistency is a key goal for most academic pursuits. This is exactly the kind of reading that Michelle Boulous Walker identifies in the article that I discussed in Chapter Two. Levinas can, potentially, be seen as offering inconsistent or irrational arguments against the inclusion of works of art in the ethical and one could attempt to correct his reasoning. To minimise the discrepancies apparent in his thought might result in an account of encountering the Other that is philosophically more robust. To read Levinas in this way would be placing his work firmly in the philosophical tradition, as well as the response produced. This kind of reading would also work to minimise the otherness of Levinas' work. It is an attempt to 'understand' his work in a particular light. The philosophically logical reading I have described tries to solve any apparent contradictions or lapses in the text/s that do not conform to the shape the genre perceives is appropriate. The focus is on the argument of the work, rather than the expression of the text.

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<sup>1</sup> This is also reflected in his ideas about language. Philosophy might be able to enact the reduction because the language used in philosophy is straightforward, non-rhetorical. It says what it means and works towards truth. Literary language, on the other hand, is rhetorical, it is figurative in nature and does not mean what it says. Literary language seeks to obscure or embellish whereas philosophical language might be seen as more transparent. This is obviously a contentious point of view and regardless of the assertion of the goal of philosophy, Levinas privileges speech and presence over writing and absence and might consider philosophy a spoken task given his ideas about approaching one via one's works.

The ethical imperative apparent in Levinas's work, which is also what seems to initially appeal to literary theorists who look to Levinas to inform their ethical readings, is to maintain Otherness, to recognise the way in which the Other calls to me without trying to master the Other. Levinas identifies a key moment in which someone in need looks at you, and your humanity requires that you recognise the Other as a person who shares your world. This Other and their plea for help or recognition involves a stepping outside oneself or questioning of one's self. This questioning is a result of encountering something completely different, fully outside the self in a way that is not simply 'not-me'. The Other's infiniteness fractures the self's world, drawing attention to the fact that there is something unknowable that transcends the self. These observations are based on systematic reflection on human consciousness and are deeply entrenched in the philosophical tradition, but there is a feeling that Levinas's concern to base philosophy on an ethics of the Other stems from his experiences as a prisoner of war in the Second World War in which members of his family were victims of the Holocaust<sup>2</sup>.

Levinas goes to great lengths to carve out the ethical encounter as an exclusively human experience. He does not frequently mention the Holocaust by name in *Totality and Infinity* or *Otherwise than Being* but many commentators, including Leonard Grob, Richard Bernstein, Tina Chanter, Michael Bernard-Donals and Daniel Epstein, consider the Holocaust, the horrors of Auschwitz and hatred of anti-Semitism 'the primary thrust of Levinas's thought' which 'is to be understood as his response to the horror of evil that erupted in the twentieth century.'<sup>3</sup> The events of 1939-1945 were clearly on Levinas's mind as he dedicates *Otherwise than Being*:

To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism (*OBBE*).

And under this he also dedicates, in Hebrew, the text to his family:

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<sup>2</sup> Levinas lost his two brothers, mother and father – all were executed by machine gun fire in Kaunas.

<sup>3</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Cambridge Companions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 253.

To the memory of my father and master, Rabbi Yehiel son of Abraham the Levite, my mother and guide, Dvora daughter of Rabbi Moshe, my brothers Dov son of Rabbi Yehiel the Levite and Aminidav son of Yehiel the Levite, my father-in-law Rabbi Shmuel son of Rabbi Gershon the Levite and my mother-in-law Malka daughter of Rabbi Chaim<sup>4</sup>

The dedications help support my thesis and Levinas's own assessment of his intellectual biography, which he sums up as being 'dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror'.<sup>5</sup> The desire to maintain the ethical as a primarily human phenomenon means that ethics, for Levinas, is what it is to be human and cannot be experienced through mediation of objects, including works of art. This desire can be seen as one of Levinas's responses to the Nazi horror.

Levinas says, in an interview, '[r]esponsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship.'<sup>6</sup> His project involves the attempt to base philosophy upon something essential, something that is the condition for the possibility of philosophy itself. By establishing ethics as first philosophy Levinas places the notion of responsibility at the centre of human experience. For Levinas, subjectivity is only possible as a result of the ethical relationship. The primal, ontological, face-to-face encounter expresses the pain and horror and enduring belief in humanity that follows the atrocities of the Second World War. The Other issues a command but at the same time is destitute. The Other appears as expression and infinity, not something to be understood or mastered but that which inaugurates subjectivity and responsibility. To fix Levinas's thought firmly in the Western philosophical tradition by discounting his statements regarding art and literature which may appear not to logically follow from his arguments regarding language is possibly akin to reducing the Other to the same. The Shoah is the ethical 'saying' that permeates Levinas's work. It is the memory of the long days cutting wood as a prisoner of war, the fear for his family, followed by the awful knowledge of their execution, the awareness of crematoria nearby making

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas, translated by Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 291.

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, p. 96.

genocide an industrial endeavour. This saying works behind the text of his work, it is the desire to say something, Levinas says, of the saying '[b]ut the *saying* is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it... It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence'.<sup>7</sup> Levinas's works, as philosophical texts<sup>8</sup>, contain the ethical saying. The texts that bear his signature can be seen as Levinas's response, before the face of the victims of the Holocaust. To insist on the inclusion of works of art in the ethical encounter and saying is to reduce this desire and responsibility to the Other to the words on the page, a finite said.

The question I raised at the beginning of this section appears again, how to proceed? How does one engage with Levinas's work in a rigorous, philosophical and serious way without succumbing to the temptation to treat his thought in the traditional approach that will destroy the otherness of the texts? And if we are not to treat his work in the 'traditional' way, how are we to respond to it? To maintain the otherness inherent in Levinas's work, the moments of incomprehensibility, the apparent contradictions, the ethical saying, whilst attempting both to understand his oeuvre, treating it with the proper respect as well as finding a way to reconcile the application of his thoughts on ethics to literature? I have chosen to proceed by placing Levinas alongside another philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer. I do not seek to plug holes in Levinas's thought with Gadamer, nor do I suggest an amalgamation of the two projects. Rather, I will bring into the open the divergences between Levinas and Gadamer, with the aim of reflecting upon their differences and complementarities towards a coherent view of the idea of encountering the Other via the mediation of literature that maintains the integrity of both philosophers.

## Why Gadamer?

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<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Levinas maintains that language is composed of both saying and said. The implication is that this is spoken language but he does make allowances for philosophy to perform a reduction from the said to the saying. He rejects the idea that works of art in general, and literary artworks in particular, give access to the ethical.

Gadamer and Levinas were both heavily influenced by Martin Heidegger's phenomenological approach in *Being and Time*. The two thinkers have some similarities that justify my decision to open a dialogue between the two in response to the thesis question. Levinas and Gadamer both emphasise the importance of alterity. Alterity is obviously central to Levinas's thought, but it is an important aspect in Gadamer's thinking as well. In discussing the notion of prejudice, Gadamer claims one ought to be 'aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself *in all its otherness* and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (*TM*, p. 272) [My italics].

Another similarity between Gadamer and Levinas is that they both point to the unique status of language in terms of what we can know. I have already established that language is crucial for Levinas. He characterises the ethical encounter as the manifestation of the face of the Other. The face is expression; the Other addresses me. As the Other speaks to me I find a breach in what I know. The Other upsets my feeling of mastery of the totality of my world. The Other expresses to me something I could not find out for myself: that I am not the sole possessor of the world but that I, in fact, share it with the Other.<sup>9</sup> It is through expression, and the ethical saying that I can know myself as a self. Language is also of central importance for Gadamer. Gadamer's hermeneutics relies on the notion that we understand through dialogue and this dialogue is mediated through language. He claims that 'all understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language.'<sup>10</sup> He is not saying that our only experience of the world is that which is expressed in language but that language 'embodies the sole means for carrying out the conversation that we are and that we hope to convey to each other.'<sup>11</sup>

Gerald L. Bruns draws out a further similarity between Levinas and Gadamer. He justifies his engagement of the two thinkers by claiming that they both reject rule-based methods in their respective fields. He says, 'Levinasian ethics is concerned with the claims other people have on us in advance of how

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<sup>9</sup> Davis, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer cited in Patricia Johnson, *On Gadamer* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Grondin, p. 121.

right we are with respect to rules and beliefs or how in tune we are with a just and rational order of things.’<sup>12</sup> He goes on to say, ‘being under claims of history and tradition rather than claims of concepts and rules is central to Gadamer’s thinking, which is critical of subjectivist accounts of human understanding in ways that coincide with Levinas’s project.’<sup>13</sup> These points of similarity provide part of the justification for the engagement of the two thinkers here. The differences in their concerns provide further justification for placing them in dialogue.

## **Gadamer – an introduction**

Gadamer’s project differs considerably from Levinas’s attempt to develop ethics as first philosophy. Gadamer is concerned largely with developing philosophical hermeneutics and exploring how we understand rather than providing a base or grounding for subsequent philosophical discussion. Gadamer’s magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1960), takes up the twentieth century’s obsession with science, and in particular the scientific method which he sees as being applied to areas that cannot be treated or understood with this methodology – more specifically, the humanities, which he saw as becoming increasingly looked at through the lens of the scientific method. Paul Gerner claims that although there is an element of ‘putting science in its place’ in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer is not actually anti-science, rather he is arguing that ‘there are certain experiences of truth which do not depend on the application of method, which indeed are distorted by the application of method.’<sup>14</sup> The classic example that Gadamer uses is art (and literature).

Gadamer and Levinas both discuss art as mimesis but come to quite different conclusions about what mimesis means and the consequences for the ontological status of works of art. We have seen how the mimetic aspect of art, for Levinas, is problematic. Levinas sees art as pure representation, an attempt at reproduction, and as such it is marked by absence of the object represented. This leads him to posit art as having a different (and lesser) ontological status to other

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<sup>12</sup> Bruns, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Bruns, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Gerner, p. 130.

objects. The ontological status of the work of art, including literary works of art, was one of the problems we encountered in trying to apply Levinas's ethics to literature. As works of art were seen as pure representation, they could not give access to the transcendental. Gadamer takes up the question of representation in art in his famous discussion of play.

Gadamer uses the notion of play to discuss the mode of being of the work of art, connecting play with the ontological status of artworks from the beginning of his argument, he says, 'when we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art...but the mode of being of the work of art itself' (*TM*, p. 102). The initial observation of play that Gadamer reflects upon is that it involves a to and fro movement. He enumerates metaphors in which the term 'play' is used, giving examples such as, 'the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words' (*TM*, p. 104). From these examples Gadamer is able to define the characteristics of play; the to and fro movement is one of these, and the other is that play is not tied to a goal, the accomplishment of which would cease the play. Rather, the movement of play renews itself in repetition. As the waves are simply returning to shore, renewing themselves in the to and fro, so too does play, in general, renew itself in the movement backwards and forwards. There is not an end-goal in which play will be complete and end. A third observation about play, in general, that Gadamer makes is that it is not tied to the subject. Gadamer goes so far to say that it 'is the game that is played – it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays it' (*TM*, p. 104). He does not regard play as being something that requires a playful subjectivity; it is not necessary for there to be a person who plays for play to exist. Gadamer points to linguistic uses of the word *Spiel* (play) in which it is not reliant on a subject, for example, 'something is "playing" (*spielt*) somewhere or at some time, that something is going on (*im Spiele ist*)' (*TM*, p. 104). He also draws upon anthropological research that seems to support his claim that the concept of 'play' involves a 'primacy of play over the consciousness of the player' (*TM*, p. 105).

By reflecting on the nature of play as being marked by a to and fro movement, without a distinct end and understood in the medial sense – players are

caught up in the play, neither controlling the play by their consciousness nor giving up their subjectivity altogether and experience play as effortless and relaxation (*TM*, p. 105) – Gadamer is able to draw a comparison between play and the work of art. He claims, ‘the being of the work of art is connected with the medial sense of play (Spiel: also, game and drama). Inasmuch as nature is without purpose and intentions, just as it is without exertion, it is a constantly self-renewing play, and can therefore appear as a model for art’ (*TM*, p. 105). Gadamer sees two ways in which play offers a useful model for the work of art. The first has to do with representation and the second with the interaction of spectator and player.

### **Mimesis, representation and the spectator**

I have already indicated that mimesis is an important concept for Gadamer, just as it was for Levinas. Gadamer notes that when one plays, one sets tasks for oneself, and it is not so much the achieving of these goals that is the purpose of setting them but rather that they give shape to the game. Think of a child playing ‘shop’. The child sets tasks; she might set up a table with her wares to sell. A cash register, full of Monopoly money, is available and she sets the task to sell her assorted goods to her younger brother, large teddy and reluctant father. The game is shaped by this goal, her brother, teddy and father’s movements are orchestrated by the tasks she has set, but the game does not succeed or fail depending on how successfully she completes her task; the game does not rely upon her successful sale of every item, her ability to turn a profit or launch a franchise. Rather Gadamer notes that ‘performing a task successfully “presents it”’ (*TM*, p. 108). He goes on to argue that the mode of being of play is self-presentation. The game or play is not the fulfilment of certain tasks but rather the presentation of those tasks. Gadamer continues, ‘[t]he self-presentation of the game involves the player’s achieving, as it were, his own self-presentation by playing i.e. presenting—something. Only because play is always presentation is human play able to make representation itself the task of a game’ (*TM*, p. 108). The difference between the child absorbed in the presentation of a game and work of art, for

instance, a play, is that the work of art is presented *for* someone whereas the child at play plays for herself.

At this point Gadamer introduces the second aspect of play that is relevant to his understanding of works of art, the role of the spectator. The two become intertwined at this point; to understand how Gadamer's idea of mimesis differs to Levinas's we must consider the fact that play (in the sense of drama) is presented for an audience. Gadamer observes that play, as presentation, always has the potential to be a representation, a presentation for someone. It is this potential that 'is the characteristic feature of art as play' (*TM*, p. 108). It is because all presentation is potentially a representation, because all play can be presented to someone, which characterises art as play. The spectator, however, is not simply outside the play, peering in, untouched by the representation. The audience 'participates by watching' (*TM*, p. 108), which constitutes what Gadamer calls a directedness that he sets aside from the all-absorbing representation that marks a child's play. The question of representation is linked to the spectator who completes the play for Gadamer. Whilst the players are absorbed in the presentation they also 'represent a meaningful whole for an audience' (*TM*, p. 109). Gadamer expands on this idea by referring to the fourth wall. He argues that it is not the absence of this wall, the ability for the audience to observe the action that allows the play to be a show, but rather that 'openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play. The audience only complete what the play as such is' (*TM*, p. 109). The audience is a *part* of the play; it is required for the play to be a play as such. The play comprises both the players who represent and the audience for whom they represent. In this structure in which the play consists of players and spectators, it is the spectators, not the players, who are fully absorbed by the play.

### **From child's play to art**

The movement from human play, in the general sense, to art, involves what Gadamer calls '*transformation into structure*' (*TM*, p. 110) in which the play is 'detached from the representing activity of the players' and instead consists 'in the

pure appearance (Erscheinung) of what they are playing' (*TM*, p. 110). The shift to representing for an audience in which the spectator is part of the closed world of the play marks this transformation in which the play becomes a work. When considering a play one asks 'what does it mean?' rather than concerning oneself with the identity of the players who to all intents and purposes disappear (*TM*, p. 111). It is here that questions of representation, truth and mimesis reoccur. Gadamer tries to work from art as play to speak about its ontological status with reference to truth. As structure (a work, a dramatic performance) the play creates its own 'measure' (*TM*, p. 111). One does not simply enter another world (the world of the play) but this world of the play has its own truth that does not need to be related back to reality to verify itself. He argues that play (as drama) 'no longer permits of any comparison with reality as the secret measure of all verisimilitude. It is raised above all such comparisons—and hence also above the question of whether it is all real—because a superior truth speaks from it' (*TM*, p. 112). Here we see Gadamer making a bold claim about the nature of artworks – they do not just give access to truth but he seems to indicate they reveal a transcendental truth. Heidegger's influence can be seen as Gadamer argues 'being presented in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn' (*TM*, p. 112).

Gadamer brings two concepts into play here to justify his position on the ontological status of works of art. The first is the idea of imitation (or mimesis) and the second the notion of recognition. The idea of imitation, mimesis or representation has already been touched upon but Gadamer explores the idea in more detail and, as we have seen, comes to the opposite position regarding the consequences of art as mimesis to Levinas. Gadamer does acknowledge that play (and works of art, insofar as they can be understood as play) is representation or mimetic in nature but he qualifies this by arguing, 'the concept of imitation can be used to describe the play of art only if one keeps in mind the cognitive import of imitation. The thing presented is there' (*TM*, p. 113). Where Levinas suggested artworks mark the absence of the represented object, Gadamer is at pains to take the opposite view. The representation is there, the play or work of art, produces a world in which the object is, in fact, present. He makes an important epistemological point which justifies his ontological view of the work of art

arguing that '[w]hen a person imitates something, he allows what he knows to exist and to exist in the way that he knows it' (*TM*, p. 113). It is not the case that someone blindly copies reality but rather, one represents their understanding of the world. The artist unconceals an aspect of reality and those who view it recognise a truth that could not have appeared otherwise in some other form. Added to this is that the player or artist does not mean to 'hide' behind their imitation but rather intends for what they produce to actually exist. Gadamer's example is of the child who plays dress-up. She represents what she knows and in doing so is able to affirm her own sense of self. She does not, however, hope to simply represent her dressed-up self (be it a nurse, vet, princess, soldier) but to bring that alter-ego into existence. The child's game would be ruined and her feelings hurt, if the onlooker were to immediately see behind the disguise to recognise the child rather than the representation. The child does not try to simply signify a nurse (or vet, princess, soldier) but rather wishes for that nurse to exist in her embodiment of the disguise. The status of imitation in Gadamer's philosophy differs significantly from the notion of imitation or mimesis as a mere copy of an absent reality. Gadamer argues that imitation involves the bringing into existence of what one knows and that the world of the representation has an existence of its own.

Central to Gadamer's account of imitation is the role of the spectator and more specifically the concept of recognition; he claims 'the cognitive import of imitation lies in recognition' (*TM*, p. 113). The thing that attracts us to works of art, according to Gadamer, is that we know and recognise something within that work. The basic understanding of recognition as 'knowing something again' is not what Gadamer means here but rather '[i]n recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence' (*TM*, p. 113). We do not merely find something familiar in works of art but rather we recognise the truth of the work and discover that the 'joy of recognition is ... the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar' (*TM*, p. 113). One discovers the essence of what one knows, of what is familiar, in contemplating an artwork and comes to know more than what is simply familiar. Gorner gives a portrait as an example. One might recognise a familiar figure in a portrait but discover more than what is familiar; one might come to know the

essence of the figure through her representation by the artist who unconceals the truth of the figure. It is the spectator who plays his part that allows the play to mean something through recognition. The work of art, in confirming its identity as a work, ‘issues a challenge which expects to be met’ and in doing so it ‘requires an answer’.<sup>15</sup> It is necessary to the identity of the work of art, as a work, that it is intended for someone. Gadamer ties the idea of imitation to recognition and the spectator, ‘Imitation and representation are not merely a repetition, a copy, but knowledge of the essence. Because they are not merely repetition, but a “bringing forth,” they imply a spectator as well. They contain in themselves an essential relation to everyone for whom the representation exists’ (*TM*, p. 114).

### **The ontological status of works of literary art**

So far I have sketched out three features of the work of art for Gadamer and it is useful to bring them together here in summary with an eye to the main question underlying this thesis. Gadamer, like Levinas, sees art as representation. He gives a robust account of art as imitation which is based on the idea of art as play. In play the player presents something. They do not attempt to simply present the appearance of something but rather what they present *exists*. The particular nature of play is that the presentation always has the potential to be representation – presentation *for* someone. The structure of art as play is such that its epistemological value relies upon the spectator who is not an outsider looking in, but rather that which completes the work, an integral part of the whole. The spectator relates to the work through recognition. The work does not simply present a truth that is independent of everything else (different iterations or performances of the same work, different audiences, etc.) but rather it issues a challenge, it asks to be understood. The work of art, as imitation, implies a spectator who answers the challenge. The spectator discovers the essence of what they know and more than what they know in the recognition they experience when they are drawn to the work of art. The differences to Levinas’s conclusions regarding art as representation are immediately apparent. Gadamer sees the work

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<sup>15</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 26.

of art as having a special ontological status in which that which is represented exists in the world of the play and this world does not rely upon the 'real' world for its validity.

The nature of the representation found in artworks might be understood as that of mimesis or imitation for Gadamer as well as Levinas, but Gadamer does not believe that this means that works of art are of a lower ontological or epistemological status to items in the 'real world' as Levinas argues. Whilst Gadamer does not discuss the transcendental in relation to art he does suggest that works of art have a special relationship to truth. I have already mentioned that Gadamer, expanding on Heidegger's thoughts about art, argues that that they present, or bring forth an 'essence' which suggests a somewhat transcendental perspective but he goes so far as to claim that the presentation in works of art, understood as presenting an essence, 'far from being a mere imitation, is necessarily revelatory' (*TM*, p. 114). Gadamer, as we have seen, uses the role of the spectator (the person the representation is presented for) to help his argument that art as representation does not have a reduced ontological status (of a mere copy of reality). Gadamer, then, presents quite a different conclusion to his thoughts on art to Levinas. One might, quite correctly, note that Gadamer's work on art presented here is rather specific to dramatic performances. He begins his musings on art with the notion of play and then moves to discuss dramatic plays. The role of the spectator is central to his argument which ensures art as an example of truth (that does not work with the scientific method) and this seems unique to a limited number of art forms – namely dramatic art and musical performance.

Gadamer takes the model of representation he has developed in his consideration of play (in general and as dramatic performance) and checks its application for other media. He attempts to consider the picture (and other plastic arts) from a different perspective than contemporary understandings of paintings that see them framed and hung in galleries. He critiques historical theories of art to be able to ask questions not about the nature of art from an art-theory point of view, but rather to inquire about its ontological status. He says, '[t]he intention of the present conceptual analysis... has to do not with theory of art but with ontology' (*TM*, p. 132). This distinction allows him to consider how well the

notion of play (and all that goes with it) applies to the plastic arts. Gadamer claims he is only interested in the related questions of how the picture differs to a copy and how it relates to its world. In his approach to the first question, how the picture differs from a copy, Gadamer argues that although it might seem that a picture is ‘ontologically inferior to what it represents’ (*TM*, p. 133) because the original, the item represented or copied, has a distinctly independent existence to the representation in the picture. To argue against pictures as ontologically inferior copies, Gadamer returns to the question of representation and argues that the representation or picture has its own reality (much like the play which is no less real for presenting something to someone but rather, has its own world or reality). Because of this, Gadamer argues, the picture/original relationship is quite different to the copy/original relationship. In the case of the picture, there is no ‘diminution of being’ (*TM*, p. 135) as the picture has a being of its own, its own world or reality and the original, as *presented*, is not dependent on the representation but at the same time ‘by being presented it experiences, as it were, an *increase in being*’ (*TM*, p. 135). The presentation of the original in the work of art becomes a part of its being, it does not take away from its being nor does the presentation lack being as a result of dependence on the original. Echoes of the ‘play’ model can be detected here. Gadamer confirms,

In countering this subjectivist attitude of modern aesthetics I developed the concept of *play* as the event of art proper. This approach has now proved its value, in that the picture – and with it the whole of art that is not dependent on being reproduced and performed – is an event of being and therefore cannot be properly understood as an object of aesthetic consciousness; rather, it is to be grasped in its ontological structure by starting from such phenomena as that of presentation (*TM*, p. 138).

Gadamer has argued convincingly to include plastic arts in his model of art as ‘play’. At this point it is tempting to simply include literature in Gadamer’s category of ‘art that is not dependent on being reproduced and performed’ (*TM*, p. 138) and assume that his ontological analysis in which artworks have a reality of their own and *increase* the being of the represented reality applies equally to literary artworks.

Gadamer considers literature aside from dramatic and musical art and the plastic arts. His reason for singling out literature is that ‘there does not appear to be any presentation that could claim an ontological valence of its own’ (*TM*, p. 153). Literature does not appear to involve an event – unlike a chamber music performance or a Beckett play in which there is a spectator who experiences the contingent condition of the artwork, rather with the case of literature, the reader reads silently, internally, with seemingly no mediation for the artwork to reach the reader’s mind, ‘reading is a purely interior mental process’ (*TM*, p. 153). Gadamer is quick to reject such a view claiming that ‘reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation’ (*TM*, p. 153). Insofar as it involves these processes, literature can be seen as being an event, open to the same ebbs and flows as art as play, as presenting or revealing truth which is not measured by reference back to reality. Like dramatic art and the plastic arts, Gadamer argues that the reader, who occupies the role of the spectator, is important to understanding the artwork.

The main difference, it would seem, between literary art and other works of art is the fact that its medium is the written word. Gadamer notes that all written works have the same ontological status as literature; some written works occupy a particular role as literary art and in doing so they stand in a special relation to history, tradition and institution which in turn helps mark them as *literary artworks*. Gadamer talks about the tradition of preserving and handing down ‘classics’. He then goes on to say, ‘[e]ven though only literature that has value of its own as art is declared to belong to world literature, the concept of literature is far wider than that of the literary work of art. All written texts share in the mode of being of literature’ (*TM*, p. 155). Gadamer reflects upon language, and the written word in particular, to argue that it is not the form – the language in which the work is composed – be it scientific, scholarly, literary or historical, that marks the difference between them, but rather ‘the essential difference between these various “languages” obviously lies elsewhere: namely the distinction between the claims to truth that each makes’ (*TM*, p. 156).

Part of Gadamer’s justification for looking at works of art in the first place is to investigate ways in which truth is presented but which the scientific method does not work for and he is clearly arguing that the experiencing art, including

literary artworks, is experiencing truth, a claim Levinas would disagree with should 'truth' be taken to mean transcendental truth<sup>16</sup>. Gadamer's view of writing, however, which echoes a rather Platonic view of the written word in which it is considered 'secondary,' 'abstract' (*TM*, p. 394) and 'dead' (*TM*, p. 156) initially suggests a similar starting point to Levinas's distrust of literary language. Gadamer does, however, afford literary works a truth value in the same way that dramatic and plastic works of art present an essence and suggests they do not have a lesser ontological status to other works of art. The literary work of art, for Gadamer, is 'unique' and 'incomparable' as he maintains that, 'the written word and what partakes of it – literature – is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium' (*TM*, p. 156). As the written word is like a 'trace of the mind' it is also hugely 'dependent on the understanding mind' (*TM*, p. 156). In 'deciphering and interpreting' the written text Gadamer argues that 'a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity' (*TM*, p. 156).

Thus far I have spoken about play and what this teaches us about the ontological status of the work of art for Gadamer. The consideration of play as child's play or in the metaphorical use of the word, such as play of light or waves, indicates that an important feature is the movement, back and forth. The game is not goal-orientated; it is the presentation and regulation of movement that is important. The player gets 'absorbed' into the structure of the play – the effortless regulated movement (*TM*, p. 105). I have also spoken about the spectator insofar as it was relevant to the discussion of representation and the ontological status of the work of art. The progression from play in general to play as art involves the presentation for an audience. The spectator becomes an integral part of the whole of the play. In fact, it is no longer the player who gets absorbed by the play but the spectator. I have discussed how Gadamer uses the notion of play to develop his understanding of representation and truth in dramatic arts and then applies it in turn to the plastic arts and literary works. The way in which artworks represent results in Gadamer giving them a special relation to truth and one that is essentially diametrically opposed to the view of Levinas in which artworks are

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<sup>16</sup> Levinas would maintain that the work of art can only ever be a copy of reality, marking the absence of its original and hence unable to reveal anything beyond its representation.

ontologically inferior to reality and only represent the absence of the object they depict. I have also given a summary of the reason why Gadamer sees literary works as unique; it is the fact that they exist in the written word, which must be translated back into living, familiar and present thought. I will turn now to discuss the hermeneutical implications of the written text.

## **Understanding – the miracle of transformation and the role of hermeneutics**

Gadamer is perhaps most famous for his hermeneutics. Gerner argues that Gadamer's writing on hermeneutics should not be seen simply as him putting forward his own technique for interpreting texts but rather, he argues, Gadamer is interested in the 'conditions of the possibility of understanding and interpretation as such'.<sup>17</sup> This should not come as a surprise given the position I described above with the literary work (as a written work) requiring a miracle of deciphering and interpretation to bring it from what is alien and dead to what is familiar and contemporaneous (*TM*, p. 156). There cannot be a set method to blindly apply to any given text with perfect understanding as the result. The act of understanding and interpretation, and the nature of truth in written texts are not like truths in empirical science to which one can employ an objective method. Gadamer is firstly interested in how we can know anything at all and only then questions how we can understand and interpret texts. From the beginning of the discussion of play, the question of understanding has been lurking in the shadows. It marks the relationship between the spectator and the work; the work of art is 'actualised only when it is "presented"' and likewise the literary work of art is realised only when 'read' (*TM*, p. 157). The spectator fulfils the work by understanding, reading, interpreting – working to answer the challenge of the text; the question of understanding is central to Gadamer's thought and essential to the question of this thesis.

I am interested in finding a way of encountering the Other in literature. Levinas has given a phenomenological account of what an encounter with the

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<sup>17</sup> Gerner, p. 138.

Other would involve. His ethical imperative, if one can use such terms with reference to Levinas, is to not reduce the Other to the same; to trace the echo of the saying in the said. Levinas has set an incredibly high benchmark for the ethical encounter but the desire to maintain the alterity of the Other is what intrigues and attracts literary critics to his work. Eaglestone and Adam Zachary Newton both embrace Levinas's notion of the saying in which the ethical encounter is the condition for the possibility for language at all, whilst many other critics such as Francesco Bigagli or A. C. Goodson look for presentation of the ethical encounter in the characters from stories or poems. The concept of an Other, something completely unknowable and outside of the totality of the self, appears to 'ring true' for readers of literature and with it the understanding that in the ethical encounter one finds oneself facing the unknowable Other and in coming face-to-face with the Other one's subjectivity is born from the questioning of one's self-mastery. Likewise, writers have found a Levinasian ethical encounter and account of subjectivity compelling, take for example Man Booker Prize winner, *The Sea*, by John Banville which incorporates an eerily closely argued Levinasian account of the Other and subjectivity:

In her I had my first experience of the *absolute otherness of other people*. It is not too much to say—well, it is, but I shall say it anyway—that in Chloe *the world was first manifest for me as an objective entity*. Not my father and mother, my teachers, other children, not Connie Grace herself, no one had yet been real in the way that Chloe was. *And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I. She was I believe the true origin in me of self-consciousness. Before, there had been one thing and I was part of it, now there was me and all that was not me. But here too there is a torsion, a kink of complexity. In severing me from the world and making me realise myself in being thus severed, she expelled me from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance. Before, I had been housed, now I was in the open, in the clearing, with no shelter in sight.*<sup>18</sup>

[My italics].

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<sup>18</sup> John Banville, *The Sea* (London: Picador, 2005), pp. 167–168.

The phenomenological framework I have sketched from Levinas with its difficulties for literature and high benchmark for the ethical encounter needs to be supplemented with a theory of understanding or interpretation if it is to be applied to literary texts. The movement to discuss theories of interpretation or understanding is already on shaky ground with reference to what has been established so far with Levinas's ethics. The Other is unknowable, infinitely Other. The encounter with the Other is ethical because I cannot understand the Other. The Other is beyond all understanding, all knowledge, this is what makes the Other, Other. Gadamer's concept of understanding and hence his hermeneutics will have to allow for the Other to somehow remain Other, potentially unknown, if the main thrust of Levinas's ethics is to remain intact. I move now to discuss Gadamer's concept of understanding with the above concerns in mind.

## **Hermeneutics**

Gadamer is best known for his contribution to what is commonly referred to as philosophical hermeneutics. Hermeneutics itself has a long history, originally the field of interpreting biblical texts and increasingly generalised to the conditions for the possibility of understanding at all during the twentieth century. Gadamer reflects upon the history of hermeneutics that sees it make this progression from the narrow field of biblical interpretation to encompass the study of interpretation of all texts and understanding in general. Key figures in this movement are Friedrich Schleiermacher who argues that hermeneutics should be applied to all texts, not just biblical texts and advocates a psychological interpretation in which the author's psychology is taken into account and Wilhelm Dilthey who, influenced by Schleiermacher, argues for interpretation freed from dogma which focuses on the development of a historical consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

Gadamer is interested in how meaning occurs, the condition for the possibility of understanding anything at all, and continues the tradition of general hermeneutics from Schleiermacher but rejects his psychological interpretation in which the author's psychology needs to complement the textual interpretation of

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<sup>19</sup> Gerner, p. 138.

the text. In this view the interpreter is concerned with the author's intentions, putting herself in the author's place to recreate the 'creative act.'<sup>20</sup> Dilthey's attention to what the text says is, as we will see, closer to Gadamer's views but he rejects Dilthey's methodological historical consciousness which involves an attempt to put one's own ideas, values and biases aside to understand the text in its own historical situation. Both these hermeneutic positions involve an attempt at recreation, of the author's point or view or the text's historical situation whilst neutralising the role of the interpreter. Both assume that one can put aside one's own historical situation, culture and point of view to step into that of the author or text.

Gadamer offers a completely unique and complicated phenomenology of understanding. He is at pains to point out that he is not putting forward a method of interpretation but rather, as I have already said, he is interested in how we can understand anything at all, hence the nomenclature 'philosophical hermeneutics'. I will now give a brief sketch of some of the key components of Gadamer's account of understanding before moving on to place Gadamer and Levinas in dialogue.

Gadamer's hermeneutics involves an account of the history of hermeneutics itself. The significance of this move will become clear as we follow Gadamer's understanding of understanding. A key influence from the hermeneutic tradition for Gadamer is the notion of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is traditionally the idea that the whole can be understood in terms of its parts and the parts understood in terms of the whole. Take, for instance, a poem. You understand the poem overall by understanding the parts – the figures of speech, the various lines, the words chosen and so on. Likewise, the overall meaning of the poem colours your understanding of these parts. Understanding involves a movement backwards and forwards between the parts and the whole – it is a circle rather than a linear progression from one to the other. Traditional understanding of the hermeneutical circle, argues Gadamer, imagined movement backward and forward between part and whole until the 'text is perfectly understood' (*TM*, 293). This conception of the hermeneutic circle marks an

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<sup>20</sup> Gorner, p. 140.

important part of the development of hermeneutics but Gadamer draws upon Heidegger's reimagining of the hermeneutical circle which is existential in nature.

Heidegger applies the basic understanding of the hermeneutical circle to understanding in general. To be able to know anything at all, to have access to reality, one must already be in the world and have individual experiences and circumstances. To be able to know (in general) requires fore-meanings or in Gadamer's vocabulary, prejudices. Heidegger appropriates the hermeneutical circle to argue against the *tabula rasa* model of human understanding suggested by Descartes' *Cogito*. Thrown, as we are, into a language, tradition, culture and family, we cannot understand without these fore-meanings with which we interpret the world.<sup>21</sup>

Gadamer takes Heidegger's ontological and existential development of the hermeneutical circle, with its acknowledgement of the role of fore-meanings in understanding, and argues for the role of tradition in interpretation. It might be helpful here to consider Gadamer's project. He is implicitly arguing against the Cartesian thinking subject (and possibly a model of subjectivity and knowledge that stretches much further back) who is able to step outside himself to be an objective subject disconnected from his situation and history. Not only does much of Western Philosophy build itself upon this model but so too does the kind of knowledge this disembodied thinker is said to hold. The model of truth built upon this is such that there are objective truths that one can discover irrespective of time, place, or circumstance. Gadamer, on the other hand, sees the role of tradition as a part of understanding. This is part of the ontological aspect of understanding in that every part of human life is involved with understanding, you cannot step outside your tradition, language and culture to understand 'objectively' but rather as human beings we are beings that understand. Gadamer claims 'we are always situated within traditions' (*TM*, p. 283). This leads Gadamer to argue for a rehabilitation of the idea of prejudice.

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<sup>21</sup> Chris Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed*, The Guides for the Perplexed Series (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 56.

## Unprejudicing prejudice

To understand Gadamer's argument for rehabilitating the idea of prejudice it is helpful to consider the idea of tradition or history in a little more detail. As beings that are always already situated in a tradition we are unable stand outside our historical and cultural circumstances to investigate it or to look 'objectively' at the world. Tradition plays a part in Gadamer's version of the hermeneutic circle. Gadamer argues, '[t]he circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter' (*TM*, p. 293). As we read a text, we anticipate the whole of the meaning from the individual parts and understanding the individual parts in relation to the whole meaning of the text (the traditional formulation of the circle) but with the Heideggerian inspired reformulation of the circle the role of the interpreter, the tradition that she is born into becomes essential to understanding the interpretation of texts. The fact that we assume and anticipate meanings is not, for Gadamer, a subjective element of interpretation but rather a fact of our 'commonality that binds us to the tradition' (*TM*, p. 293). Gadamer discusses the nature of this commonality of tradition and sees it not as a fixed precondition but rather as something dynamic and that is produced by the interpreter as she understands. The tradition evolves in the process of understanding.

Gadamer is able to further justify his claim that the hermeneutical approach he takes to texts is not a method. The traditional hermeneutical circle seems to offer something of a method to understand texts in which full understanding will result. Gadamer's insistence on a productive tradition as that which grounds understanding resists any methodological approach. This is important to remember as we discuss understanding and interpretation of texts – Gadamer is not advocating a method by which to unlock the true meaning of texts and does not think such a method would be appropriate for the human sciences, including the reading of literature.

The fact that we are ‘embedded’<sup>22</sup> in a time, place and culture and unable to step outside of this to view the world from a non-place of objectivity, or as Gadamer argues, ‘history does not belong to us; we belong to it’ (*TM*, p. 278) means that we are prejudiced beings. In the twentieth century, whilst Gadamer was completing *Truth and Method* prejudice was being fought in the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America. The world was still reeling from the effects of prejudice shockingly played out during the Second World War; prejudice was as dirty a word as one could get. The Enlightenment’s rejection of dogma, authority and tradition gave birth to a prejudice against prejudice. Gadamer reminds us that there is a positive aspect to prejudice, the word simply meaning pre-judgement. For Gadamer, humans, as finite creatures living in a time and place, are unable to avoid pre-judgements. He claims it is ‘necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate prejudices’ (*TM*, p. 278). In the rehabilitation of prejudice, Gadamer draws upon Heidegger’s concept of foremeanings.

As a finite being living in a time and place I come to any interpretive act or act of understanding with preconceptions, ideas about what might be meant based upon the world as I have known it. The tradition I know and belong to structures my understanding. If I have grown up in rural New Zealand during the 1980s, for instance, I might have a bunch of fore-meanings or pre-judgements that mean when presented with information on Hereford cattle I anticipate certain meanings based upon my prior experience of angry Hereford bulls. An example of more relevance to this thesis would be that as a reader of Western literature in the later parts of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, I come to any novel I read with certain prejudice. One of these will be the expectation that the novel has some kind of narrative; another might be that it represents a complete whole and even the prejudiced belief that it was crafted by an author. My expectations may prove incorrect but these are the prejudices that arise from the history and tradition to which I belong

The acknowledgement of prejudice as an unavoidable part of understanding is one of the reasons for the ontological status of understanding that

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<sup>22</sup> Lawn, p. 65.

I suggested in connection to the hermeneutic circle. This is important implication for Gadamer. Gadamer's starting point is the notion of understanding as basic. He thinks that one cannot get behind understanding to something more basic 'because the something more basic would itself have to be *understood*.'<sup>23</sup> There is not some mystical pre-understanding time or state of being. This view does not sit comfortably with Levinas's ethics as first philosophy which suggests the encounter with the Other creates a break in understanding, should understanding have ever been possible before the encounter in the first place. The Other is completely Other, infinite and unknowable but at the same time by challenging the self-mastery of the same brings about subjectivity. I will return to this point of tension in the following chapter. The combination of understanding as basic and humans' inability to step out of tradition means that for Gadamer understanding is ontological. Understanding is part of our very being.

As finite beings that understand and that are situated always in history that is happening and in a tradition that is forever being played out, we are also prejudiced beings. This does not mean that we are destined to dogmatism or that we are unable to revise our pre-judgements. It also does not make all prejudices legitimate. Despite the prominence of the role of history and tradition in Gadamer's explication of understanding he does not advocate a hermeneutics based on historical consciousness. It is not the historical situation of the author or text that needs to be understood and acknowledged but that of the interpreter. So, understanding does not involve dogmatism or the justification of all prejudices and it does not require a historical consciousness but what does it involve?

### **The fusion of horizons**

The first point to remember is that Gadamer is not putting forward a method for understanding artworks, legal statutes, literary texts, and so on. To do so would be to forget the place of tradition and overlook the finitude of human consciousness. A method does not pay attention to specific circumstances, the situated history the interpreter finds herself in. It does not allow the text to speak otherwise to

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<sup>23</sup> Gerner, p. 131.

different times and people. Gadamer is attempting to describe understanding and the preconditions for it in the light of the history of hermeneutics and Heideggerian phenomenology. Gadamer's account of understanding involves acknowledgement of the situatedness of the human being who understands and, in fact, describes this as a precondition for understanding. A person must be situated in the world along with the object/idea/person to be understood in order for the item to show up as something to be understood. Gadamer, when discussing historical consciousness and historically effected consciousness claims 'we are always already affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation' (*TM*, p. 300).

Gadamer's portrayal of humans as prejudiced beings who are always already part of tradition means that we are an effect of history. In all our understanding, argues Gadamer, 'the efficacy of history is at work' (*TM*, p. 300). I will turn soon to discuss the idea of historically effected consciousness but first I will look at the idea of horizons and more particularly, the fusion of horizons. Gadamer claims 'the purpose of the whole account of the formulation of fusion of horizons was to show how historically effected consciousness operates' (*TM*, p. 337). We will look at these notions briefly to give ourselves a good footing to discuss historically effected consciousness. The term 'horizon' is not new, it can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche and Edmund Husserl's work (*TM*, p. 301). The term draws upon the lay-meaning of the limit of what one can see. One's horizon, in a phenomenological sense, is one's worldview or one's perspective on the world. Horizon is clearly connected to being situated in a time and place; my worldview is created by where I am, the culture I belong to and so on. Gadamer's contribution to the concept of horizon is the way in which he applies it to understanding, particularly understanding the past or historical texts. The question of historical consciousness arises again. How does one with a particular horizon understand something, say a text from the past, which comes from another worldview or horizon?

One view, which Gadamer would label 'historical consciousness,' would be to recreate the situation we are trying to understand. This view would involve losing or forgetting ourselves, our own horizon, so that we might inhabit the

horizon we are trying to understand. Gadamer rejects this view; it is neither possible nor desirable to step outside one's own horizon. You can never see anything otherwise than through your own eyes. To deny the role of your own horizon would be to leave prejudices unexamined. Likewise, it would be a mistake to not try to broaden one's horizon, so to speak, by applying a fixed or steadfast judgement from my own horizon without considering the historical position of that which I try to understand. Although we are always already in tradition, we belong to a time and place, this horizon is never fixed. 'The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us' (*TM*, p. 303). A horizon is not a fixed point, it moves as we move and all that we understand, encounter and experience impacts on what we can see from the vantage point of our place in the world. When we understand a text, which is necessarily historical, we place ourselves into the horizon of the tradition from which it comes. Gadamer's example is putting ourselves into someone else's shoes. To understand another we put ourselves into their shoes. We take our horizon and try to stand in her place, her horizon. Gadamer argues we, 'become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person - by putting *ourselves* in his position' (*TM*, p. 304). He calls understanding a 'fusion of horizons' (*TM*, p. 305). Understanding happens when the horizon of what I am attempting to understand fuses with my own worldview. My horizon is shaped by the past; it cannot exist in isolation, in some kind of present 'bubble' and it is constantly changing as I move through the world. My understanding of the past includes my current worldview, I do not leave that behind as I consider the past but rather it is when the two come together that I understand.

How does the fusion of horizons which is the 'task of what we called historically effective consciousness' (*TM*, p. 306) help us understand the idea of historically effective consciousness? Historically effected consciousness is what we have been describing from the discussion of tradition and prejudice to the fusion of horizons. It is the idea that we understand from a tradition, a horizon, from a context that is both historical and dynamic. Over and above this we are conscious of the effects of history. The subject who seeks to understand is aware of connection to the past and sees her interpretation as an effect of the past, of past interpretations of the event or text as well as being situated and effected by the

contemporary milieu. The fusion of horizons describes the hermeneutical situation and the understanding subject must be aware of her horizon and realise that horizon not as something that she controls but as an effect of history, she must also not attempt to neutralise her horizon, her position in history but negotiate understanding.

## **Understanding through dialogue**

Negotiation is key for Gadamer in understanding understanding. Understanding is ultimately coming to agreement about the subject matter at hand. I mentioned earlier, in my justification for placing Gadamer and Levinas in dialogue, or at least placing them side-by-side to approach the question of my thesis, that both have language central to their thought. Gadamer claims that ‘the fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language’ (*TM*, p. 370). The idea of coming to agreement is connected to language for Gadamer as we come to this agreement through dialogue.

Gadamer sees dialogue, a conversation between two people, as a model for the task of hermeneutics. He argues, ‘in dialogue spoken language... performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics’ (*TM*, p. 361). Gadamer sees the hermeneutical task of understanding and interpreting texts as operating in the same way that two speakers come to an agreement about a subject matter in a conversation. The matter-at-hand is central to both conversation and the hermeneutical task. Gadamer thinks a conversation in which someone tries to find out all about the other is not a real conversation (*TM*, p. 302). A real conversation, according to Gadamer, is more like a dialectic in which questions are asked and consensus reached on a particular topic. The idea of tradition, of fusion of horizons, prejudice and historically effected consciousness is still at play in this dialogue. To be in conversation, to attempt to understand the matter at hand, it is not required that one forgets their own tradition or prejudice but rather ‘that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text’ (*TM*, p. 271). A conversation or dialogue requires an openness to the other which may involve a

questioning of one's own prejudices. As Gadamer points out, when one comes to read something or speak with someone, he is prepared for the text or person to 'tell him something' (*TM*, p 271). Another notable similarity between understanding in conversation and the hermeneutic task of understanding and interpreting texts is that both occur in language. I hinted at the beginning of this chapter at the central place of language for Gadamer and the model of a dialogue, or conversation certainly connects the idea of understanding to language. With this basic sketch of what understanding entails for Gadamer it is worthwhile to turn from understanding in general to understanding and interpreting texts, i.e. the hermeneutic task.

## **Understanding texts**

Gadamer claims that it is the text, not the author that must be understood. Gorner argues that for Gadamer, it is not the author that one enters into dialogue with but 'it is a dialogue with the text itself.'<sup>24</sup> Gadamer puts it thus: 'understanding means primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such' (*TM*, p. 294). The relevance of this claim for my thesis is considerable. The question of *who* the Other that is encountered in literature might be has been raised but not answered at this stage. The possibilities include the author, a character within the text or the text itself. Gadamer's hermeneutical position would suggest that it is the text that is encountered as Other. I will come back to this question in Chapter Four.

Gadamer argues that understanding a text comes about in the same way that one understands through conversation. The obvious difference, of course, is that the text does not speak in the spontaneous way in which another person will during a conversation. I have already explained that written texts, for Gadamer, exist in a strange state of deadness or abstractness. The written word is static and it endures; the words remain the same on the page, in the same order, describing, explaining or arguing the same point in the same way, unlike a conversational partner who can change their line of argument, amend their statements or clarify

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<sup>24</sup> Gorner, p. 139.

that which is unclear. Gadamer quotes Johann Gustav Droysen and describes texts as ‘enduringly fixed expressions of life’ and as a result of this he claims that ‘the text speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter’ (*TM*, p. 389). The text, as we have already seen, issues a challenge – to be understood and interpreted. Gadamer’s grounding of the discussion of hermeneutics with the study of play can be seen here where the text requires a reader, someone who can take the dead, abstract written marks and transform them into living meaning (*TM*, p. 389). It is this vulnerability of the written word, to misunderstanding, to misuse, to misinterpretation and dependence upon the understanding subject that motivates the application of the ethical to literary works. The interpreter holds a special responsibility to the text to understand it, to allow it to speak.

## Summary

I have given a very brief summary of Gadamer’s aesthetics, best known for his discussion of play. Gadamer describes the experience of works of art as structurally analogous to play. In his discussion of play Gadamer puts forward an understanding of mimesis that sees works of art as revealing truth in the only way that that truth can be represented. The work of art presents a world that does not rely on correspondence to reality for its truth-value. This view differed significantly from Levinas’s account of mimesis as simple repetition of an absent object and as such unable to give access to the Other. From this sketch I have gone on to discuss Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gadamer, unlike most philosophers who work in the field of hermeneutics, does not put forward an interpretive method for understanding texts but rather, I have suggested, performs a phenomenological description of what understanding is. Following Heidegger, Gadamer sees the rehabilitation of the notion of prejudice – understood as fore-meanings or pre-judgements – as essential to a correct account of understanding. I have given a summary of the role of prejudice and tradition in understanding and how they figure in the fusion of horizons which is the site of understanding. What resulted from this summary was that the text is what is to be understood, not the author. In Levinasian terms, the text is the Other. Gadamer also presents the written text in a role of vulnerability and dependence upon the interpreter who

must answer the challenge that it presents. I have not presented a full and complete representation of Gadamer's thought but rather I have tried to pick out salient aspects for the discussion of encountering the Other in literature.

## **Chapter Four: Face-to-face: Levinas and Gadamer**

### **Introduction**

I began the previous chapter asking how to proceed. With Levinas leaving his answer to the question of this thesis in no doubt it seemed impossible to discuss encountering the Other through the mediation of literature. I indicated that I would not take a traditionally philosophical approach to the problem of literature. I would not try to ‘correct’ Levinas’s arguments by revealing their logical inconsistencies nor would I try to simply patch these problems with another thinker – namely Gadamer’s – work. To do so would be to reduce the otherness of Levinas’s text to the same. Instead I said I would place them side-by-side and allow the two thinkers to enter a dialogue in which the otherness of each is maintained whilst a better understanding of the question of encountering the Other in literature might be had. In this chapter I will make explicit the similarities and differences in the two thinkers’ work and then see if the dialogue sheds light upon the question of the thesis. In the previous chapter I marked points of tension between Gadamer and Levinas as they arose and will return to investigate these moments of difference later in this chapter. First, however, I will look at sites of similarity or convergence where agreement may be reached on the matter at hand.

### **Similarities**

I mentioned in the section ‘Why Gadamer?’ that Gerald L. Bruns cites a rejection of rule-based systems of thought or methods in their respective fields as justification for his pairing of the two thinkers. This is clearly a major similarity between the two. The uniqueness and difficulty of Levinas’s ethics comes from the fact that he is not advocating an ‘ethics’ in the usual sense. He does not provide a set of rules to be followed, nor does he explore virtues to be embodied and he does not advocate attention to the consequences of one’s actions. Rather, Bruns argues, Levinas is interested in the particular demands other people have on us. The ethical encounter is necessarily singular, particular and untheorisable.

Bruns likens this to Gadamer's project which also rejects a rule-based methodology and instead consists of a phenomenological exploration of understanding. Bruns claims that just as the subject is under the claim of the Other for Levinas, the subject is under the claim of history for Gadamer.<sup>1</sup> Gadamer does not develop an interpretive method to be applied to texts. He does not suggest a list of rules of interpretation that will lead to understanding. Rather, the subject is answerable to both the text and tradition. The subject and their interpretive moves are an effect of history and take place within a forever changing horizon. To engage with the Other in literature then, it would seem, is a singular, particular act that cannot be understood according to a set of rules. More than that, however, the subject that stands before a text is under the claim of another – both the Other and history if both Levinas and Gadamer's accounts are correct. Is it possible, however, to be under the claims of the Other and history at the same time?

For both Levinas and Gadamer, the relationship with the Other and history, respectively are essential parts of what it is to be human, in fact, they are facts that one cannot get behind to see what human consciousness is like without them – for Levinas subjectivity begins with the encounter with the Other and for Gadamer interpretation is understanding and anything prior to understanding would, itself, need to be understood. Can one have an encounter with the Other whilst being under the claim of history, or are the two mutually exclusive? Intuition says the two are not mutually exclusive. I can imagine being conscious of the effects of history and, at the same time, responsible for an Other. The possible objection might be the break that occurs with the encounter with the Other. In a purely Levinasian account, the encounter with the Other is supposed to break my sense of being 'at home' in the world. Being under the claim of the Other, as Bruns describes it, disrupts my sense of self-mastery and heralds the beginning of subjectivity in its true sense. Does the disruption of being at home in the world sit comfortably with being conscious of the effects of history and under the claims of such effects?

The two philosophers begin from quite different places and have very different goals. Levinas imagines a pre-subjective, almost Hobbesian state-of-

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<sup>1</sup> Bruns, p. 30.

nature thought experiment to explain the structure of human subjectivity whereas Gadamer simply accepts that the origin of understanding, consciousness, subjectivity is something we cannot theorise about because we cannot get behind those structures to investigate them. To think about a pre-subjective or pre-conscious state involves consciousness, understanding and implies subjectivity. Gadamer's starting point is that we simply cannot look at the world from a pre-subjective, pre-understanding, pre-conscious perspective. Levinas could be correct about the structure of subjectivity but we can never know, the minute we begin to think about it we are in the realm of understanding. Likewise, we cannot step outside our historical situation or our horizon. Gadamer might disagree with Levinas's account of the *il y a* and mode of *jouissance* when dwelling in the world conceived without an Other to disrupt the mastery of this mode, but his concern would be that it is impossible to conceive of these things without understanding and all that comes bundled with it. The two starting points are not necessarily contradictory, rather, it is possible to bracket Levinas's account up to the point of the encounter with the Other as something we cannot know for sure, and consider whether we can be under the demand of history whilst experiencing a break in our sense of self-mastery and awareness of our own finitude and subjectivity when we encounter an Other. Gadamer argues that being a historically effected consciousness involves being aware of our finitude. When we acknowledge the role of prejudice, being situated in a tradition, we understand 'the finitude which dominates...our humanity' (*TM*, p. 277). What is similar in both accounts is that part of being human is being aware of our finitude, the way in which being situated in the world with others and as part of a tradition means that we are a part of something larger or beyond ourselves.

Perhaps one of the most interesting similarities between Levinas and Gadamer is the central role of language in both theorists' work. I have spoken about the importance of language for Levinas in some depth. Language is that which allows the Other to be encountered but not assimilated. When the Other appears it speaks, it issues a plea and command, it asks to share the self's world, to have room made for it and at the same time forbids murder. Language as a spoken plea creates a bridge between the Other and the subject without closing the distance between them. The role of language is to reveal or herald the Other

whilst leaving her complete in her otherness. Language does not work to make the Other knowable, to bring her into the totality of the same where she might be one part of a binary between self and other. Instead, it has a strong effect upon the subject who finds herself completely responsible for the Other who addresses her, in ways in which the Other does not reciprocate. Levinas, as we have seen, expands his interest in language in *Otherwise than Being* where he puts forward a full discussion of language as saying and said. Language, for Levinas, is a site of otherness. Inherent in the very structure of language is the encounter with the Other in which there is the desire to say something to someone. Each use of language carries with it this primordial encounter in which something is said and that saying bridged the abyss between the subject and Other without annihilating the distance. Levinas's account of language is particular and unique. We see then that language has a critical role in Levinas's work.

Gadamer, like Levinas, considers the importance of conversation or dialogue. In Levinas the dialogue takes the form of the address with the response being the sense of responsibility and entrance into subjectivity. For Gadamer, conversation is the model that best describes understanding. He claims that although we speak about 'conducting' a conversation, a true conversation involves the participants not so much leading the conversation as being led by it (*TM*, p. 385). A conversation cannot be controlled, it is dynamic and uncertain; he claims, that 'no one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation' (*TM*, p. 385). Through this process of conversing, understanding is reached. Understanding does not involve trying to recreate someone's experiences, to 'get inside another person and relive his experiences,' (*TM*, p. 385) but rather understanding involves the fusion of horizons when one *puts oneself* into the other's shoes. In this case one is open to the other's point of view but does not seek to lose oneself, one's own horizon in the process. This is what Gadamer calls historically effected consciousness and Richard E. Palmer argues, '...understanding is not the passive "recognition" of the otherness of the past but rather a placing oneself so as to be laid claim to by the other.'<sup>2</sup> By maintaining one's own horizon when entering a conversation one puts one's tradition, place in

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<sup>2</sup> Richard E Palmer, *Hermeneutics; Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 193.

history and sense of self in question. Contact with the other means that you might find something that goes against your beliefs and experience. If one embraces the historical consciousness and seeks to forget, or bracket her own self and time then judgment can only fall upon the past, not the present in which she lives and moves.

This suggests a similar function between Levinas and Gadamer's idea of language. For both, language as dialogue (a plea or calling in Levinas and more conventional understanding of conversation in Gadamer) puts the self in question. Exposure to an other through language results in the self being vulnerable; it becomes aware of its finitude, and that of all humans. The understanding consciousness is necessarily limited. It stands in the present and attempts to understand the past whilst applying its understanding to the future. By being situated in the present which is not static but always becoming, the self is likewise not static nor infinite but rather open to change and limited by its place in tradition. Gadamer, in considering Aristotelian ethics reaches this conclusion with regard to the hermeneutic task and puts it thus, 'the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation' (*TM*, p. 321). Understanding involves coming to agreement about a subject matter and this happens through language and carries with it the implication of compromise, closing of distance and a spirit of cooperation.

Initially the two accounts of language do not seem to have much more in common. Levinas's understanding of language is heavily influenced and connected to his description of the Other and the ethical encounter that grounds philosophy. Gadamer, on the other hand, discusses language as the medium through which understanding is reached. For Levinas language protects the otherness of the Other – it allows the Other to be approached but not understood; for Gadamer language brings agreement, understanding and implies a closing of distance. Bruns offers an insightful contrast in the difference between 'being-with' and 'face-to-face' which helps explain the difference I am suggesting here.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that the hermeneutical 'being-with' 'implies a relationship of mutual

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<sup>3</sup> Bruns, p. 39.

understanding, participation, attunement, being on the same track, being in the swing of the game, having words and interests (not to say a world) in common.’<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the ‘face-to-face’ is not an ‘I-Thou relation’ but an encounter with something that goes beyond all my understanding and experience and ‘calls me into question’.<sup>5</sup>

Although language is important to both Levinas and Gadamer it appears that it is seen as producing quite different results. It might be argued that language offers a site of encounter for both Levinas and Gadamer, for Levinas it is in language that the Other can appear as Other and for Gadamer understanding, the coming to agreement with another occurs in language. This interpretation of language as a site of encounter is uncontroversial with regard to Gadamer but is perhaps a less straightforward claim when it comes to Levinas. However, there is evidence in *Totality and Infinity* that Levinas might agree with my argument. He claims, ‘[t]o speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces’ (*TI*, p. 76). It is through language that you can offer the world to the Other. Language is the movement from ‘the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other’ (*TI*, p. 76).

The central role of language is clearly relevant to a discussion of literature, but does there need to be more convergence between the two thinker’s accounts of language than the notion of language as a meeting point? Is there a further connection between language as the mediation of the encounter with the Other in literature that we can develop from a study of Levinas and Gadamer? More specifically, is there a way of coming to agreement about the role of language and its relation to the Other that might allow Levinas’s ethical work to be applied in the reading of literature whilst maintaining the otherness of the same work?

Gadamer’s discussion of the hermeneutical process suggests a similarity with Levinas and a possible way forward for the question of this thesis. Hermeneutics, for Gadamer, requires an openness. When elaborating on the nature of conversation he claims, ‘[i]t belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other’ (*TM*, p. 387). He values the idea of otherness

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<sup>4</sup> Bruns, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Bruns, p. 40.

and argues that 'a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity' (*TM*, p. 271). One important aspect of the idea of understanding, of interpretation, of the hermeneutical task is being open to the otherness (of the other, tradition, text) and this is characterised by the openness to the other in conversation. Gadamer offers three different possibilities for framing the I-Thou relationship. He rejects two but advocates the third in which 'the important thing is... to experience the Thou truly as a Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us' (*TM*, p. 355). Gadamer discusses the I-Thou relationship to look at analogous ways of experiencing the hermeneutical situation. In this final and most appropriate formulation of the I-Thou relationship Gadamer focuses on seeing the other person as a person in their own right. A part of this is being open to the ways in which they are other which in turn 'involves recognising that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one forces me to do so' (*TM*, p. 355). The spirit of the 'correct' I-Thou relationship is listening to what the other has to say with respect and openness and accepting ways in which this interrupts my own worldview.

Gadamer claims that this feature of the I-Thou relationship is just as true for the hermeneutical situation. Just as I must be open to the other person, I must allow her to say something to me and be willing to accept that which is alien, I must also be open to tradition and what it has to say to me (*TM*, p. 355). Gadamer continues to draw out the idea of openness (to tradition at this point) with a comparison of historical consciousness and historically effected consciousness. Historical consciousness, the desire to essentially recreate the historical situation of the text whilst forgetting or ignoring one's own horizon, is not open, according to Gadamer. He claims that one who reads 'historically' has 'smoothed' out the text beforehand so that their 'own knowledge can never be called into question by tradition' (*TM*, p. 355). By bracketing their own horizon, severing their connection and place in tradition, the historical consciousness attempts to remove themselves from the interpretation. The result of this is a closedness. The historical consciousness does not engage with the historical text, there is no encounter, no fusion of horizons and hence no real attempt to understand because to understand requires being open to changing one's horizon, it requires the self to put itself in question. Historically effected consciousness, on the other hand,

opens itself to experience tradition; it sees itself as a part of tradition in the same way the text they approach is. In doing so the historically effected consciousness is open to what tradition has to say even if this involves a questioning of itself.

Gadamer's hermeneutics contains within it a similar sentiment to Levinas's ethics. Gadamer might write a similar mandate to Levinas in relation to the treatment of the Other and alterity. If asked to write such a decree I suggest Levinas would say something along the lines of 'recognise otherness as total otherness, otherness that goes beyond the same. Listen for that which goes beyond understanding whilst acknowledging that the moment it becomes intelligible it has returned to immanence.' Gadamer would also want to say something about maintaining otherness, about respecting what is otherwise in what is said and exposing the self to questioning but he would maintain, unlike Levinas, that the goal is to come to an understanding (of what is said). At this stage we have two versions of openness; two ways of maintaining or respecting otherness that put forward quite different ideas of how such an openness to alterity, a respect of otherness would orient someone with respect to the other<sup>6</sup>. Gadamer's account of the hermeneutical experience as being open and sensitive to otherness still entails understanding. One accepts what is otherwise in the fusion of horizons. It is clear that this would nicely solve our problem. *Prima facie*, Gadamer's account would seem to offer an affirmative answer to the question of the thesis as well as a hermeneutical account of describing phenomenologically if not methodologically how it might be achieved. It would be tempting to answer the thesis question thus based on a quick reading of Gadamer: yes you can encounter otherness via literature, and in fact, an openness to this alterity is essential for an authentic hermeneutical experience. To do this, the answer would continue, you need only to recognise your place as a part of the tradition you seek to understand and be willing to listen to what the text has to say, even if it goes against what you know or expect. You must focus on the subject matter and attempt to reach an agreement about this from your place in tradition. To understand why this answer to the thesis question cannot be accepted we need to move from similarities of Levinas and Gadamer's work to places of difference or tension.

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<sup>6</sup> I use other with a small 'o' deliberately here.

## Differences

The first point of tension is the different accounts of mimesis in works of art. Again, it would be easy to simply choose the theory that appeals more or that seems intuitively correct. An intellectually dishonest way to settle the dispute might be to pick whichever version of mimesis – absent representation or productive presentation of truth – better advances my own argument. In discussing the two at all, I should be attentive to my own biases and prejudice whilst also aware of the fact that there are biases and prejudices that I have no awareness of, enmeshed, as I am, in a tradition that I cannot look at from a position outside of that same time and place in history. For the purposes of this thesis it would be beneficial to find fault with Levinas's view of mimesis, to discount his views in favour of Gadamer's more 'art-friendly' account. In reading the two accounts my expectation is to find a way to allow works of art to occupy the same or sufficiently similar ontological status as a person so that I can claim a mistake in Levinas's thinking that opens a loophole which would allow me to apply his ethics of the encounter with the Other to literary works. By acknowledging and questioning my bias I am in a better position to be open to what the two thinkers' work has to say.

Of course, the accepted academic and philosophical method for dealing with competing accounts of the same problem is to weigh the quality of the arguments. Does Levinas show a lack of reasoning? Would empirical research settle the dispute? Although I have suggested some potential logical inconsistencies with Levinas's account of language and by extension the ontological status of the work of art, I have also argued that these can be seen as potential sites of otherness and it is these places of 'otherness' that point to a saying behind the argument. The saying is the primordial desire to say or express something that is both destroyed and made manifest in the words, sentences and phrases of the argument. The saying remains as an extra-linguistic echo or trace in the fixed grammatical structures of the said. By definition, the saying, like the Other, is not something one can apply logic to. The saying is beyond being. To weigh Levinas's arguments for his account of mimesis would attend only to the

said of his work but overlook the saying. Given it is the saying, the Other, that we are interested in maintaining in our discussion this would raise significant problems and itself be contradictory.

This particular argument is risky. It runs the risk of a charge of relativism or irrationality. One might, quite legitimately, ask what the difference is between basic flawed logic, a poor argument and an argument that is interrupted by the saying? In other words, how can we be sure that Levinas's insistence on the face-to-face, on the saying's exclusion from literary works, is his desire to say something? How can we be sure that Levinas's insistence on the face-to-face, the ethical encounter, is likely triggered by experiences in the Second World War interrupting and echoing in the words of his text and not just sloppy reasoning? This is a critical point given Levinas's 'goal' for philosophy and by implication a potential way forward for this thesis, is to reduce the said to the saying; to be aware of the fissures in which the ethical saying erupts. It seems to me that there are several points to consider when approaching this task. The first would be to look for clues in the said. We saw above that the memory of the Shoah is invoked explicitly in the dedication of *Otherwise than Being* and that Levinas himself considered his work to be 'dominated' by the memory of Nazi Germany. Although the said does not give access to the saying we can catch a glimpse of the desire to respond in the framing of the work. The actual text does not explicitly engage with the Holocaust but this concern is rather left unsaid. This leads me to the second point to consider in suggesting what we are experiencing is the interruption of the said by the saying rather than simple errors in reasoning which is the sense that you are being addressed, called out, that someone is saying something to you beyond the words and phrases they are using. Consider some of Levinas's descriptions of the encounter again:

The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say 'you' or 'we' is not a plural of the 'I.' I, you—these are not individuals of a common concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [*l'Etranger*], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [*le chez soi*]. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my

disposal. He is not wholly in my site. But I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus (*TI*, p. 39).

For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation. The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum—the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but *καθ'αυτό*. It expresses itself (*TI*, p. 51).

This gaze [of the Other] that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one ‘puts the things in question in giving’) – this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give (*TI*, p. 75).

In these passages Levinas approaches a description of the Other. In the first passage we see the most concrete or typically philosophical description. Levinas begins to talk about the Other almost analytically in terms of how it fits into the metaphysics of the world; the Other transcends the self’s sense of totality and mastery of the world – it is not in binary opposition with the self and it disturbs the self’s mode of being in the world, characterised as *jouissance*. Levinas finds he can talk about the Other, to some extent, negatively but saying anything positive about what the Other *is* is impossible because as soon as he forms a statement ‘the Other is X’ he will have turned the Other into something else, something that does not transcend the world of the same. In the second passage Levinas develops the notion of the face to help his description of the Other. He focuses on the way in which the face overflows my idea of it. The

Other always goes beyond my attempts to grasp it, even as the face appears (as a material face upon which my gaze falls) it overflows that image. The face is not the eyes, nose, ears, mouth that I look at and that looks at me but the expression of the Other, the demand or plea.

In this second passage we see Levinas continuing to struggle to talk about something that he cannot speak about. A large part of the challenge of *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* is to discuss that which is beyond language. The final passage I have included here is perhaps the least conventionally philosophical. It can be seen as a continuation of the desire to express the unsayable. The language Levinas uses becomes more emotive and arguably less philosophical; ‘epiphany’, ‘nakedness’, ‘destitute’, and ‘hunger’. Levinas, I contend, is trying to evoke the Other in his description. He is not trying to so much as describe the Other, to enumerate its features and place it in a wider philosophical system as he is rather trying to find a way for the Other to emerge in his writing. By using emotive language and the necessity of leaving details of the Other unsaid, Levinas places us in the position of the one that is summoned by the Other. The Other is something that cannot be identified in so many words and Levinas’s challenge of speaking of that which is unspeakable allows the Other to appear in the gaps. The constant return to the question of the Other throughout *Totality and Infinity*, each time with a different emphasis or wording is akin to the response we have to the Other, in which we take on full responsibility for the Other and must respond with generosity in sharing our world. Levinas’s constant return to the Other suggests the kind of urgency that comes with responsibility. With each iteration and elaboration of his discussion of the Other, the Other slips beyond the words on the page. There is a sense that Levinas is responding to the call of the Other and is calling on his reader to experience the way in which the face overflows the plastic image, the way in which the Other is not, not-I but something that exists outside of anything that it is possible to give voice to. The Other only becomes manifest as expression. This slipping beyond language is the fact of the Other. The Other is ~~present~~ in the very failure to evoke it.

The justification of the argument that Levinas’s text is marked by the saying, that the sites of most controversy and potential inconsistencies are sites of otherness, comes from his very failure to speak about the Other in clear, positive

terms. The failure of argument, logic and language to bring the Other into focus, to enumerate her qualities, to communicate her being forces Levinas and his reader into another realm of experience. Where the said of the text fails the saying emerges. Levinas is able to push language to its limit and the point of fissure or break provides the reader with a sense of encounter that cannot be accounted for by philosophical argument alone. In the revisiting of the question of the Other, time and again, in *Totality and Infinity* we witness the failure of language and understanding to make it manifest but instead we are presented with the experience of the one who stands face-to-face. The Other is vulnerable, destitute and stranger to us. The echo of the saying upon the said of Levinas's arguments is experienced as a plea to be recognised, to be given a world. The reader is forced to question her self-mastery and respond with generosity. This generosity involves offering the Other the world. The Other does not fit into my understanding of the totality of my world and to respond to the plea I must give that world to the Other. I must put my understanding of the world into question and make room for the Other that is beyond my understanding. This reader certainly finds the harrowing images of the Holocaust etched upon the desire to withhold the ethical encounter as a purely human experience, reserved for the face-to-face. These rather necessarily non-philosophical or unconventionally academic approaches to the saying provide the justification of not simply discounting Levinas's less philosophically rigorous moments as 'sloppy reasoning'.

If we are to accept that Levinas's apparent inconsistencies are sites of otherness rather than failures of logic how are we then to proceed? To follow the course I have been developing we can, for the moment, bracket the question of whether we ought to treat a text as an Other<sup>7</sup> and look to Levinas's phenomenological description of the encounter with the Other. The Other is pure alterity, unknowable. What is felt is the demand, the plea, the sense of responsibility to the Other. Through language we are able to bridge the distance of the Other whilst leaving her untouched. If Levinas's text is Other, if the points of difficulty and tension are the unknowable alterity of the Other then we ought not to try to minimise this otherness by turning it into something we understand and

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<sup>7</sup> This can be somewhat justified by Levinas's argument that the task of philosophy is to perform a reduction from the said to the saying. Of course, it does not get around the problem of literature but rather allows this line of argument to continue, for now.

can utilise in the usual way. We might simply acknowledge that we recognise something has been said. That there is something being expressed that we cannot fully understand but that we are responsible for. The responsibility we feel is not to 'fix' or 'correct' inconsistencies but to allow them to be otherwise. If this is how we approach a problem from a Levinasian ethical point of view then it clearly flies in the face of every other previous approach to reading texts. However, the encounter with the Other is only one part of my project. Gadamer's hermeneutics was considered in the hope that it might provide a way to approach texts with a mind to understanding whilst still allowing the text to maintain its otherness.

I will return now to the question of mimesis and the apparent tension between Levinas and Gadamer's view of representation and truth in artworks with our rather daunting task of both reaching agreement but also maintaining the alterity of the Other as I have just set out. In the paragraphs above I have suggested that Levinas's view of mimesis and by extension his relegation of the work of art to a lower ontological status to other objects and certainly of a different status to human beings is flawed. In Chapter Two I explored the possible contradiction between the claim that all language is comprised of the saying and the said and the exclusion of the saying from literary works. Levinas, as we have seen, casts ethics as first philosophy, with it providing the platform upon which philosophy is built. Insofar as this is the case, he does not exclude the saying from philosophical texts and therefore opens himself to the charge of contradiction. If all language is comprised of the saying and the said and this includes philosophical written texts then it would seem to follow that literary texts are also comprised of the saying and the said. His justification for this is that literary works occupy a different ontological status based on their relation to reality and truth. This stems from his notion of mimesis which he claims is the way in which artworks represent.

For Levinas, as we saw in Chapter Two, works of art, and in this he includes literary artworks, are pure representation. They simply imitate reality and in doing so are simply absence (of the thing represented) and hence occupy an ontological status that is different to that of objects and certainly different to the ontological status of human beings. Works of art, for Levinas, are not able to

reveal or make manifest truth and do not give access to the otherwise than being. Gadamer, as already related, also thinks artworks are characterised by mimesis but rather than representing absence, non-truth and immanence he sees mimesis as something productive. In imitating the artist presents the truth, he presents a world that is not dependent on reality but rather ‘allows what he knows to exist and exist in the way that he knows it’ (*TM*, p. 113). The work of art makes manifest or brings forth truth and presents it in the only way in which it can exist. It is not mere representation but rather presentation of the essence of the thing.

The two thinkers start from the same position ‘art is mimetic’ and come to wildly different conclusions. Can understanding be reached upon this subject matter? At the heart of the issue are the individual philosophical projects that each thinker is immersed in. Levinas can be seen as contributing to a developing phenomenological tradition in which the role of the Other has been overlooked. He addresses the oversight offering an account of subjectivity and its relation to the Other and emphasises this relation as foundational for understanding subjectivity and the philosophical project itself. Gadamer, on the other hand, is seeking to explore ways in which we experience truth that do not fit the scientific methodology. Each begins with an assumption – for Levinas truth is to be found in the relation with the Other, for Gadamer truth exists in the experience of art (which is not to say it exists solely in the experience of art, but merely that art is one area in which truth is encountered). Each seeks to ‘bring forth’, to borrow a phrase from Gadamer, an aspect of human experience. Gadamer, in his discussion of imitation, claims that ‘presentation of an essence... is necessarily revelatory. In imitating, one has to leave out and to heighten. Because he is pointing to something, he has to exaggerate, whether he likes it or not’ (*TM*, p. 114). Are both Levinas and Gadamer pointing to something in this way? Does Levinas leave out ways in which art can present truth or a lifeworld?

Certainly one can look at a painting of a pair of shoes and see only the representation of a pair of shoes. One could be well aware that this is an image that stands as a poor substitute of the real thing. This mode of relating to the image might be likened to the experience of a card featuring a picture of a bunch of bananas with the words ‘item currently out of stock’ found at the local green grocer. The image represents a lack. In this mode, we seek the item in reality – we

are hungry and want a sweet treat – and instead of finding the real potassium-rich berry we discover a picture whose sole purpose is to represent what is missing. Levinas is probably correct in saying that this is a genuine mode of relating to the image in this case. I see the bunch of bananas as pure representation and signalling lack (and perhaps frustration and hunger). Is this the main way in which we encounter an artwork? Does contemplation of Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* operate in the same way that I encounter the 'item out of stock' image? In this scenario I seek nothing from works of art but a direct connection to reality. All I see as I look at the pair of peasant boots is a hollow representation of absent shoes. Perhaps I can find some pleasure in the form of the work, the ways in which it might trick me into seeing a pair of boots when no boots really exist. Is it possible that Levinas, in trying to 'heighten' or 'point out' the role of the encounter with the Other as the only access to the transcendental, leaves out other ways in which to encounter works of art?

Can Gadamer also be seen as leaving out ways in which works of art are simply representation and not 'knowledge of the essence' (*TM*, p. 114)? Although we might agree with Gadamer that in painting the *Mona Lisa*, da Vinci did not simply represent a woman with a curious smile but rather presented the essence of her in a way that could not be presented or known in any other way we may not feel the same way about Duchamp's 'Fountain'. We might look at the urinal and simply see a urinal, ripped away from its utility and find ourselves looking around for a functional bathroom. Do all works of art present the knowledge of the essence? Do all artworks present a world in the way Heidegger describes the life of Van Gogh's peasant? Is it correct to assume a truth presented in each work, regardless of execution or subject? Gadamer, like Levinas, can be seen as highlighting and minimising features of truth, mimesis and art as he points to the experience of truth in art.

The two accounts, mimesis as pure representation of a lack (or absence) and mimesis as presentation of knowledge independent of reality, initially appear contradictory. On further inspection they can be seen as different modes of relating to works of art dependent on the subjective experience and orientation towards truth. This again sounds like shaky ground. We need to consider whether Levinas or Gadamer would particularly embrace a relativist subjective account of

art in which ‘anything goes’ and more importantly whether this is a position that will help or hinder the question of this thesis. Along with these considerations a further question needs to be asked: whether this ‘it depends upon the mode or position you take with regard to art’ view is what the placing of Levinas and Gadamer’s accounts of mimesis side-by-side actually results in and if so, whether it is correct.

I am suggesting that the relation of works of art to truth which differs between Levinas and Gadamer might be a result of their wider philosophical projects in which they seek to point to a certain experience of the human condition that entails they minimise or heighten particular elements to allow their argument to move forward, for the knowledge that they are pointing out to be moved to the fore, an argument that echoes Gadamer’s claim about the way in which when one imitates – they are forced to both emphasise certain aspects while allowing others to slip into the background. This does not solve, however, the contradiction in their definitions of mimesis. We can overlook what each names ‘mimesis’ as a squabble over semantics but the ascribing of truth to art is a true contradiction between the two thinkers. I have suggested cases in which a different stance can be taken to a work of art – one in which the work is seen as representation of a lack and the other in which it can be seen as presenting truth in an authentic way. But does this actually solve the contradiction? If Levinas maintains that works of art cannot have a mode of being other than a hollow representation that presents no truth except by imitating reality and therefore giving no access to the transcendental, then he is clearly presenting a different and contradictory definition of art to Gadamer. One of the reasons Gadamer discusses art is because he believes it *does* reveal essences, it *does* present truth in a way that is not reliant upon reference to reality and in fact presents truth in a way that reality cannot.

Which view of art and its relation to truth is correct? I have already begun to explore ways in which the same work of art can be viewed equally plausibly from both perspectives. Standing before Manet’s *The Races at Longchamp* I might, almost simultaneously, view the painting from both a Levinasian and Gadamerian point of view. I might see nothing but an image of horses racing front on. I will observe the artist’s attempts to evoke the speed of the animals by blurring the elements on the canvas but note that the experience of standing before

the painting is derivative and lesser than the experience of standing before a group of galloping horses. I would here consider not to have learned anything about the essence of horse racing or nineteenth century Parisian life. I might then find myself in the world of the work of art. I might see the essence of the natural power and energy of the horses. I might ponder the life and time of the Parisian women with parasols whose pastime pursuits are presented to me here in a way that could not be otherwise. Likewise, I might consider my reading of a literary text. I may read about Holden Caulfield's red hunting cap. I can consider both the clever symbolic representation that presents aspects of a character's personality without feeling like I have experienced the authentic meeting of another person but at the same time I might note that Holden's love of the hunting cap opens his world to me. I might consider how this connects with other aspects of the story, like Ali's baseball glove, to give me an insight into Holden's depth of despair. I might get the impression that I know Holden, that I can relate to him and that his truth is presented in an authentic way and could not exist in any other form. Is this a fair claim? And if so, does it suggest an answer to the contradiction between Levinas and Gadamer, a coming to agreement in which we can respect the alterity of each thinker and allow them to say something to us?

Certainly we might come to the agreement that art is such that it permits of different and contradictory stances to be taken to it. We might hear Levinas's claim that art is unable to reveal the essence of things and at the same time listen to Gadamer's assertion that works of art reveal truth, the essence of things in a unique way. We might suggest that the nature of works of art permits them to be viewed from these contradictory stances. In this case it is the subject who views the work that determines its relation to reality and truth. Of course, even if this is correct, some may argue that Levinas's argument about the lack of truth in art does not adequately or appropriately describe the stance one takes when beholding a work of art. It seems intuitively incorrect to assume that when contemplating a work of art one is viewing but a mere representation, that the work only signifies lack and does not offer access to an essence beyond the representation of the absent subject. In this view, works of art including the works of great Masters offer no insight into human life or existence but are, at best, attractive decoration displaying skill and talent. For the moment this objection

will be put aside and we will return to the question of agreement in our dialogue between Levinas and Gadamer.

### **The work of literature as a Thou**

Levinas and Gadamer, it would appear, do hold contradictory views on art and its relation to truth. An agreement in ontological terms cannot be reached between the two thinkers. It is either the case that works of art reveal something about the nature of being or that they do not. Agreement might be reached phenomenologically or subjectively in which case we ascribe the truth value of the artwork to the relation or mind-set of the viewer. But a further question might be put to Levinas: what truth do you want to deny works of art? For Gadamer, who draws upon Heidegger, it is clear that works of art open a world for the viewer. They reveal truth about the human experience, about the world in which we find ourselves and our own subjectivity. Levinas, I maintain, creates a view of works of art based on his wider philosophical project which involves preserving a special role for the face-to-face. The view of 'truth' in the Levinasian perspective is much narrower than what we see with Gadamer. To carve out the face-to-face as the only site of transcendence, of the ethical encounter that reveals the otherwise than being, Levinas must deny any other ways of encountering this truth, including via works of art.

I suggest the real problem here is best understood as whether we ought to treat a work of art, including literary works of art as a 'Thou,' a person or Other. Levinas's objections to art can be seen as resulting mostly from his goal to maintain this role for the face-to-face encounter. The work of art cannot result in transcendence, because for Levinas, transcendence is the experience of encountering the Other. Levinas might very well agree that works of art open a window into the tradition in which they were created and in contemplation of them they can be interpreted as relevant for the present time, if he could at the same time carve out a special place for the face-to-face ethical encounter in which this is the only way to experience something that goes beyond the totality of our understanding. Levinas is willing to dismiss this experience of art as giving us the

sense of transcendence, of having come into contact with something that takes us beyond ourselves, as inauthentic based on the exclusivity of the experience of the face-to-face encounter and transcendence. Levinas could happily concede that we might think we experience something beyond ourselves in contemplation of works of art but in fact we are mistaken. What we are experiencing is the representation or illustration of this experience. Much as I might feel I have experienced walking through The Hermitage because I managed to stay awake through all 96 minutes of Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* Levinas would be quick to remind me that I have not, in fact, walked through The Hermitage. The only way to actually experience the museum would be a trip to St Petersburg. I have not encountered the Other when I read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or *Bartleby* or *King Lear*, all I have done is read a text that represents something like this experience.

This representation is not a person, it does not function like a person who singles me out with her gaze and asks me for the world. Levinas might suggest that what we encounter in works of art is a plastic image, a mask and not a face that faces. In this view the Other is either the author who resides behind or beyond the text or perhaps the person or model upon which characters or subjects of art are based. The problem with art, remember, for Levinas is that it is hollow representation. The text or work of art relies upon reality for its meaning and truth, therefore it would follow that if an encounter with the Other can be seen as having been represented in a piece of fiction or work of art then it must represent something in reality. One of the reasons Levinas criticises literary works of art is that 'To approach someone from works is to enter into his interiority as though by burglary... Works signify their author, but indirectly, in the third person' (*TI*, p. 67) which implies that the face-to-face encounter is hidden behind a veil of words that are deliberately deceitful, not straightforward and designed to conceal. The author is the site of otherness but in placing a work of art or text before her face her artistic expression only acts to hide her otherness, putting forward a plastic image of herself. Levinas seems to see all artworks as being representation, not so much of characters, ideas, symbols and so on but rather representations of their origins, the author or artist herself. The work of art acts as a representation of her absence. The text speaks because the author is not present to speak for herself. For Levinas, the Other, if it can be encountered at all, must be encountered face-to-face,

unmediated by rhetoric, even if he does concede that philosophical texts might partake of the ethical saying.

Interestingly enough, Gadamer suggests that the model of the I-Thou relationship in which a person is treated as a person (complete with ability to contradict or go against your views) in his hermeneutics, he does not advocate that we see the text as Other in the same way that Levinas wants to protect against. Certainly Gadamer does discuss the text, as tradition, as other and identifies the importance of maintaining the otherness of the text in his philosophical hermeneutics but he does not cast the author or any other specific person as other. In fact, remember that for Gadamer what is important is coming to an agreement about the matter at hand, not coming to an understanding of the person with whom you converse. This has already been identified as a possible problem with developing a way of encountering the Other through the mediation of literature.

In reading a work of literature our goal, generally speaking, is to understand it. I read *The Catcher in the Rye* and although I might feel that I have encountered a young man by the name of Holden Caulfield I do not rest easily there. I ask questions of the text in an attempt to understand what he means when he claims he wants to be a catcher in the rye. I might begin to pay attention to imagery of falls and falling. I might cast my mind wider to other texts and stories that include ideas of falling and being fallen. What I am doing is trying to *understand* the text. I am trying to understand the worldview of the protagonist, the imagery, the symbolism and ideas that are represented. By Levinas's account, by understanding Holden's fear of growing up and his desire to maintain the authenticity that belongs to children but somehow is lost when children become adults, I am bringing any otherness into the same. Holden (if we were to see character as cast as the role of the Other) is no longer an Other that transcends my grasp of the world and forces me to challenge my perception that I am master of my world but rather he becomes an object of my understanding. I look at him in the same way that I would look at a still life in a painting or a fish gill to be dissected for biology class. For Levinas the problem is similar to this. He would not cast Holden as the Other but rather JD Salinger. Holden is a limited representation of a human being. We only follow a short period of his adolescence and by his own definition we only hear about some 'madman stuff that happened

to me around last Christmas' because he doesn't 'feel like going into' his 'lousy childhood' and 'all that David Copperfield kind of crap'.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the only person on Levinasian terms who can occupy the role of the Other is the author, the man who served in World War II, married three times and lived a semi-reclusive lifestyle in New Hampshire.

Levinas's concern is clear. The representation of something the artist knows and seeks to express the essence of (assuming Gadamer is correct on this point) would invite the spectator or reader to seek to understand, to bring the alien world of the artwork into the structures of her own understanding. I claim to understand the text or author or both by careful reading and study of the text and in coming to understand the text or author I look to minimise points of confusion, of otherness or inconsistency. What then of Gadamer's claim that it is not the author that we seek to understand? That it is the subject matter under discussion that invites understanding. Can I come to an agreement about a text, at the same time that I maintain its otherness, letting it say something to me, whilst not attempting to understand the author of the text? Certainly I can approach a text anonymously. I might have no idea who the author of *Gilgamesh* is but open myself to the world of the great King. I might seek to understand the quest he undertakes and the people and monsters he meets. I might examine Gilgamesh's relationship with Enkidu from a variety of theoretical perspectives and consider the place Gilgamesh ends up and any lesson he might learn. Although I do not know anything about the author/s of *Gilgamesh* and in fact may be entirely ignorant of the history and composition of the ancient texts that form the basis of the modern retelling I approach, I can still seek to come to an understanding of the subject matter that is presented under that title.

Would this arrangement go some way to quieting Levinas's concerns? The text is understood but the author left untouched. In this scenario, it is the text that I claim to understand and I do not comment upon the author, the origin of the work. Levinas might agree that this is the best way to consider an ethical treatment of an author, who he considers is the Other behind the text, if we are unable to be face-to-face with the actual person but he would not consider the reading of the text to

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<sup>8</sup> J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), p. 1.

involve an encounter with an Other. The question of the Other rises again. Who or what is the Other that we encounter? I have hinted that this is an important question for my thesis question but I am yet to really face the question head on. I have drawn out what the Other is in Levinasian terms, which admittedly does not clear the matter up entirely. The Levinasian Other cannot be spoken about in positive terms but is described as stranger, destitute, as not forming a binary with me, as that which transcends or is otherwise, the Other is face and expression. At times Levinas appears to position the Other as God, and at others the Other seems to be the other people that we share the world with.

### **Who is this Other?**

In the case of literature, Levinas is much clearer; he does not believe the Other can be encountered through the mediation of words on a page, of a world created by and given voice to by an author. His disagreement with literary texts suggests that in these cases he sees the Other as the person behind the text, the author who could be met face-to-face, whose being in the world makes me aware of my own finitude and holds me hostage by calling me out in such a way that I can only respond with complete generosity in my responsibility toward this Other. In literary texts, from a Levinasian point of view, it is only the author that can occupy the role of the Other. The characters in the text may serve as illustrations of the Other or represent the Other but they are not infinite, they do not surpass all that I know and can know. Fictional characters, no matter how well portrayed or developed are, on this view, imminent constructions who do not challenge the world of the same. Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, gives further support to the author as Other. He says: 'To approach someone from works is to enter into his interiority as though by burglary; the other is surprised in his intimacy, where, like the personages of history, he is, to be sure, exposed, but does not express himself. Works signify their author, but indirectly, in the third person' (*TI*, p. 67).

I have also raised Gadamer's notion of otherness which resides not in other people or God but rather in tradition and that which allows us to encounter this tradition. Gadamer identifies the interaction between past, present and future

as the hermeneutical situation. At any given point in time every person has a certain perspective or horizon that is made up from the experiences they have had, the connections they have to the past, the ways in which they have tried to understand the past and applied it to the future and so on. Every person stands in a shifting perspective in which the past, present and future create the ever-changing horizon of an individual's understanding. In this view, the past, the world that occurred previously, tradition, is encountered as other. It is external to me, it is a world in which I did not live and move but through the artefacts of the culture worlds that are not mine are opened for me. My encounter with these other horizons, through the mediation of art works and literary texts, challenges me in much the same way that the Other challenged my sense of mastery in Levinas's account. If I am truly open to the other, according to Gadamer, I do not leave my present horizon, my present self and throw myself into the world of the other tradition but rather I place myself with my current understanding and world into the other tradition and open myself, my horizon and my present tradition, to questioning by the past. I discover my own finitude. I become aware that my tradition and present understanding is not complete nor objective in the strict, scientific sense, but rather fractured, prejudiced and fluid.

We have here another apparent contradiction between Levinas and Gadamer. For Levinas the Other is undefinable but seems to imply at the least another person and at most God. For Gadamer the tradition we encounter through artefacts from the past is other. What they agree upon is the role of the Other/other in challenging our sense of self-mastery and in drawing attention to our finitude. But what does this mean for my project? The guiding question of my thesis is whether we can encounter the Other through the mediation of literature and the answer seems to require a clear idea of what or who the Other is that we are encountering. Putting aside Levinas, for the moment, we need to consider Gadamer's account of the otherness of tradition and whether this might be the otherness that we encounter in literature. It would be convenient if Gadamer is correct. If our responsibility to texts is to allow the past to *say something* to us, even if it goes against our current knowledge, view of the world or understanding of the situation then we might be able to bracket Levinas's concerns altogether. If this is correct, then we need only worry ourselves about the texts themselves and

Levinas's desire to maintain the ethical encounter as particular to the face-to-face can be upheld. Let us, for the moment, assume this position and see how we fare.

## **Tradition as Other**

It is clearly a feasible position, based upon some of the main ideas and concerns of Gadamer's *magnum opus*. It allows us to read works of literature and genuinely seek to come to an agreement upon the meaning of the work (agreement with the text itself, other commentators and either directly or indirectly the author of the work). In this point of view, it still makes sense to consider symbolism, theme, character, structure, narrative, links to Freudian, Jungian, Derridean or innumerable other theoretical observations, connections with genre or ideologies, and the plethora of other tools and ideas we currently engage when reading a work of literature. We can still work with texts in ways that are currently employed. In utilising these ideas, tools and methods we would need to be willing to be open to ways in which the textual conversation takes an unlikely path.

I might read Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* with a mind to a Freudian analysis. I may note a certain phallic quality to the cat in the hat, or I might draw parallels between the goldfish and the superego and the cat's relation to the id. With these connections I might be tempted to develop other Freudian concepts such as dreamwork, childhood development through the oral, anal and phallic, stages but Gadamer's project encourages me to be open to the alterity of the text. I am engaged not in a monologue but rather a dialogue in which I must transform the dead, written words on the page back to living speech. If the text, like a partner in conversation, takes an unexpected turn, I should not try to control the conversation and stick stubbornly to my original course but work with the textual conversational partner to come to an understanding of what is being said. If *The Cat in the Hat* deviates from my Freudian analysis – what role do the children play? The ego? What about the parents? Can there be two superegos or does the goldfish represent the way in which the children take on the 'rule' of their parents? What to make of Thing One and Thing Two? Is there some particularly Freudian relevance to the capture of the Things in a net? – then I should listen to what the

text is saying rather than rushing to fit that which appears otherwise into my analysis.

On further analysis a Freudian account might be able to be given to these questions but it is also possible that they represent turns in the conversation, ways in which my approach is one-sided. I ought to view them as invitations to broaden my horizon, to encounter something outside my current perspective, perhaps looking to the cat, as Philip Nel did, as a member of the tradition of con artists in American literature such as the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*<sup>9</sup> or perhaps in listening to what the text has to say I might open myself to understanding a Christian morality where the fish belongs to this tradition rather than representing an aspect of the human consciousness. To be truly open to the alterity, the otherness of the text, I need to be aware of parts that do not fit my current understanding or projected meaning, even noting places where they go against my current beliefs. I need to respond to what is on the page rather than what I want to see on the page, in this way anomalies are potential areas for new understanding, for encountering tradition and challenging my sense of mastery and knowledge.

We have then, an idea of *how* we might approach a text in such a way as to attend to its otherness. We acknowledge the horizon in which we move and keep it with us as we encounter the otherness of tradition in the text we read. In placing our horizon in the conversation we open it to critique, to questioning and acknowledge our place in history as finite. I must be willing to listen to what the text says and if it disagrees with my own understanding of the world I must work to come to an agreement on the subject matter at hand. It is clear that this approach does not lend itself to a particular method or theoretical position. I am not given a map to follow to produce a reading. I am not encouraged to look for particular features of the text such as symbolism, nor to explore structures of narrative nor am I instructed to connect to the wider intertextual references that might be present in the text. There is not a single template that would produce the kind of attention to otherness that Gadamer advocates. In fact, by definition, there cannot be a method or process for reading. Rather there is something like an

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Nel, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 183.

ethical imperative; listen, be open, be willing to change or question one's beliefs and ideas.

The question now is whether this particular view of reading with its stance that we encounter the otherness of the past or tradition in our encounter with texts fits with both how we experience texts and otherness. In other words, does Gadamer's account of hermeneutics with its sensitivity to the otherness of tradition and focus on the subject matter rather than the author, provide a satisfactory answer to the question of this thesis? Do we need to concern ourselves with Levinas at all? The question of otherness that I began to address above is a key component to the answer here. On the one hand we have Levinas positioning the indescribable Other as either other people who share our world, or a primordial sense of sharing the world with people who are completely separate from ourselves which in turn is written into our very being as the condition for the possibility of subjectivity, or at an extreme interpretation Levinas could be argued as positing God as the Other. On the other hand, Gadamer speaks about otherness and the other with a small 'o' as tradition or history.

When I read a text, do I feel that I am encountering an Other in the Levinasian sense, perhaps that I have glimpsed into the face of an Other that I cannot know, cannot fully account for in my understanding of my world because she goes *beyond* my understanding? The ever-increasing application of Levinas's work to literary readings seems to suggest that this is the case. Personally, phenomenologically speaking, my subjective experience does support this notion. Following the Trask and Hamilton families in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* I find myself shifted. I am less sure of my knowledge of the world as total and full as I follow Adam Trask's ill-fated love for Cathy and desire to protect his sons from his former wife's new life. I read *East of Eden* and discover a world completely beyond myself and beyond anything that could be understood in its entirety from my own limited perspective. I feel that I have glimpsed another mind by having this world revealed to me in the work of literature. I have already suggested that for both Levinas and Gadamer, however, it is not the characters who inhabit the role of the Other/other.

Whilst reading Steinbeck's novel, do I encounter the author himself in the words on the page, the settings described, the characters developed? It is, after all, Steinbeck's vision, a combination of his experiences – both actual and intellectual – that drives the text. Steinbeck offers a world to me; Salinas Valley in the early part of the twentieth century. This is not a world revealed to me by Adam Trask or Cathy Ames. They are parts of this wider vision. When I read *East of Eden*, I understand that it is not just Samuel Hamilton's world that I am entering but that his particular place in this narrative is limited – both his perspective on the action of the story and his overall role in the development of ideas are instrumental, he occupies a role that allows certain ideas to flourish, and for storylines to be explored. In other words, I am aware, as I read any piece of literature, that the characters I encounter are constructed, finite and born from something outside the text. I am inclined to look at any given character as a part of a larger whole and ask what the author is trying to achieve or say by casting her in such a way. In this view, I am enthralled by the creator of the text. Is it Steinbeck that I am trying to understand, his motivation, intentions, his message or vision? There is certainly a case to be made for this.

In many lecture theatres in English departments around the globe the author's situation is explained, studied and described to undergraduates to help place the text in context. Links are frequently made between the text, its ideas, structure, narrative, occupations and place in the *Zeitgeist* with the author and her interests, comments on the text's coming into being, personal and political situation and intellectual alliances. Take for example, a recent undergraduate course in which I was a tutor. The class studied *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* by Salman Rushdie. Students were told that the story was written for one of Rushdie's children and the theme of storytelling was explored on the two levels – textual and extra-textual. An account was given of Rushdie's precarious situation post-*The Satanic Verses* and parallels with the text were considered. The author seems to continue to fascinate. As that which brought the text into being we feel that we have shared an intimate moment with this creator and look to the worldview she has presented as testament to her very existence.

Two objections might be raised at this point. The first is that this is a terribly archaic view of what we do when we read. In the twenty-first century,

post-Barthesian ‘death of the author’ world in which we move we have dispensed with the notion of authorial intention. The author no longer holds the interpretative key or last word, and with good reason. The second is that we do not merely see characters as pawns in a larger game of chess. Many readers, including academics, laypeople and writers, feel strongly about characters; some characters are so well developed that their finitude and constructedness melt away and are experienced like they are people who exist in and for the world of the text independently of authorial intentions (conscious and subconscious). It is not uncommon for authors to discuss their characters as ‘having a life of their own’. The author develops a character but finds that rather than an object of their conscious mind that they are studying, creating and shaping, the character actually presents herself as a person that in turn must be listened to. Nobel Prize winner André Gide claims that ‘The true novelist listens to [his characters] and watches them function; he eavesdrops on them even before he knows them.’<sup>10</sup> Readers appreciate this aspect of character development and do not necessarily see them as purely constructed and controlled by the author. The characters in any given work might reveal more than the author is conscious of or ever dreamed possible.

The first objection, that discussions of the author and particularly her intentions have no place in 2015, is fairly easily dealt with. The objection Barthes (and other post-modernist theoreticians) raises with regard to the author stem from a particular way of ascribing power or interpretive finality to the creator of the text. In this view, the goal of each reading is to discover what the circumstances of the author were when she was composing the text, her place in history, her geographical location, her motivations and intentions for writing the particular text she wrote as well as her psychological situation, relationships, sexual identity, ethnicity and so on. The idea is that if we could fully understand the author and her intentions we would fully understand the work before us. If the author released information about the text’s meaning we would take this as authority and base our understanding of the work upon her testimony. I think most people working with literary texts in the latter part of the twentieth century and forward into the twenty-first see the problems with this stance. The first and most obvious problem is that the author is rarely available to consult at length about her

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<sup>10</sup> André Gide, *The Counterfeiters: A Novel* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 444.

intentions and particular interpretation of the work and even if she is available she will have unconscious desires and forces that are present in the text but not her understanding.

Another problem with relying upon the author for the final word on interpretation is that language works in such a way that meaning is not self-evident or stable. The author might clothe a female character in a red hoodie. She might do this because the character is shy and the hooded jersey represents her desire to hide but at the same time the shy woman might have many secret passions represented by the red of the garment. Or perhaps the author dressed the character this way because she was working in a café and noticed someone thus attired and it caught her eye. Once the work is published the red hoodie enters the world and is open to other readings. It is up to the reader to give life to the hoodie and in doing so one reader will see the hoodie in a different way to the next. A reader might connect the girl's dress to the children's folk story 'Little Red Riding hood' and consider the connection between a loss of innocence or danger of stepping away from the well-trodden path or even the danger of listening to others. The author, when confronted with such interpretations, might throw up her arms and say 'I just liked the colour red' but the growing body of interpretation around her red hoodie work to construct its meaning. Language is open to being otherwise, to being read in ways in which the author did not intend but are still utterly fitting with the text and what it says.<sup>11</sup>

Do these problems prevent us from discussing the author as something encountered in literature? I do not think they do. Certainly I agree that we do not have to even be aware of who the author is, let alone reconstruct the situation of their writing-self, to be able to understand, interpret and enjoy their texts. I do not think the author holds the answer to the question 'what does the text mean?' Even a considerable analysis of the meaning of the text by the author would not fully address this question as meaning is created each time the text is read and the reader's own knowledge, experiences and situation form a part of the conversation

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth keeping in mind that this is one of Levinas's objections to literature (and written work in general). The author is not there to be able to speak for herself or defend herself and is thus liable to be misunderstood. Connected to this is the way in which language is open to multiple interpretations or understandings (this being exclusive to figurative language for Levinas who perhaps naively believes that spoken language and ethical or philosophical language has a straightforwardness that renders it transparent and meaning to be clearly transmitted).

that allows understanding to be reached. But I do think we can feel that we have encountered something beyond or behind the text that we might name 'author'. It does not matter *what* the author intended by dressing the girl in a red hoodie but merely that there was intention or even action, someone decided to clothe the character in this particular way and put this into action. When I approach a work of fiction I know that someone, which is not to say a single person, created it. They may have had no real intentions except to create and the resulting text might be a combination of found work and free writing but when I read it I know that there is someone beyond the work that began the conversation.

The 'author' is a good candidate for the Other in our discussion of literature. The reading of *East of Eden* reveals a world which is not the world of any individual character in the story but rather a world made manifest by someone beyond the words on the page. By reading the text I am exposed to the Other, I am made aware that there is someone else that occupies the world with me but is not a mere object in my world. My understanding cannot account for this Other in her entirety. We do not meet the 'author/Other' face-to-face but rather she puts before us a plea. The text stands in place for the absent author and requires the reader, as Gadamer has intimated, to transform the dead written words back into living conversation. The text calls upon the reader to understand and interpret it; to question it and discover the question that it is the answer to, to bring it into the present world and make space for its claims in the moment.<sup>12</sup>

I have argued that the other/Other encountered in a work of literature is the 'author,' a term that is not as clear-cut as might be thought. The 'author' remains somewhat elusive, we do not necessarily situate the author as the particular person that created the text but rather with the vision and collective experiences that brought the work into being. We do not need to know who wrote the book, nor does there need to be one person who was responsible for the work's creation but rather we sense something larger than the text and ourselves when we encounter a world through literature. We know that we are catching a glimpse of thought, intention, experience that is beyond our own. Does this stance mean that we are in agreement with Levinas, who would cast the author as Other if asked to locate the

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<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, *Relevance*, p. 26.

Other in literature? And, if so, does it also mean that the tradition we encounter, in Gadamer's account, does not hold the position of the Other despite appearing as alterity or otherness in our horizon? I began the above argument by asking if we could dispense with Levinas. I looked at the way in which Gadamer's hermeneutics required the reader to be open to the ways in which the text challenges understanding, prejudice, or knowledge in their own horizon in similar ways in which the Other challenges the self's subjectivity in Levinas's ethics. Gadamer seemed to offer an affirmative answer to the question of the thesis but only if we see tradition, history, the knowledge and worlds that are handed down as the Other. Does the above argument of the Other as author preclude tradition as Other? In other words, does our description of the author fit Gadamer's notion of tradition?

I have already drawn some similarities between Gadamer's tradition and Levinas's Other the most obvious and important of which is that they have the same consequences. They both draw attention to our finitude and challenge our sense of self mastery. There are, however, some differences. The most noticeable difference between the two is that the Other, for Levinas, as ambiguous as it is, involves a face, involves an entity that approaches, that speaks in a singular way. It calls to me, elects me and I find that I am responsible. Basically, for Levinas, the Other is another person, whether this is the destitute stranger who appeals with her eyes for my help or a primordial awareness of other people that is the condition for the possibility of subjectivity at all. Tradition, on the other hand, involves understanding artefacts, works of art, buildings, texts, et cetera that expose the viewer to another horizon. On first glance, these seem like considerably different things. We have people, exemplified by the face-to-face on the one side, and tradition handed down in artefacts for interpretation on the other.

Although this might appear like the biggest difference between the two, I suggest it is in fact not a difference at all. Levinas, whether deliberate or not, in dismissing literature as 'not straightforward,' as using language in ways that do not face but rather approach at an angle, he is positioning the author as Other. It is the author that one *could* encounter if one could approach her straight on, if one could stand face-to-face and hear the plea. The author is hidden behind her text and the text stands between her and the self and prevents a face-to-face encounter.

The text as artefact is one of the ways in which we encounter tradition for Gadamer. The text reveals or makes manifest worlds, perspectives, histories that are other to me but at the same time become a part of my horizon as I take my own perspective and place myself in the tradition I stand before. The artefact is what is passed down, what remains and makes possible the encounter with tradition, with the worldview that belonged to someone else. Gadamer's account presupposes other people with horizons that were particular to them in time and place. These horizons are the history that we can encounter as other, as opening our eyes to ways in which our own horizon is particular and finite. Both Levinas and Gadamer's views are consistent with the idea of a 'person,' an Other with a perspective/worldview/horizon that is beyond my own. Tradition, in Gadamer's account, is a way in which we can come into contact with this other perspective or horizon. Tradition, for all that it seems quite different to Levinas's idea of an Other, is really the coming into proximity with an Other that is absent in person but present in what they have left behind.

### **The ethical demand**

The real difference between the two ways of seeing the Other/other is that although Levinas might concede that it is the author behind or beyond the text who occupies the role of Other he does not think the experience of encounter can occur in her absence, even if she has presented a worldview in a literary text. Gadamer, clearly would disagree. On the one hand, Levinas provides a very guttural account of the encounter with the Other. In the face-to-face the Other presents a desperation and urgency that cannot be denied. In the split second that the two sets of eyes meet the self's world changes and she becomes responsible for the infinite Other. On the other hand, Gadamer provides an account of understanding. Works of literature appear as other; they present a tradition or history that is not mine. I do not have an instantaneous moment of recognition but rather work to bring the dead words on the page back to life, to place myself in the conversation with the goal of coming to an understanding, to an agreement that requires both an attempt to hear what the text says as well as putting my own perspective on trial, amending my position and letting the otherness of the text

really affect me. Gadamer's hermeneutics lacks the strong ethical propulsion of Levinas's phenomenology.

When you come face-to-face with the Other, for Levinas, there is no turning away. You cannot choose to have not encountered the Other. You might choose to respond with violence, by killing the other, but in the moment that the face presents itself, in the moment it expresses itself, there is no going back. That moment is the birth of subjectivity. The awareness that you could kill every other you meet does not change the fact that you have encountered the Other and will never be able to go back to a world in which the Other does not exist.

The otherness of tradition, encountered as it is through works of art or literature, might be argued not to have the same gripping urgency. Gadamer offers several versions of the I-Thou relationship when drawing an analogy between the hermeneutic situation and the relationship between people. He settles upon the version where the other person is experienced as a person rather than an object of my understanding. A person, as person, is understood in similar terms to Levinas's Other. The other person is beyond me, other from me and not something that I can know in full. Gadamer suggests this is the way in which we should experience works of literature but in doing so he also seems to suggest that other I-Thou relationships are possible. It implies that I can approach and treat a text merely as an object of my understanding or as an example of something typical, already known and predictable. The implication is that I might be exposed to the otherness of tradition or history but fail to experience this as otherness. I may do this by failing to hear the otherness of the text. I might approach the text with certain ideas about what the work will say and fail to see anything that disagrees with my prejudice. Or, I might fail to bring my own horizon into contact with that of the text. I read the text purely as an object of curiosity or historical interest with no bearing upon myself. Although these might be inauthentic ways to read, the fact that they are possible reinforces Levinas's argument that it is only through proximity, the face-to-face meeting that allows the Other to be encountered in the ethical sense.

## Summary

I have argued that if we encounter the Other in literature it is the ‘author,’ understood as the condition for the possibility of the text’s existence who occupies this role; the Other is the worldview that is made manifest in the work but at the same time moves beyond the text. I have suggested that Levinas’s concerns regarding literature go some way to backing this view up. Levinas wants to maintain the face-to-face as the site of encounter with the Other and argues that mediation by a literary work means that an ethical encounter with the Other does not take place. The work stands like a mask between the Other and the self. The fact that the language used in literature is marked by its figurative nature means that one cannot approach the Other straight on but rather we can only approach from an angle, the words on the page do not mean what they say but rather point beyond their common or superficial meanings. Literary works signify, in Levinas’s view, absence (of subject matter and author). The creator behind the work does not face or become manifest but rather a mediating image is presented in her absence. The objection to literature implies that the literary work hides the real Other behind it. It suggests that the author, who perhaps wants to appeal to the self, is unable to appear face-to-face and in lieu of a true encounter leaves an empty mimetic sign.

I have also explored ways in which ‘author’ understood in the sense explained above coincides with Gadamer’s notion of tradition. It is certainly possible to draw parallels between this wider and less literal idea of author and history or tradition as discussed in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. It is worth considering our position now with regard to the wider task of this thesis. We have established that it is possible to consider the otherness of tradition or history in written literary texts by paying attention to what is said, even when it goes against our current knowledge or understanding, allowing our current self to be challenged and looking to come to an agreement on the matter at hand. I have also connected the idea of history or tradition with the wider definition of ‘author’ and suggested that we might indeed encounter the otherness of this ‘author’ through consideration of literary texts. But there is still a question mark over whether this constitutes an *encounter* with the *Other*. The otherness of a literary text might

come as a result of its relation to an Other but the immediate *human* response is lacking. The fact that it is possible for a text to be put aside, read as a singularly historical artefact, suggests that Levinas's phenomenological account of the encounter with the Other may indeed not apply to literary works. Levinas's very high standard for an encounter with the Other, his insistence on the face-to-face appears irreconcilable with any type of artistic or representative mediation.

## Chapter Five: an answer?

### Introduction

In the chapters above I have explored ways in which we might address the question of this thesis: can we have an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature? This question led me first to read Levinas's ethics to develop a theory of an ethical encounter and then to consider ways in which Levinas resists the application of his work to the field of literature. In hope for a solution to the problems Levinas raises for the thesis question I turned to Gadamer's hermeneutics to explore ways in which one can understand a text whilst also maintaining its otherness. In my attempt to bring the two ideas into dialogue further questions were raised or highlighted. The most striking of these is what or who is the Other that we are looking to encounter.

On the one hand both Levinas and Gadamer identify the other/Other as occupying the same kind of role with regard to subjectivity. For both philosophers, the other/Other challenges the subject's mastery and draws attention to their finitude. The encounter or dialogue with other/Other for both involve coming into contact with something outside of the subject's experience, understanding or knowledge of the world. And this is where one of the major differences lies. For Levinas we can never understand the Other but for Gadamer the goal of hermeneutics in which the otherness of a text is respected is to coming to an understanding. This difference is in part due to Levinas's insistence on the unmediated face-to-face nature of the encounter. The ethical encounter, the moment of recognition happens in an instant, marking a break in the subject's sense of completeness and mastery. This instant of recognition does not allow the subject to make the Other an object of her understanding; the Other appears as expression, as face and as such the subject can only respond to her as Other. A text presented in the Other's absence lacks the immediacy required, according to Levinas, to disrupt the self's sense of mastery and create authentic subjectivity. The otherness of a text is not revealed in a moment but over the course of reading. The reading subject is not confronted immediately with an absolute Other but

rather comes to the literary text with the goal of understanding. Basically, to borrow Levinas's sentiment, we encounter, in a text, a finite representation not an infinite Other.

I suggested that Levinas has constructed a view of the ethical encounter with the beginning premise that it can only occur face-to-face, rather than coming to the face-to-face from an argument or other premises. My investigation of Gadamer's hermeneutics revealed that readers can and do feel that they have had an encounter with an other in the kind of way that Levinas describes in their exposure to a horizon that differs to their own. They can experience the feeling of responsibility that Levinas discusses. When reading a work of literature one is faced with the responsibility of bringing the words on the page to life; to hearing what the text says and allowing its meaning to come forth. Likewise, readers experience a similar feeling of finitude from encountering something absolutely outside their horizon. Gadamer certainly provides a hermeneutics that is consistent with the ethical encounter as described by Levinas. I have argued, however, that the ethical urgency of the face-to-face that consumes Levinas's work is absent from the mediated encounter where there is opportunity to not recognise the Other, to not experience the Other as Other but rather to view the otherness present in the text, the different horizon, as a purely historical point of view with no bearing upon myself; it is possible to see the text simply as an object in a way that is impossible to see the Other in the face-to-face. In a word, we need both Levinas's ethical urgency which may have impossibly high standards, and Gadamer's hermeneutics that allows us to *say* something about the text without destroying its alterity.

It is time now to consider the outcome or answer for the thesis question based upon the apparent similarities and difficulties encountered in Levinas and Gadamer. Can we have an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature? The short answer is no. Levinas's insistence on the face-to-face and the immediate does preclude mediation which includes literary texts. Obviously we could choose, like Eaglestone and others, to find a way around this by either arguing that Levinas contradicts himself by suggesting philosophical texts hold a special place in which the ethical saying (in which the ethical encounter is implicit) is present whilst maintaining that there is no access to the transcendental via

literary works or perhaps simply claiming that the visceral ethical urge to maintain the ethical encounter as face-to-face and immediate is fitting but simply not true. Gadamer's notion of tradition and his hermeneutical approach which allows understanding of the text while still maintaining the text's integrity and ability to say otherwise certainly suggests an affirmative answer to the thesis question. I have already dealt with the first possible way of discounting Levinas and argued that on the balance of things his insistence on the face-to-face, unmediated encounter constitutes an ethical saying that, by definition, is beyond logic, rational thinking and our understanding. The second approach, that Levinas is simply wrong in his account of the ethical encounter can in part be dealt with by the same response – Levinas is putting forward an ethical saying, possibly and probably as a result of his experiences in the Second World War and as an ethical saying it does not fall under the usual requirements for truth, and to write it off as factually incorrect or logically inconsistent would be to miss the point of both Levinas's ethics and Gadamer's hermeneutical approach.

### **The encounter: empirical or transcendental?**

Where then does this leave my particular project? Is there nothing that can be done to respect Levinas's ethical saying, his insistence on the face-to-face whilst understanding literary texts as falling under the same phenomenological framework? The long answer requires us to reconsider the nature of Levinas's face-to-face encounter. Putting the question of literature aside for the moment, the assumption throughout has been that one *can* encounter the Other. That the face-to-face encounter Levinas describes is something that one can *experience*. A subjective reflection seems to support this; when reading Levinas I understand the point he is making. I can feel the gaze of the Other arresting me and holding me hostage. I consider meeting the eye of a homeless person on the street or remember images of prisoners from concentration camps pleading through the camera. The explosion of interest in Levinas's work in the field of literary study would seem to back this up. His description of the encounter with the Other seems to speak a human truth that we all understand and feel that we have felt. It is, however, debateable as to whether Levinas considers the ethical encounter as

something that we actually experience in our day-to-day lives or whether it is something within our psyche, part of our human nature that is best explained in these terms. Michael Morgan, following Bernasconi, labels the two possible interpretations of Levinas's ethical encounter 'empirical' and 'transcendental'.<sup>1</sup>

Bernasconi notes that interpreters of *Totality and Infinity* tend to fall into one of the two categories. The empirical approach recognises the ethical encounter as something concrete and able to be subjectively experienced, whereas the transcendental interpretation reads the ethical encounter as a condition for the possibility of ethics. Bernasconi claims that Levinas seems to entertain both interpretations.<sup>2</sup> Morgan briefly explores the two interpretations and tends towards the transcendental. It is worth briefly considering the evidence for both interpretations here before continuing the 'long answer' to the thesis question. I will begin with the empirical interpretation, which the question of this thesis is guilty of assuming. Levinas certainly speaks about the Other as if they were someone that we can empirically come face-to-face with. Levinas's use of language and metaphor is suggestive of concrete, lived experience. The Other is described as 'face,' 'expression,' 'stranger,' 'widow' and 'orphan'. Each of these terms position the Other with people that make up our world. These terms are suggestive of a concrete encounter or the empirical interpretation but are certainly not definitive in deciding how to interpret the ethical encounter. They are best considered metaphor or symbol rather than signifying a physical face, actual expression or language, real strangers, widows or orphans. But Levinas does make other claims that seem to support the empirical interpretation, such as, 'it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me' (*TI*, p. 73) which clearly aligns other human beings with the absolute Other. In an interview Levinas responds to a question about the encounter with the Other taking the mode of violence by saying: 'The interpersonal relation I establish with the Other, I must also establish with other men'.<sup>3</sup> This statement, although not without ambiguity which does not rule out the transcendental argument, does suggest in claiming an 'interpersonal

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<sup>1</sup> Morgan, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> *The Question of the Other: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott, Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, 15 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, p. 90.

relation' with the Other, the possibility of an empirical, concrete encounter with the Other.

Many readers of Levinas maintain the empirical interpretation as they seek to apply Levinas's ethics to wider areas such as politics. Lisa Guenther, in her essay on ethics and politics, argues 'the other could be *anyone*—black or white, rich or poor, American or Afghani—the command to respond to the other's singularity is absolute. It matters little to Levinas if the other is similar or different to me'.<sup>4</sup> Guenther is clearly reading Levinas's ethics in the empirical light. She is arguing against interpretations that align the other<sup>5</sup> with people living in third-world countries or the poor and homeless (perhaps in response to Levinas's characterisation of the Other as orphan, widow or stranger), but rather than argue a transcendental interpretation she opens up the notion of other to 'anyone'. She notes upon the singularity of the other who addresses me and this focus on singularity and indifference to the type of person who issues a plea are firmly in the empirical interpretation mode. Guenther is reading the face as something that can and is encountered in ordinary life, which is not to say it is an everyday experience. Edward S. Casey makes an even stronger claim, '[e]thics, then, resides in the face to face encounter, in its unguarded openness and transparency, in its abrupt actuality. For only then and there do I find the other as Other, as existing in separation from me even as we share the fact and fate of being members of the same species.'<sup>6</sup> Casey is claiming here that the Other is in fact other people in the world with me but when we meet them face to face in the ethical encounter we encounter them as truly Other, they may be people like me but when face-to-face they transcend this similarity and appear as separate, unknowable and beyond my human understanding. The fact that others, who are to be encountered face-to-face as the Other, are 'members of the same species' as me suggests the ethical encounter can be empirically experienced. This is emphasised by Casey's use of the word 'actuality'. The face-to-face ethical encounter has a certainty, a reality to it. Given our condition of sharing the world

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<sup>4</sup> Guenther, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Guenther does not use a capitalised 'o' for other.

<sup>6</sup> Edward S. Casey, 'The Ethics of the Face to Face Encounter: Schroeder, Levinas, and the Glance', *The Pluralist*, 1 (2006), 74–97 (p. 80).

with others and the actuality of the face-to-face it would seem that Casey is supporting the empirical interpretation of the ethical encounter.

Morgan argues that the transcendental interpretation is the best way to understand Levinas's ethical encounter. He states, 'it seems utterly impossible that the face-to-face could occur in ordinary life.'<sup>7</sup> One reason he gives for this comes from Levinas's own words. We saw above ways in which Levinas discusses the face-to-face in concrete terms that suggest the encounter can occur in ordinary life but he also speaks about it in ways that suggest the face is beyond the world of being. I have referred to the face-to-face encounter throughout the thesis so far as 'primordial' and Morgan concurs, 'Levinas says that the encounter with the face is somehow originary and primordial, prior to ontology and being, in his terms "anarchic"'.<sup>8</sup> The justification for this interpretation, for Morgan, can be seen in the distinction between the world of being and the face. If the face is prior to the world of experience then it cannot be experienced. A basic analogy makes this point a little clearer; we might imagine the world of experience is a cake. All we know, everything we understand, everything we are, is cake. The face, by analogy might be the chicken that laid the eggs that the cake is made from. Eating the cake does not give us an experience of the chicken. We are completely unable to experience the chicken, whether she is a Rhode Island Red or Black Orpington, raised in a battery cage or free range farm, et cetera. However, the cake is still reliant upon her; it would not exist if she had not laid her eggs. We live in the world of experience, the world of being but, like the chicken who makes the cake possible, the face exists beyond this world. It is the condition of the possibility for experience of the world as world but the experience of the world does not allow us experience of the face. Without the face-to-face encounter I would not be able to experience the world in the same way I do now.

Morgan claims that Levinas awkwardly attempts to speak of the face in ways that support its primordial, originary status. He uses terms like 'epiphany' to suggest that the face does not appear to us, it is not made manifest but rather it '*reveals* itself'.<sup>9</sup> Levinas must try to discuss the encounter with the Other, the

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<sup>7</sup> Morgan, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Morgan, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, p. 44.

face-to-face in ways that do not slip into ontology. We can only speak about what we can experience. All our language, investigation and thought belong in the world of being. If the Other is outside experience, then every tool we have to speak about it fails to be able to express its exteriority and instead brings it within the realm of experience or being. To go back to the cake analogy – if all we know is cake then to speculate on what is outside cake (like chickens) we can only talk in terms of cake, therefore we fail to talk about chickens at all, we merely speak of cake. The use of religious terminology (epiphany, revelation) is not accidental.

Proponents of the transcendental interpretation might argue that the Other, like God, is not something experienced in the same way as we experience other people in the world, but something we might sense or have revealed to us in a way that is analogous to a religious experience. The very fact of revelation or epiphany, both of which Levinas asserts clearly with relation to the face, causes some problem for proponents of the transcendental interpretation. Morgan can be seen as struggling with the indetermination that Levinas exhibits with regard to the face's ontological status in his discussion of epiphany and revelation. Morgan claims that the face 'is *like* an appearance but not one. It is pre-perceptual, pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual, and pre-theoretical. Nonetheless, the individual self *does engage with or encounter the face of the other person.*'<sup>10</sup>[My italics]. On the one hand, the face is beyond any perception, language, concept or theory but on the other hand individuals do in fact engage with or encounter it. If the face did not reveal itself, did not make itself manifest then we would not be discussing it whatsoever. The face, at the very least, breaks through into the world of being. Morgan continues by claiming that although individual selves encounter the face 'it is hard to believe that this engagement is an everyday event or an ordinary – or even extraordinary – concrete experience.'<sup>11</sup>

What exactly is Morgan trying to argue? He must concede some way in which the face is experienced 'the individual self does engage with...the face of the other person' but at the same time he wants to maintain that this is not a 'concrete experience'. Is this so different from the assertion from Casey above? We are in the world with others and experience them in our day-to-day lives are

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<sup>10</sup> Morgan, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan, p. 44.

other people, like ourselves. We might understand that person A is upset because her husband left her; that person B is always a bit grumpy because he is suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome; or we might surmise that person C is considerably better at problem solving than we are ourselves. We can do this by looking at ourselves and realising that if our partner were to leave us we would also be upset. Or we could take the knowledge we have of basic medical knowledge and apply it to our friend's recent diagnosis and deduce from when we feel sick we feel grumpy, therefore it is likely that our friend, who is like us in many respects, will also feel grumpy as he is now sick. In our day-to-day lives we understand other people as being *like* us. We can look at how others act and predict fairly accurately their inner states by considering how we feel when we act that way. For example, Sally is smiling and giggling, when I smile and giggle I feel happy inside. I might ask Sally how she feels and could answer 'excited' which would correlate with my guess that she is feeling happy. In our normal interactions we experience other people as other people *like me*. From time to time, however, according to both the empirical and the transcendental interpretation of Levinas that Morgan has outlined above, I experience something that cuts through this everyday way of encountering other people; this experience is the Levinasian ethical encounter.

It is worth considering briefly an alternative interpretation of the ethical encounter, one that aligns best with the transcendental interpretation. Back in Chapter One I gave an account of the development of subjectivity with the ethical encounter as a central factor in this. I suggested there that this way of explaining some of Levinas's central concepts was possible based on his work but at the same time a simplification and perhaps a misrepresentation. The story I told traced the subject's development from the horrific undifferentiated existence of the *il y a* to the enjoyment and mastery of the world of things followed by the crisis and emergence of true subjectivity with the revelation of the face and the ethical encounter. This 'story' is clearly not based upon empirical experience. It is not an account of development like Freud's version of childhood development or even the Lacanian mirror-stage. The self is always already in a world with things and people, we are never in a position to experience a world that is prior to this engagement with things and people. So, we might see Levinas's account of

subjectivity and ethics as first philosophy as the *condition for the possibility* for subjectivity and philosophy. The account Levinas gives explains how there is subjectivity and philosophy at all but we might see it as taking the form of a hypothesis that explains phenomena we experience but it itself remains forever unverifiable or unknowable. The ethical encounter has not and will not take place but rather it explains the world as it is, including human experience. It is, in this sense, ‘primordial’ and transcendental. It is both originary and is utterly beyond lived experience.

The problem that this type of argument faces is the same as Morgan’s version of the transcendental argument. To be able to talk about it as anything other than pure hypothesis we must acknowledge its existence and we can only know about its existence in the world of being. This coupled with Levinas’s descriptions of the face-to-face encounter that indicate insight or experience of the face or Other which include: ‘The face is a *living presence*; it is expression’ (TI, p. 66) [my italics], and ‘I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the *existent he is*’ (TI, p. 47) [my italics]. These, as well as terms mentioned above such as ‘epiphany’ and ‘revelation’ suggest, despite the mystery surrounding the ethical encounter and the seemingly impossible actuality of the face-to-face encounter, that it is intended to be something experienced, in one way or another.

Levinas’s apparent indecision between the empirical and transcendental representation of the face is not so much indecision as an acknowledgement that both can be seen as elements of the ethical encounter. Levinas would also want to maintain that the ethical encounter is not merely situated in one or other of these philosophical outlooks. Levinas states it thus:

Between a philosophy of transcendence that situates elsewhere the true life to which man, escaping from here, would gain access in the privileged moments of liturgical, mystical elevation, or in dying – and a philosophy of immanence in which we would truly come into possession of being when every ‘other’ (cause for war), encompassed by the same, would vanish at the end of history – we propose to describe, within the unfolding of terrestrial existence, of economic existence...a relationship with the

other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity. Such a relationship is metaphysics itself (*TI*, p. 52).

Levinas situates his work outside of or other than both transcendental philosophy that posits truth outside of the world of lived human experience and philosophy of immanence in which there is nothing that is unknowable or outside human understanding, given enough time. The problem with both of these philosophical positions is that they aim toward a totality. Both have the same goal of full and total understanding of truth which is there to be understood given the right circumstances. The ethical encounter, on the other hand, suggests that neither position adequately describes reality, as the Other remains unknowable, outside of totality as the idea of infinity. The above passage from *Totality and Infinity* does not exclude the ethical encounter from lived experience as Levinas claims to propose ‘within the unfolding of terrestrial existence’ the relationship with the Other. But this relationship is not the same as our usual day-to-day experiences in which we are able to understand everything we meet in relation to an expectation of totality. We might not understand everything we come into contact with immediately but we experience it as a piece of a larger whole. The face of the Other, on the other hand, is experienced as something that does not fit into this larger picture. It is not like our experience of everyday items and then might be considered analogous to a transcendental experience but Levinas does not want to situate the face in the totality suggested by transcendental philosophy. Rather, Levinas suggests the ethical encounter is ‘between’ these two viewpoints.

### **The Infinite and ethics**

Where does this leave us? Can we experience the ethical encounter in our everyday lives? If so, are there particular situations that make us more likely to encounter the Other or is this a real possibility every time we meet another person? What does it mean for it to exist ‘between’ transcendental philosophy and a philosophy of immanence? There is perhaps a hint to the answer to these questions in the passage quoted above. Levinas identifies his project as describing

‘a relationship with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity’ (*TI*, p. 52). The idea of infinity is clearly a key aspect of Levinas’s philosophy - the book is called *Totality and Infinity* after all. In Chapter One I discussed the infinite as one of the ways in which Levinas speaks about the Other. In fact, Levinas devotes the first part of section IIIB, ‘Ethics and the Face,’ to a discussion of infinity and the face. The face, the Other, is infinite, infinitely Other, utterly foreign and it overflows every concept I might have. We have accepted this idea without further investigation. It is one of the ways in which Levinas tries to explain how the Other is not something that fits into *my* world, not part of the totality of the same. The Other is not, not-I, not understood by terms of logic, it overflows everything we know and think.

It is worth looking at the idea of infinity and its consequences for the ethical relation in more detail as it might help us decide whether the ethical encounter is something that we could experience in general and via the mediation of literature for our particular purposes. The face is the idea of infinity and to fully appreciate the argument Levinas is making we need to go back to René Descartes who we first encountered back in Chapter One. Descartes proves that God exists by considering whether the subject is the source of its own ideas. Are there any ideas that the subject has that do not come from within? Descartes has already established that the only truth he can be certain of and unable to doubt is that he exists because he thinks. Even as he doubts he is assured of his existence in the very act of doubting.

In the Third Meditation he considers those things he doubted in the First. Objects such as trees, houses, animals – those things that he perceived by his senses. He comes to realise that he can know not the objects but the idea of the objects. He might be mistaken in perceiving a goat when in fact it was a sheep but he cannot be wrong about the fact that he has an idea of a goat. He identifies three types of ideas or thought – those that come from outside ourselves such as the heat from a fire, those that come from within, that we make up such as the flying spaghetti monster and finally those that are innate. Descartes considers that all ideas must have a cause and concludes that even those ideas that seem to come from the outside could in fact come from within. There is no clear way of

knowing if our ideas of things in the world emanate from the world outside or from within, he claims, ‘perhaps there is some other faculty within me, as yet insufficiently known to me, that produces such ideas – just as up to now it has always seemed to me that they formed themselves in me while I am asleep without any assistance from external things.’<sup>12</sup> This leaves Descartes unsure if there are any ideas that do not find their source in the thinking self. He continues to investigate the source of ideas and turns his attention to the idea of God.

Descartes argues that logically speaking the self cannot be the source of an idea that is greater than itself. He describes God as ‘eternal, infinite, omniscient, all-powerful, and the creator of all things that exist beside himself.’<sup>13</sup> The idea of God within me is of a perfect being; infinite, eternal, all good, all-powerful and all-knowing. I know that I myself am finite and imperfect so Descartes concludes that the idea of God could not have originated from within me but must have come from a perfect being, one that is infinite, eternal, all good, all powerful and all knowing. In this way he is able to establish a cosmological argument for God’s existence.

What does all this have to do with Levinas and the idea of infinity?

Levinas refers to Descartes, especially this Third Meditation, multiple times in *Totality and Infinity* and finds inspiration in Descartes’ proof of God. Levinas finds the way Descartes connects exteriority (an infinite God) with interiority appealing. The self, in Descartes’ meditation, comes into contact with something completely exterior to itself – the self has an idea of God which comes not from the self but from outside. In this connection with exteriority the self is not compromised. Levinas claims that Descartes, ‘discovers a relation with a total alterity irreducible to interiority, which nevertheless does not do violence to interiority’ (*TI*, p. 211). The subject is not annihilated by exteriority, it does not become swept up by the infinite but rather the two exist in separation. The self is not just uncompromised by the idea of the infinite but its relation to exteriority actually ensures the subject’s place in the world. Descartes takes the idea of God within the self to prove God’s existence and from that is able to rebuild the subject’s knowledge of the external world which he had doubted in the First

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<sup>12</sup> René Descartes and Michael Moriarty, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes and Moriarty, p. 29.

Meditation. The influence on Levinas's thought is clear. The Other is the idea of infinity in the subject. Infinity is larger than the self and must come from the outside, it can only come from something infinite and the self is finite. The self is unable to account for the infinite Other, any attempt to understand or think about the Other will fail as a finite being cannot think the infinite; the infinite will always exceed and surpass the self's attempts to categorise or limit it. 'The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed' (*TI*, p. 194). But nevertheless the idea is there within us.

The idea of the infinite provides a possible place for us to make some ground on the long answer to my thesis question. We have reached a point where we are not even sure whether an encounter with the Other can take place at all, let alone through the mediation of literature. Levinas seems to entertain both that the encounter does take place and that it is impossible. I have suggested that the best reading of this particular question is to resist either the empirical or transcendental interpretation, rather than arguing one side or the other one ought to find a way to understand Levinas's claim that his project fits between a philosophy of immanence and transcendental philosophy. How does the idea of the infinite and Descartes' meditations factor into this? In much the same way that Descartes rediscovers the world of things from the proof that God exists as the source of the idea of God, Levinas rests subjectivity upon the idea of the infinite. The self only becomes a self in its true sense when it is aware that it is not alone in the world, master over all. The self, ironically, finds freedom in its own finitude. By realising that it shares the world with the Other, that the world is not simply there for its own enjoyment, the self becomes aware of itself as a subject, finite but distinct from the rest of the world. In this realisation, in becoming a subject, the self is able to see itself as a distinct and free being, if limited by human finitude. It is only when the self is met by something outside itself that it can truly become a subject.

This is the aspect of Levinas's thought that lends itself to a label of being primordial or originary. It would appear to fit best in the transcendental philosophy interpretation insofar as the idea of infinity, pure exteriority, cannot be grasped or understood, surpassing, exceeding or transcending the physical world of things. Given Levinas's reading of Descartes we might argue that we have the

idea of infinity *a priori*. Like Descartes' doubting self for whom the idea of God is present and clear when all else is doubted, the idea of infinity appears to be something we have without having to look outside ourselves to the world around us. The knowledge of ourselves as distinct and finite beings, as subjects in a world with others is the foundation upon which human experience is lived. Of course, theorists have spent much time contemplating the nature of subjectivity and the development of the ego and some offer counter-arguments or conflicting opinions to this. Notably psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan's mirror stage offers an alternate picture of the development of subjectivity.

Lacan's early account of the mirror stage claimed that infants do not have a notion of themselves as complete and distinct selves. It is only when they encounter their image in a mirror<sup>14</sup> that they are able to conceive of themselves as whole. Lacan then moves on to discuss how this image of a whole contrasts with the infant's sense of fragmentation arising from their lack of control over their bodies. This particular view suggests that prior to the stage in which the child is able to view themselves from the outside, as a whole being, they do not have a sense of self of an autonomous free being. If my claim that the idea of infinity is somehow primordial, a structure or condition for the possibility of lived human experience, is correct then the young child would already have a sense of exteriority, of an Other that both challenges their sense of self and at the same time makes subjectivity possible. How different are these two claims? Both rely upon the self coming into contact with something outside or external to itself in order for it to see itself as a subject; for Levinas it is the Other and for Lacan it is an image of the self in which the self sees itself as a whole, autonomous being. Both claims offer a foundation for subjectivity, a condition for the possibility for subjective thought. For Levinas we have the idea of infinity, we enter a relation with exteriority and for Lacan the self only becomes a self, able to function as a subject (albeit a subject alienated from itself). Lacan can be seen as asking the same kind of question as Levinas regarding the nature of subjectivity and the conditions for the possibility of this. Levinas finds his answer in exteriority which is known as an idea of infinity which by definition transcends or overflows the idea within us. Lacan, on the other hand, finds his answer in the psychological

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<sup>14</sup> Lacan does not link this to an actual, necessary event in the life of the infant.

development of the child. The two views are couched in different traditions, Levinas looks for a phenomenological account of subjectivity which is necessarily inward looking, whilst Lacan looks to empirical studies and constructs a psychological picture or theory from this. Regardless whether the idea of infinity is *a priori* or something that features as part of our maturation, neither of which we can really know for sure because our very thought relies on our subjectivity. There can be no unified perspectives, thinking, rationality, experiences or observations that can be grouped under the title 'I' without a subject, the subject, by definition, does the thinking, observing, has the perspectives and experiences, it is the 'I'.

What I am getting at here is that the idea of infinity, the condition for the possibility of subjectivity, is best seen as primordial. It is a structure of human experience rather than an event in which one becomes a subject. Whether one develops a notion of self from an indistinguishable mishmash of sensory experience or is born with an innate sense of 'I' does not really factor. Lived human experience, as we know it, relies upon subjectivity. We have an ability to be aware of something utterly outside of ourselves, which does not destroy our sense of self but rather guarantees it. This sense or awareness is built into our very nature. We do not need to actually come into contact with infinity to have a notion of it. Infinity, after all, or pure exteriority, is impossible to come into contact with. The infinite will always exceed our ability to understand or think it, we can never really know it but we still have a guttural awareness of it. We seem to have sided with Morgan here, the encounter with the Other (the infinite or pure exteriority) is impossible, it does not occur in our day to day lives. This is, however, not the end of the story.

### **The sublime as analogy for the encounter with the Other**

The sense or awareness of pure exteriority, of the infinite, might be something that does not occur as an event, something that is itself without origin as it itself is the condition for the possibility for subjectivity, but that does not rule out us experiencing something structurally similar to the primordial encounter with the

Other. To explain this a little further we might take advantage of Levinas's choice of language, 'the infinite', and consider the Kantian sublime. Kant identifies two different types of the sublime: the mathematical and dynamic. The mathematically sublime is with reference to the size or magnitude of the object, examples of this might be the ocean, a very large mountain or the sky. The dynamically sublime refers to experiences of intense force or power, such as a violent storm or God/religion. When we encounter these objects we find our senses overwhelmed. We cannot sense the size of the mountain, it is of course measurable but standing before it our senses cannot account for this, we cannot grasp the size of it. Likewise, standing before a raging storm we find our senses overwhelmed, we are powerless against nature's fury. In these cases we experience a sense of displeasure or fear. We are overwhelmed by the object and fearful because we are unable to overcome or account for its force or magnitude.

Clearly the story does not end here. The sublime ought to be a pleasurable experience, humans seek out the sublime, they create works of art that aspire to it, so what does Kant say about this? Kant says that the objects we credit with the quality of the sublime, the mountains, storms, ravines, Egyptian pyramids, lightning storms and so on, are not really the objects of the sublime. What these experiences lead us towards is the true experience of the sublime, the object of which are our own rational ideas. According to Kant our experience of overwhelming sensible objects is itself overwhelmed by our ability to reason or think about absolute totality or absolute freedom or our ideas of absolute totality and absolute freedom. When faced with a very large mountain that our senses are overwhelmed by we first experience displeasure or fear because of our own lack of power but our rational ideas of absolute totality in turn overwhelm our experience of being overwhelmed and we experience pleasure at our rational mastery. The idea of absolute freedom or absolute totality cannot be exhibited. It is through the experience of the failure of the senses to account for the magnitude of the sensible object that the mind is led to these ideas. The sublime consists in our movement back and forward between displeasure or fear and pleasure.

How does this help with the problem of experiencing the encounter with the Other in general, and via the mediation of literature in particular? Although the Kantian sublime is clearly quite specific to his own work and on the surface

not relevant to Levinas's project I posit that we might consider it as analogous or as a structurally similar to the encounter with the Other. The encounter with the Other, I have argued, is best seen as primordial and as a condition for the possibility of subjectivity, however I also contend that a bit like Kant's sublime experiences in the phenomenal world point us toward the encounter with the Other.

The encounter with the Other, in its true sense, is something that marks the beginning of subjectivity. Because of this, it is outside of human experience but provides that basis for our lived experience. Like the Kantian ideas of absolute totality or freedom the encounter with the Other is unexhibitable but I think that the encounters we have with other people in our day to day lives are structurally and effectively similar or analogous to the encounter with the Other. The Kantian sublime takes a sensory experience which involves the object overwhelming the senses and suggests that this is a ruse or structural experience of something happening internally, namely the object of the experience is actually the ideas of absolute totality and freedom which overwhelm the sense of being overwhelmed. This is certainly not a one-to-one analogy but I think it helps us understand my proposition. We have two notions of the encounter with the Other<sup>15</sup>. One is the face-to-face as the primordial condition for the possibility of subjectivity, and the other as an experience that we can and do have in our lives. I am arguing that both are legitimate and non-contradictory.

The former understanding of the encounter is foundational. It is an origin without origin. Without it, there can be no 'I' as we understand it. There is not a *first* encounter with the Other, not an historical moment we could point to nor a moment in an individual's development that constitutes the original, primordial first encounter with the Other. Because of this, we cannot experience the encounter in this very specific sense. What we can and do experience is, I argue, a sensory or physical phenomenon that is structurally similar to the encounter with the Other, in the originary sense, when we meet others in the right circumstances. I have already suggested that we get a sense of the face-to-face, of unreciprocated responsibility and being made hostage to the Other when we see someone in

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<sup>15</sup> This is where I begin to use a lower case 'o' for the experienced, analogous, encounter with the other – the sense of encounter that lies between the experienced and the originary.

particular need. Drawing upon Levinas's own description of the Other as 'widow, orphan or stranger,' I have hinted that we might experience the face-to-face when we see a homeless person on the street. Viewing pictures of victims of the Holocaust have also been identified as situations in which we might experience the face-to-face. These are not originary, primordial moments but, similarly to Kant's sublime, they lead us to the experience that cannot be experienced. The actual, physical encounter with the other, standing face-to-face with another person, stands like a trace or echo of the encounter with the Other in the originary, condition-for-the-possibility sense. I am claiming that we can have an encounter with an other/the Other in our ordinary lives and when we do the experience is heightened or elevated by the anarchic encounter with the Other that provides the condition for the possibility for subjective experience at all. This argument allows for ethics to exist 'between' a philosophy of immanence and transcendental philosophy. One of the appeals of Levinas's philosophy is that the many descriptions of the encounter with the Other strike a chord with readers. When we read Levinas's work we instinctively understand and find affinity with the idea of exteriority and its affect upon us. Our experiences with other people in the world occasionally reflect the qualities of the encounter with the Other as described by Levinas – we discover in an other something that appears unknowable, something that overflows all our attempts to understand or grasp what is made manifest. This sense of overflowing, the break in totality with something that appears exterior, appears otherwise, echoes the structure of the encounter with the Other and we sense a truth or experience that is familiar but beyond experience. The physical encounter, I argue, gives us the ability to ~~experience~~ the primordial unexperienceable 'transcendent' encounter. Likewise, it is the transcendent, anarchic encounter that heightens the physical, mundane encounter to an encounter with the Other.

Levinas, I have argued above, maintains a position of undecidedness, failing to be conclusive about whether the encounter with the Other is something that occurs in lived experience or is a structure of human subjectivity that provides the condition for the possibility for lived experience. He goes so far as to place his philosophy 'between' a philosophy of immanence and transcendental philosophy. At times he speaks as if the encounter with the Other is something

that happens when humans meet other humans and at other times he writes as if the face-to-face is beyond human experience. I have looked at the arguments for picking an interpretation – either empirical or transcendental – and argued that both are essential components for the face-to-face. Using Levinas’s description of the Other as the idea of infinity, I drew upon Kant’s sublime to illustrate the way in which I believe Levinas’s philosophy exists between the two standard interpretations of his encounter with the Other. I have suggested that the face-to-face as condition for the possibility for subjective experience heightens some encounters with others to the face-to-face and this experience, in turn, makes the encounter with the Other (in the primordial sense) manifest.

My argument, based on the structure of the Kantian sublime, is consistent with Levinas’s account of the encounter with the Other in *Totality and Infinity*. It allows for both interpretations of the face-to-face and also gives an idea of how this ethics can reside *between* the two interpretations, requiring a play between the two for us to be able to experience the encounter at all. A question my argument raises is under what circumstances we can experience the encounter with the Other.

### **Conditions for an empirical encounter with the other**

I have given two fairly uncontroversial examples of situations in which we might find ourselves experiencing the face-to-face: when standing before someone who is homeless and when we look at photos of victims of the Holocaust. The common factor is the sense of need of the other. These examples require further consideration. Let us look more closely at the first example. The claim is that when I encounter a homeless person I find myself stopped short. I am reminded of my finitude; the world is not mine alone as this stranger makes demands upon me. I find myself responding with generosity, I must make room in the totality of my world for this other. This is well and good but what about the many times I simply walk past people living on the street? A recent wander down Queen Street in Auckland had me encounter several people who were homeless and begging. I did not find myself experiencing the Levinasian face-to-face. I walked on by whilst

trying to avoid eye-contact. My experience is clearly not unique but exactly what does it mean? Do I try to avoid eye-contact with the homeless people on the street to avoid entering into the face-to-face where I will be unable to escape the sense of responsibility the other calls me to? If the homeless person truly occupies this role of other, widow, orphan or stranger, then how can I remain unaffected?

The Other, if we remember back to Chapter One, elects us, calls us away and there is no avoiding this call. How then, if the homeless person is a non-controversial example of the other, can I simply walk by with my eyes down? Do I need to literally stand face-to-face to experience her as other? Certainly my anticipation would be that I would be moved by the person's plight should I engage with her. If I were to look at her, rather than turn my head away, I would feel saddened, I would want to help. Is this what constitutes an encounter with the other in real terms? I would certainly question my own self, my privileges, my world in which everyone I know has a roof over their heads and food in their belly. I would also become aware of how this person occupies a position of otherness that when I am forced to consider it in all its alterity, has a profound effect upon my sense of the world and my place in it. This singular person, who, when I look upon her, makes a demand of me also goes beyond her individual self; when I engage with her I realise there are many like her, I understand there are others who are other. I may be able to walk past this one person but I cannot escape the fact that there are others who can call upon me, who remind me of my finitude as they overflow my attempts to grasp or know them.

Two things to note from this example: the first is the play between the empirical and transcendent interpretations is clear in this example. The empirical situation of meeting a homeless person triggers me to experience the transcendent, primordial encounter with the Other as the idea of infinity. As I come face-to-face with this particular, singular person I experience her as something beyond my understanding, as the idea of infinity; she overflows the manifestation of herself and although I might be able to walk past her I am aware, as I walk by, that in dodging her demands, her alterity I am not escaping the other/Other at all. The second thing to note about my example is that even as I may walk by the person on the street I am not successful in escaping the other/Other. My motivation in turning my head as I walk by is to avoid the sense of responsibility that the other

invokes. My world is unsettled as the other calls me out and I attempt to turn the other into an object, something inert and knowable to escape. The fact of the play between the encounter as empirical and encounter as condition for the possibility for subjective experience means that even as I turn away from the homeless person and seek to avoid being made hostage to their call; I am unable to avoid the other/Other in the wider sense.

Although the homeless person example is more problematic than we might initially think, I can walk by and seemingly remain unaffected by her plight, it serves to illustrate the play between the empirical and transcendental aspects of the encounter with the other/Other. What else does it tell us about empirical encounters that might fit the role of an encounter with the Other? Is it purely the plight or need of the person that causes the self to experience the person as infinitely Other, requiring a response of generosity, unreciprocated responsibility and a questioning of self? If so, then what of injured people? Do Emergency Room doctors and nurses constantly experience the encounter with the other as they are exposed so regularly to people in serious need? Certainly, it would seem, that there is more to the encounter with the other than someone in need. It is yet to be seen if being in need is a necessary, let alone sufficient, condition for the encounter.

With questions remaining over the required conditions for an empirical encounter with the other let us turn to my second example: the photos of prisoners in concentration camps from the Second World War. I cited this example earlier and in connection with the ethical saying that permeates Levinas's work. On the one hand this example seems to be the quintessential encounter with the other in which the subject's world is simultaneously brought up short (the subject realises that she is not master over this other and therefore not alone in a world that is there just for her) and her subjectivity is confirmed (she sees herself as a distinct person in a world with others). The extreme conditions the people in the photos have endured, the attempts to deny them a place in the world, the systematic attempt to strip their identity and humanity results in images that really brings their humanity, their identity, their otherness to the fore. The eyes staring straight at the camera have seen and experienced things viewers cannot imagine and makes them rethink their entire world. This example shares the quality of need

found in the example above; the people in the images are in great need. They call to us, our eyes meet theirs and we know we are responsible. The Holocaust, the systematic genocide of six million Jews, weighs upon humanity. The events of 1939-1945 changed what we thought about human nature and what we considered possible. Decades on from the Holocaust our collective consciousness still calls for us to be responsible, as author and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel says, ‘To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.’<sup>16</sup> There is an imperative to remember, to hold the lives and deaths of those victims in our consciousness and respond with generosity, with a world. So far this example appears to be a non-controversial experience of the encounter with the other.

There is however something unusual about this example that might help us understand the encounter with the other with relation to literature. The encounter is mediated. I do not come face-to-face with a person in the flesh but rather the meeting spans decades, the face is not one I can touch but remains as an echo, a moment in time when the person in the photo gazed into a camera and called for help, asked not to be killed, to be given a world. Levinas, we have already seen, suggests that the face-to-face cannot be mediated; to represent the other necessarily limits her. This means that either this example is not an example of an empirical encounter with the other or there is something unique about photographic representation or that Levinas is incorrect in his claim about the face-to-face and representation. Subjectively, the photographs of concentration camp prisoners elicit a response that matches with Levinas’s description of the encounter with the Other. For argument’s sake I will assume that this subjective experience is legitimate, we can and do encounter the other in this circumstance. This leaves us with the question of the nature of the representation in the case of photography and Levinas’s claim about the face-to-face excluding mediation.

## **Lessons from photography**

Photography certainly seems to represent differently to other art forms. Our day-to-day use of it aims for a transparent replication. We take photos and view photos

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<sup>16</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. xv.

in such a way as to forget that there is any mediation going on. With cameras becoming ubiquitous in the twenty-first century, photographs are used as mirrors, as machines that replicate exactly. But does the humble 'selfie' or quick home-snap count as art and does it represent in a way that is different to photographs that we might consider 'art'? Roger Scruton, in a 1981 essay, argues that photography is not representational.<sup>17</sup> He notes that in painting an artist represents something or someone. This object or subject does not necessarily exist. An artist may paint a person but this person might include the features of several different people and not be a representation of a particular person in the world. The artist intends to represent a subject and this is not reliant upon nor validated by the subject existing in the real world. Photography, on the other hand, involves a photograph *of* someone. Scruton distinguishes between the representational act of painting which involves *intention* and photography which is marked by *causality*. We do not have time to look at Scruton's argument more closely but in the age of Photoshop and photographic manipulation his claims regarding causality vs intention seem outdated and seem to misunderstand the artistic side of photography, including the photographer's *intended* decisions regarding frame, exposure, lighting and so on.

Jean Baudrillard also considers the role of photography with regard to representation and reality. Where Scruton argues photography simply translates reality, reflects it without representation, Baudrillard, by contrast, argues that 'the photographic image materially translates the absence of reality'.<sup>18</sup> We might here notice an affinity with Levinas's concern with art. One of the problems Levinas has with works of art (including literary works) is that they represent what is absent. They are mere representations that do not give access to any transcendental truth (or access to the Other). Baudrillard, unlike Levinas, does not relegate (photographic) works of art to some secondary ontological status behind reality. Rather, Baudrillard seems to suggest that photography allows a truth to be seen that would otherwise be inaccessible.

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<sup>17</sup> Roger Scruton, 'Photography and Representation', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1981), 577–603.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Photography, or the Writing of Light', trans. by Francois Debrix, *Ctheory*, 2000 <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=126>> [accessed 15 July 2015].

Baudrillard discusses the ‘photographic gaze’ which does not attempt to delve into an analysis of reality but it is ‘applied on the surface of things’ which highlights or reveals the fragmented appearance of reality.<sup>19</sup> He describes the photographic gaze as, ‘a very brief revelation, immediately followed by the disappearance of the objects.’<sup>20</sup> The application of the gaze of the lens/photographer momentarily calls attention to the fragmentation of objects in reality but this dissolves when the photograph becomes the fiction of reality and the object under the photograph gaze disappears. Baudrillard suggests that the photograph is not a representation but a ‘fiction’.<sup>21</sup> The very nature of photography is such that it captures reality instantaneously and appears to immediately represent the world. However, this is a fiction of representation. The camera captures the world in an instant and displays it in a particular way and the world allows itself to be captured in this way. It appears to us as constantly in motion but the photographic lens allows us to see a fictionalised, momentary instant of the world. What we see in the photographic is not really there in the world, the object disappears.<sup>22</sup>

Baudrillard continues to explain that in photography, ‘the writing of light’ the photograph involves not just an object – in Scruton fashion where the object is merely translated into an image by an inert technical process – nor simply a subject who acts to capture the image but it takes its light from both subject and object. He argues that, like the object that disappears under the writing of light, the Other is not what ‘catches the photographer’s eye, but rather what is left of the Other when the photographer is absent’.<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard states clearly that ‘we are never in the real presence of the object. Between reality and its image, there is an impossible exchange.’<sup>24</sup> The photograph does not transport or transparently reflect reality onto celluloid, there is an exchange, mediation, translation from the object to its image. In the end, both object and subject (the person behind the lens) disappear and all that remains is the fiction of representation.

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<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard.

<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard.

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard.

<sup>22</sup> Baudrillard.

<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard.

<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard.

What do these observations add to our consideration of the encounter with the other in photographs of the Holocaust? Scruton's distinction between photographic images and works of art like painting might help explain how we can have an encounter with the other without going against Levinas's concerns regarding art and representation. The photograph, in this case, is a picture *of* the Holocaust survivors, the photographer does not intend to represent them in any particular way but simply starts a causal chain that results in reality (the concentration camp prisoners) being translated or reflected on celluloid strip. This causal, rather than representational, relationship to reality means that we could consider ourselves face-to-face with the person in the photograph, who is, after all, a real person even if they are currently absent. One does experience a certain immediacy when viewing photographs that might be lacking in the plastic arts. I questioned this particular argument earlier and suggested that the *modus operandi* for photographers is in the realm of intention rather than a clog in a causal wheel.

Baudrillard makes an apt point that supports my concerns with Scruton's line of argument. Baudrillard claims that, 'every time we are being photographed, we spontaneously take a mental position on the photographer's lens just as his lens takes a position on us.'<sup>25</sup> We do not simply continue about our daily lives when someone attempts to take our photo. What is captured by the photographer's lens is not reality but a fiction. We pose. We position our faces towards the light. We work the angles of our face for the resulting image to be flattering. Baudrillard goes so far as to say, '[e]ven the most savage of tribesmen has learned how to spontaneously strike a pose.'<sup>26</sup> The very moment the lens appears before us we find ourselves lifted from our lives and standing before and for the camera. The image that is produced is not of me but of a fictionalised 'me' caught in an instant. The photographer works to capture a moment (which does not exist) by careful use of light, angles, exposure and so on but the object of the photographic gaze also works to represent herself in a particular way, even without knowing that she does so as she spontaneously strikes a pose.

On the balance of things, Scruton's type of argument seems naïve. There is representation involved in photography. Like Levinas's concerns with works of

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<sup>25</sup> Baudrillard.

<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard.

art, the representation in photographs operates to stand in the absence of the subject/object. There is an immediacy and apparent correlation in the image but if Baudrillard is to be believed this is a fiction. The world represented by the photograph does not exist. Certainly there will be further arguments on either side of this issue but I maintain that there is intention and representation in photographs. The next question to be considered is whether the representation is ontologically similar to the representation we find in works of art and particularly literary works of art. If we can encounter the other through a photograph and if photographs represent in a similar or equivalent way to works of art and literature then it would follow that we could have an encounter with the other via works of art and literature.

The major difference in the representation in photography compared to works of art is the role of the object of representation. Baudrillard, as we have seen above, mentions a 'light' that emanates from both the subject and object. The 'object' of the photo holds more power or sway over the resulting image than 'objects' of other artistic representation. If I have my photo taken I may choose to show my left-hand side, believing it the better of my two aspects, I might angle my face down to appear slimmer or raise an eyebrow to appear quizzical. I may do these things consciously or unconsciously and the photographer may employ certain techniques to make me appear one way or another but it cannot be mistaken that I play a role in the representation of me. If I were to sit for an artist I might attempt to pose in a particular way but the artist has the ability and freedom to override my posturing. She might choose to ignore my cocked eyebrow or interpret my left-hand leaning in an abstract way. She could simply ignore my pose and paint me the way she sees me. She might only use my nose and reconstruct the rest of my face from her imagination. The point being that although photography may represent in an analogous way to other works of art, there is an immediacy that stems from the role of the object of the photograph/representation. What might Levinas say about this? He may admit that this form of representation differs in kind to other artistic representation but the *fiction* of the image would be where he would object. Levinas might argue that the way a momentary fragmented representation of the other, taken in an instant, is removed from its everyday being means that the other is fixed in time, limited and

brought into the realm of the same or totality. A photograph risks destroying alterity; it risks turning the infinite other into a posed object. But is this always the case? Baudrillard's observation about the 'light' brought by the object of the photograph (the person in front of the lens) as well as from the person behind the camera, suggests a life within the image, a desire to communicate or depths that move beyond the image.

The basis for my selection of this example – photographs of prisoners in the concentration camps of the 1940s – is subjective. It is based upon my own sense of disruption of self, responsibility and sense that I have encountered something utterly exterior when I view them. I find I am dwarfed by the magnitude of suffering and resilience etched upon the faces and bodies of these people. The mediation of the photograph, in my opinion, aids the sense that the face I have encountered is utterly beyond my understanding. The play between reality and its image, with the knowledge that the image is a fiction of reality which itself is a fiction created by the confrontation of the photographic lens and the object in front of the camera, means that the image we view, the face captured on film, has completely unknown depths. On the one hand, we might see the image as a very limited moment in time, freezing the subject into a knowable and finite part of totality but in some cases the image's very limitations, the representation of a moment past, the face frozen in time, highlights the otherness of the person.

We might see a photograph of a Holocaust survivor in a concentration camp. The face, gaunt and staring, does not express finitude; it does not ask to be brought into the realm of the same. Rather, it makes otherness manifest. It makes a life present that is utterly unknowable to me. It is unknowable in its mundane details, where the person was born, their favourite subject in school, who they married, where they were when war was declared, but it is also unknowable in other ways; the suffering, the heart-break, the indignities, the hope, the despair, the propulsion to survive, to exist despite it all. I can never know that. The very fiction of the image, its disconnect to the reality and the fiction of the moment, work to make the alterity manifest. If the photograph were a simple translation, an exact representation of the person as they are in reality, then certainly the argument for alterity being quashed would hold some strength. But in the light of

Baudrillard's observations about photography, combined with the subjective experience of viewing particular photographic images, the image points to alterity, to an ungraspable otherness that overflows the representation we are faced with and slips away from our attempts to understand it.

I will be the first to admit that this argument is not conclusive or exhaustive. It is based partly on Baudrillard's observations, which are certainly open to disagreement and partly on subjective experience which might be non-representative. However, it does provide a model in which we can see how an encounter with the other might be possible through mediation. I have already distinguished between the encounter with the Other in the primordial sense which cannot be experienced except by structurally and effectively similar experiences in the real world which echo the anarchic encounter. These 'real world' experiences of the other are what we are currently considering. I have given two examples of when we might feel that we have encountered the other in our everyday lives: the first is the when we come face-to-face with a homeless person and the second is in photographs of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. I have explored these two examples in more detail to learn about the nature of our 'everyday' experiences of encountering the other.

## **The place of need**

The example of homelessness raised some problems for encountering the other in reality. I suggested that although I might experience the type of encounter Levinas describes in some of my dealings with homeless people, at other times I can walk by without appearing affected by the meeting. I explored ways in which I might still be affected in appropriate ways despite my attempts to bypass the encounter and finally I asked if need was a necessary or sufficient condition for the encounter with the other. From this example we were able to see an interplay between the transcendental or primordial encounter and the empirical encounter. The transcendental encounter with the Other, which is not something we can experience, forms the basis of subjective experience and with this as the condition

for the possibility for lived human experience at all, it makes sense that encounters with others in our daily lives adhere to this structure.

Need or suffering was a factor in both examples and I asked whether it might be a necessary or sufficient condition for having an encounter with the other/Other. Levinas's examples of the Other all have an element of one in need (widow, stranger, orphan) and my two examples follow suit. We have established that need is apparent in many cases where we have an encounter with the other, but are there any where it is not? Levinas's description of the encounter goes some way to support the idea that the Other is connected to the idea of suffering. He claims, '[h]is very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan' (*TI*, p. 77). It is in 'destitution' that the Other faces the I. But, at the same time, the Other, as the idea of infinity, 'designates a height and a nobility, a transascendence' (*TI*, p. 41). The Other appears in need as she faces us and implores us to make space for her in our world, but this is achieved by calling us forth, from a height, as the Other implores she commands, 'thou shalt not murder'. The Other, whilst seemingly in need or suffering, is also in a position of height which indicates power or perfection.

To answer my question, being in need is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the encounter with the other/Other. The other/Other cannot be typecast in this kind of way. By definition the Other is utterly beyond my understanding, beyond any concept I have. To limit the possibility of an encounter with the other/Other to those in need works to destroy the otherness by bringing the Other back into the realm of the same. It is the Other's very particular singularity that disrupts the same, elects the I to respond and become responsible. The other might very well be someone who is suffering, certainly this type of situation often has the ability to affect the subject in the correct kind of ways but Levinas's analysis of the encounter with the Other does not require an other/Other in need despite some of the examples he employs to describe it. Guenther argues, '[t]o the extent that the alterity of the other is identified with particular social, economic, or political differences, it loses the ethical power to break with every context and to cut across relative differences. Precisely because the other could be *anyone*—black or white, rich or poor, American or Afghani—the command to

respond to the other's singularity is absolute.<sup>27</sup> Guenther is responding to critics who make use of Levinas's work in political discussions by seeking to ally his discussions on otherness with a politically marginalised group. She points out that, in doing so, the 'ethical power' of Levinas's description is lost as the encounter would then come under the traditional logic of 'I and not-I'. It is rather, the very singularity of the other, the way the other is unlike or beyond everyone and everything else I know that holds the power and key to the ethical encounter. One cannot predict when an encounter with the other might occur in daily experience, nor the situation that will facilitate it.

The answer regarding need or suffering above is significant for my overall project. It would be hard to argue that a text is in need or suffering or that the author responsible for the work is in this situation. It is the singularity of the other/Other that holds the power to arrest the subject. This does not seem to discount the possibility of an everyday encounter with the other via the mediation of literature. The text can be seen as an utterance from the 'author's'<sup>28</sup> horizon. The 'author' speaks, expresses themselves. In the post-post-modern world the text itself is singular insofar as we subscribe to the position that there is not a literary essence that defines Literature. Each work signifies uniquely and enters a complex relationship with Literature (in general).<sup>29</sup> Gadamer argues that the text 'issues a challenge'<sup>30</sup> it speaks and asks to be heard, to be understood. The reader finds themselves *addressed* by the work, invited to participate. In Levinasian terms, the text addresses the reader and asks the reader to make room for it in the world; the text needs the reader to make the dead words on the page come to life.

So, on one level we might be able to justify the structurally similar everyday encounter with the other being applied to literature. The singularity of the call or command can be seen as structurally similar to the other/Other that addresses in the face-to-face. It is this sense of being addressed by a work of literature that has led to the increasing uptake of Levinas's work by literary critics, after all. It is important to remember that, like Kant's sublime, I am not claiming that the encounter with the other in everyday life, whether it be face-to-face or

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<sup>27</sup> Guenther, p. 201.

<sup>28</sup> In the particular sense of 'author' established above.

<sup>29</sup> One might think of Jacques Derrida's 'Before the Law' as an essay that addresses this issue.

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, *Relevance*, p. 26.

mediated in some way, is the encounter with the Other in the strictly ethical sense but rather it is how we are able to experience the primordial encounter with the Other. This leaves the final problem of representation within the encounter with the other (in the everyday sense). Although my 'long answer' to the thesis question might seem to offer a work around, insofar as I have distinguished between the primordial encounter with the Other that cannot be experienced in itself and the everyday encounter with the other which is structurally similar to and signifies the primordial encounter in a play between the empirical and transcendental, I do not claim this interpretation allows us to ignore Levinas's concerns regarding art and literature. Just as there are certain situations or events that will inspire the Kantian sublime and others that will not, the Levinasian face-to-face will not become manifest in every case. Levinas's objections, at this stage, still hold.

### **Back to the question of literature**

The example of the photograph considered earlier suggested a way of representing which differs from the representation that Levinas subscribes to the plastic arts and extends to literature. This view of representation is in line with Gadamer's notion of presentation as in play explored in Chapter Three and relies on the idea of the presentation or revelation of a tradition but moves beyond this to question the idea of mimesis at all. In photography the object of the photograph (the person in front of the lens) has the ability to contribute to the representation in ways that the object represented in plastic arts does not. The resulting image is more than mere representation in which the absence of the object is signified. The active role played by the person in front of the lens means that the image is able to present the object of the photograph in a way that captures a particular moment that is gone in the instant the photograph is taken. The resulting image does not signify an absent reality nor does it rely upon its connection to reality for its signification.

Baudrillard's contemplation of the question of representation in photography allows us to argue that the active staging of the image, the posing for the lens, creates a break with reality that allows the resulting image to exist in

parallel with 'the real world'. The moment captured on film does not exist separate to the image, nor does the image capture 'the real world'. The moment captured is no more 'real' than the image of it. This gap between reality and representation or presentation presents a potential counter-argument to Levinas's concern with art and representation. Levinas dismisses art from the transcendental or face-to-face as it merely represents what is absent and in doing so can only partake of the same or totality. The face depicted in art is pure representation, according to Levinas, and as such it represents finitude, not the idea of the infinite. Levinas's objection, when art is understood in his terms, makes some sense. The otherness of the Other is quashed in representation. The art consumer faces but the image does not face back. The image is trapped in immanence and unable to express anything other than lack (of the object/subject represented). The active role of the object of the photograph in the representation and the staging of 'reality' allows us to challenge Levinas's problems with art.

The person present in the photographic image may be absent in the flesh but in striking a pose for the camera they are able to *express*, this is particularly clear in the example I have given above of prisoners in concentration camps during World War Two. The faces, looking straight down the lens, express themselves, ask to be given a world. The act of stopping, standing for the camera, taking a moment to step out of one's everyday life, creates a reality for the photograph that is not reliant upon the physical everyday reality that Levinas is imagining. The photograph is not the mere representation of an absent object because that object as it is made manifest in the photograph does not exist except in the photograph.

I have suggested that the mediated photographic image not only goes some way to counter Levinas's concerns with art (at least for photographic art) but that it also highlights, rather than destroys, otherness. What, then, can these observations do for our wider concern – the encounter with the other/Other and literature? The medium of photography may allow a mediated encounter with the other (in the empirical sense) but it does not necessarily follow that any type of mediated encounter will result in the encounter with the other. This leads me to ask, are there any similarities between representation in photography and representation in literature that might allow literary works of art to mediate an

(empirical) encounter with the other? It is worth remembering at this point that we are trying to work within Levinas's limits. The empirical encounter with the other is structurally similar to the encounter with the Other in the primordial, strictly ethical sense, and its true object is not the empirical other but rather it signifies towards the primordial encounter with the Other. The empirical encounter with the other, guided by Levinas's description, occurs in the face-to-face, privileging presence and rejecting mediation by works of art from which the other is absent. The case of photography, I have argued, offers a different understanding of how the face-to-face might work through mediation. The active role of the person in front of the lens, their connection with the person behind the lens and the fiction of reality that marks representation in photography poses a situation in which an empirical encounter with the other may occur despite the encounter being mediated.

Can literature also offer a mediated encounter with the other? Let us begin by considering the role of the 'other' in literary works. In photography the 'other' occupies a more active role in the representation than in other artistic media<sup>31</sup>. This changed the dynamic of representation and reality. What of the other in literature? The literary other, as I have argued above, is not a character in the text but rather the horizon within which the text emerged and that it reflects. This I have named the 'author'. The 'author' is the one who expresses and faces, it is both the person/s who created the text, the history and literary milieu that the text belongs to and the text itself insofar as the text lives a separate existence to its history, creator and other texts, always signifying beyond this tradition and transformed in connection with the various horizons of its readers.

The 'author' shares the active role characteristic of photography. The 'author,' like the person in front of the lens, has a certain amount of control over the representation that will be made manifest in the work of art. This might seem counter-intuitive at first glance. Our gut feeling is that the author shares the position of the subject with the person *behind* the lens of the camera. They are the creative force behind the work and, like the photographer choose the setting, frame, subject-matter and so on. This would not be an incorrect positioning of the

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<sup>31</sup> At least according to Baudrillard.

author. I suggest, however, that the ‘author,’ the horizon or worldview represented in the literary work of art *also* occupies the position of object. If the author is the person who crafts the work and the object of the work is the horizon presented in the work then the ‘author’ is both subject and object of the work. The author or ‘author’ can be seen as both the one that transcribes the representation (the photographer) but also that which is represented, or that which actively presents itself as worldview or horizon (the person in front of the lens). The person/s crafting the work can actively choose elements of the work and how they will be displayed. Take, for example, Philip K. Dick’s repeated use of emotionless or cold women or women who are androids such as Pris Frauentzimmer from *We Can Build You* and Pris Stratton from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* This repeated character-type is actively chosen by Dick and he expresses his distrust of womankind’s coldness. He is able to make this idea or ‘reality’ manifest, time and again. This is not to say that an author or creator of a literary work has complete active control over every aspect of the text. Unconscious thoughts and desires may work their way into the text or the author might allow certain situations out of their control dictate aspects of the work (such as tossing a coin to decide if a character lives or dies) or the author might base parts of the work on happenings in the ‘real world’ which colour the artwork and sit beyond the author’s control. Regardless, like the person posing in front of the camera, the author as creator of the work, has control over what is represented and how it is represented. Moreover, if one views the literary work of art as *expression* (of the ‘author’ as horizon or worldview) rather than a specific character in a certain setting performing particular actions, the similarity with the person in front of the lens posing for the camera becomes more clear. Charles Bernstein can be seen as ‘posing’ in quite a different way to T. S. Eliot or Allen Ginsberg.

What, then, of the disconnect or break with reality that Baudrillard argues is characteristic of photography, is this true for literary works as well? The photograph captures an instant which is gone ‘in reality’ in moments. But that instantaneous fragment of reality that is represented, the moment in time, argues Baudrillard, is a fiction of reality. The person in front of the lens is elevated from her everyday life, caught in a pose that is not ‘real’ but still part of the ‘real world’. The image becomes that which endures, more real than the moment that gave rise

to it. Is there a similar fiction of reality at work in the representation in literary works? Literary works represent in ways that are quite different to photographic or plastic arts, especially the plastic arts as Levinas depicts them. In photography, painting or sculpture there is often (but by no means always) a model or object upon which the artwork is based. This is the realist, purely representational view of art that Levinas seems to adhere to and rejects from the transcendental. A person stands before the photographer, artist or sculptor and the artist attempts to represent the model's likeness and whatever ideas, emotions or stories belong in the representation. The connection to reality, to the inspiration for the work, seems relatively clear. In some cases the model does not stand before the artist but might be a fictional character from myth, fable or tradition. In these cases the one-to-one relation is less clear but the artist is able to draw upon other works that depict the figure, including oral or written reports, as well as their own imagination. This, of course, is a terrifically simplified and contentious summary of what happens when an artist sets about creating a work of art. I do not intend this to be anything more than the most basic description of the physical act of inspiration and representation in cases of realist or near-realist works of art featuring a human figure.

Literary works, on the other hand, rarely involve a specific person represented with realist accuracy. Writers may draw upon their own selves and connections to create and craft characters but they rarely seek to exactly represent a single person as a character in their work. It is more common for writers to draw upon aspects of several people as a conglomerate or to delve into their imagination to create the characters that populate their stories. Barbara Kingsolver, for instance, claims 'those characters are not people I know, and none of them is me. My job, as I understand it, is to invent lives that are far more enlightening than my own, invested with special meaning.'<sup>32</sup> Kingsolver here identifies her characters as inventions from her imagination rather than as based on her own self or actual people in the world. Likewise, Graham Greene identifies his characters as coming from imagination rather than real life, '[n]o, one never knows enough about characters in real life to put them into novels. One gets started and then,

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara Kingsolver, 'About Writing', *Barbara Kingsolver: The Authorized Site* <<http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/about-writing.html#6>> [accessed 6 July 2015].

suddenly, one cannot remember what toothpaste they use; what are their views on interior decoration, and one is stuck utterly. No, major characters emerge; minor ones may be photographed.’<sup>33</sup> And Iris Murdoch also claims to invent characters, or to let them emerge, rather than produce a ‘photographic’ image of a real person, ‘[j]ust by this process of sitting and waiting. I would abominate the idea of putting real people into a novel, not only because I think it’s morally questionable, but also because I think it would be terribly dull. I don’t want to make a photographic copy of somebody I know. I want to create somebody who never existed, and who is at the same time a plausible person.’<sup>34</sup>

The mode of representation in literary art, the fact that characters, places, times can be completely fictional, inventions that bear no resemblance to ‘reality,’ suggest a break with reality that is reminiscent of the fiction of reality identified by Baudrillard in photography. Levinas’s concern with art, and he included literary artworks in this condemnation, is that they only mimic reality, they signify the absence of what is real and because of this they are unable to partake of the transcendental. He argues against the tradition by which art is seen as offering knowledge or truth that lies beyond reality and is only accessible through artistic insight. The mimetic nature of art, for Levinas, renders it a hollow representation, firmly in the realm of the same in which the subject of the work of art is presented as a part of the totality; to represent the subject in works of art the subject must be known, it must be presentable and the infinitely other, the beyond understanding, by definition will exceed representation, will slip beyond any ability of the artist to present them in paint, sculpture or words. The fictional aspect of literary works complicates the objection Levinas puts forward.

Works of literary art do not have to represent reality. One might think of fantasy or fairy tales in which the characters are not only fictional in that they are not based on real people but are frequently not even human but rather are mystic beings, elves, dwarves, orcs, speaking animals and so on. The work of literary art does not rely upon the real world in the way Levinas suggests. The literary work,

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Shuttleworth and Simon Raven, ‘Graham Greene, The Art of Fiction No. 3’, *Paris Review*, Autumn 1953 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5180/the-art-of-fiction-no-3-graham-greene>> [accessed 6 July 2015].

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, ‘Iris Murdoch, The Art of Fiction No. 117’, *Paris Review*, Summer 1990 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2313/the-art-of-fiction-no-117-iris-murdoch>> [accessed 6 July 2015].

like the photograph, does not capture reality in itself. The work of literature creates a new reality. Following Baudrillard's argument with regard to photography one might argue that the literary work is more real than reality. The literary work stands on its own, partly expressing the author's desire to be heard, desire to exist and be acknowledged, partly presenting the author's horizon, the tradition, history and specific personal experiences that the author has lived through and with. The work of literature, in the end, signifies itself. A common description of the writing process by authors is that the characters, settings and storylines emerge. The author lives with these features of the text and facilitates their emergence. Some authors describe the characters and stories taking over, diverging from the path the author set out for them from the beginning. The text can be seen as taking on a 'life of its own' a reality that exists beyond or distinct from the physical reality of our lived experience, including from the author's (in the conventional sense) real life.

## Summary

The literary text, with its ability to present the fiction of reality, as well as fiction in the common sense, is able to be seen as constructive, or making manifest, presenting rather than representing. The literary text does not simply represent some aspect of reality that is not present to represent itself. By contrast, it can be seen as making the horizon of the 'author' manifest, presenting something new, unknown and that signifies itself rather than pointing to something in reality. This suggests a potential for an encounter with the other.

The work presents itself as a call, as a singular, unique expression. It is language. The literary text is the use of language which bridges the distance between two horizons, that of the 'author' (the other) and that of the reader, without closing that distance. To read a work of literature does not necessarily involve understanding the other, the horizon of the author, reducing this otherness to the same or totality. The work, as mediation *and* as expression, does not invite understanding or knowledge of the 'other' but rather it expresses that otherness. This positions it between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Levinas's phenomenology.

The text, as expression, signifies only its own self. It does not try to represent reality; it does not paint a picture of the other. As mediation, as a filter through which the otherness of the author's horizon is made manifest or presents itself, the other can be glimpsed, felt but not known. Certainly a text allows a reader to have some insight into the worldview of the creator/s of the work, including the historical, personal, cultural and literary milieu from which it arose but the text, in the end, presents fiction. It does not point to its author (in the broad sense of the term or the more traditional definition of it) but rather expresses itself and in doing so does not allow itself to be reduced. The work of literature by the very fact of it being expression and mediation means that it stands alone. There is a remove from the other that protects its otherness.

The literary text presents otherness, gives a glimpse of the other without defining the other; reducing it to the same. If the literary text was a simple representation of the other then the other would be reduced to a part of the totality. The reader would approach the text and fully comprehend the other; the other would fit into their schema of how the world is and works. But the literary text as expression and mediation, presents something else. A fictional reality that does not depend upon physical reality but at the same time the singular, particular work allows a glimpse at something beyond the work, the otherness of the text is felt by the reader who can respond but not fully understand or comprehend this otherness that slips beyond the words on the page. This sense of having encountered something beyond my understanding in my reading of a work of literature leaves me feeling like I have encountered something truly beyond myself in the Levinasian ethical sense. This empirical encounter is made possible because of the primordial encounter with the Other. It is this structure that makes subjective experience possible and the empirical experiences of otherness signify this un-experienceable but nevertheless phenomenological encounter.

In this way, we might allow a tentative positive answer to the question of this thesis, 'can we have an encounter with the other/Other through the mediation of literature?' The short answer, or answer to the question 'can we have encounter with the Other in the strictly transcendental sense?' is no. We cannot experience that which our experience is based upon. There is no subjective experience without this primordial encounter therefore we cannot experience it in itself. The

possibility for an affirmative answer rests with our distinction between empirical and primordial encounters. The empirical encounters, I have argued, reflect or signify the primordial encounter. When we experience otherness in our everyday lives, it is because it is structurally similar to the primordial encounter which is the basis for human subjectivity. It is through our empirical encounters of otherness that we are able to experience the primordial, ethical Other.<sup>35</sup>

The possibility of an experienced encounter with the other opens the way to consider whether one could experience a mediated encounter with the other. The active representation that has been argued to be characteristic of literary texts suggests a counter-argument to Levinas's objections with art and literature as representation of that which is absent. Levinas's desire to maintain the encounter with the other as a purely unmediated experience is still hanging over our heads. We can side-step the issue by saying we do not encounter the other in literature but experience something structurally similar to this encounter which signifies the unmediated face-to-face summons. If empirical encounters with the other signify toward the primordial encounter with the Other then perhaps mediated encounters with the other in literature signify toward the empirical unmediated experience.

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<sup>35</sup> In the latter part of this chapter I have made the case for literature as a legitimate mediation for the encounter with the other and at times this has set an opposition between the plastic arts and literary art. The opposition arises from a narrow understanding of the plastic arts, in keeping with Levinas's discussion of painting and sculpture. I suspect the same case could be made for plastic arts and certainly for musical works of art but this falls outside the scope of this thesis.

## Chapter Six: 'The Purloined Letter'

### Introduction

I have explored the question 'can we have an encounter with the Other through the mediation of literature?' in detail in the previous chapters. I drew upon Levinas's phenomenological description of the encounter with the Other and considered his reasons for arguing against the ethical in art and, more specifically, literature. I then looked to Gadamer's hermeneutics to suggest a way of approaching texts without destroying their otherness. Despite Levinas's protestations, I argued we can have an encounter with the other in literature in the empirical sense and that this experience is structurally similar to and signifies the encounter with the Other in the primordial sense. Like the Kantian sublime, it is only through the encounters with the other that we can experience the encounter with the Other.

I have positioned my positive answer to the question of the thesis between Levinas's phenomenology and Gadamer's hermeneutics, coming to this position by consideration of the two thinkers in dialogue. Gadamer's ideas around understanding, its relation to language and focus on the matter at hand have allowed me to consider how one might approach a literary work and say something about it without reducing its otherness. Levinas's phenomenological account of the encounter with the Other has given a framework for the urgency and sense of responsibility that seems to attract readers of literature whilst also setting a very high bar for what counts as an encounter with the Other. Putting Levinas and Gadamer into conversation allowed me to develop an idea of who the other in literature is and how it functions in literary texts.

The questions I have asked and arguments I have given thus far remain situated on the boundary between philosophy and literature. They have been somewhat abstract and removed from the business of reading despite being actively engaged with reading in both form and content. With the theoretical arguments drawn I will now turn to look at a specific literary text and the analyses that surround it to anchor the arguments I have made and allow me to explore the practicalities and implications of these discussions further.

The text I have decided to focus this chapter on is ‘The Purloined Letter’ by Edgar Allan Poe. This text was the original inspiration for my thesis; in the debate surrounding the work Jacques Derrida accuses Jacques Lacan’s reading of Poe of an interpretive violence. This led me to consider the question of ethics and reading, and more specifically, do we have ethical obligations to texts? From this initial question I formulated the question of the thesis. Poe’s story, in and of itself, is interesting and engaging but the interpretation of it by Lacan, Derrida and Johnson<sup>1</sup> is where the insights into the relation of readers and texts is most clear. In this chapter I will look at the series of texts that surround Poe’s story and investigate the relationship between texts and readers. I will look at how readings are perhaps destined to fail insofar as the moment we seek to place a frame around the text (which is necessary to say anything about it at all) we find ourselves limiting and reducing the otherness of the text and imposing our own horizon upon it but argue that it is the failure to fully grasp the text that allows a site of otherness to emerge. I will then give a reading of Poe’s story that asks where otherness resides and that seeks to preserve this otherness thus exploring the ways in which we can encounter the other in this text. This concrete example will help me illustrate the Levinasian encounter with the other in mediation as well as the way in which seeking understanding of the matter at hand, inspired by Gadamer, allows this otherness to not only be maintained but experienced at all.

## **Background**

Poe’s short story, ‘The Purloined Letter’ sparked some of the most interesting debate in twentieth century French thought. The simple detective story was taken up by Jacques Lacan in a seminar given in the mid-Fifties. Lacan reads the story to illustrate the ‘truth,’ learned from Freud, of the repetition automatism. Lacan uses this notion in conjunction with illustrations from the story to argue for the constitution of the subject by the signifier. Lacan’s text is taken up by Derrida who offers a critique, centred around Lacan’s omission of certain aspects of the story such as the role of the narrator. Barbara Johnson enters the debate with an

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<sup>1</sup> The debate sparked by Lacan’s *Seminar* and Derrida’s response to it is still ongoing with books and articles published as recently as 2012 (*Adapting Poe: Re-Imaginations in Popular Culture*, ed. by Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). The debate itself was published in a collection of essays, *The Purloined Poe*, in 1988.

insightful essay in which she raises concerns over Derrida's own omissions and corrections of important sections from Lacan's text.

This series of essays is an important one for the purposes of my thesis question. The texts involved can be identified, or have been identified as literary, philosophical and psychoanalytic however, each of these texts, regardless of their affiliation with any particular discipline, is engaged with the question of reading, interpretation and analysis of a literary text as well as the question of how one ought to stand in relation to a literary text. Through these literary readings I will consider ways in which interpretations operate to create meaning, particularly the ways in which readings rely upon the interaction of the reader and the text. It is on this boundary between reader and text, where two horizons meet, that otherness can be encountered or destroyed and the interpretative debate between Lacan, Derrida and Johnson highlights this.

### **The necessity of failure**

It is in failing that we can see the voice of the other calling for recognition. The essential argument in Derrida's reading of Lacan and Johnson's reading of Derrida is that they fail. Derrida thinks that Lacan fails to read Poe with sufficient care. Derrida argues that Lacan frames the text in a way that highlights those aspects that serve his purpose but minimises those that do not conform to the reading he wants to produce. Lacan produces an unjust reading. Likewise, Johnson argues that Derrida fails to read Lacan's text with the kind of respect and nuance that he usually employs. She notes that Derrida makes additions and omissions to Lacan's text even as he accuses Lacan of doing the same. Johnson claims that Derrida seems to respond more to Lacan's power or status in French thought than to his actual seminar. The failure seems to be measured by the way in which one responds to the spirit of the text; the way in which the reading misses something about the text that is important.<sup>2</sup>

Each time one 'fails' to read we can see the text calling out against the interpretation. Take, for example, Derrida's criticism of Lacan's treatment of the

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<sup>2</sup> The question of failure, of a reading that commits violence to the text is central to this project. One fails a text in many ways and I suggest that there might be no way to avoid some violence when one reads, a Levinasian approach will attempt to minimalise such violence or at least acknowledge the violence committed.

narrator. He claims that Lacan leaves the narrator and the role of narration out of his analysis. The narrator, we are told by Lacan, ‘adds nothing’<sup>3</sup> to the relation of initial events and thus he dismisses the narrative role altogether. Derrida finds this unacceptable, especially as the inclusion of the narrator and his role may complicate the triangular structure of possible roles that characters play that Lacan outlines. Lacan is interested in exploring an intersubjectivity that illustrates the constitution of the subject by the signifier. He does this, Derrida claims, by ignoring the narrator who is a fourth side or point. The narrator cannot remain neutral; his interjections, remarks and comments figure in the story and demand acknowledgement.

It is this ‘demanding acknowledgement’ that opens a possible site of otherness in the text. We might read Lacan’s *Seminar* and find ourselves thinking, ‘but the narrator *does* add something. He holds a position not unlike that of Dupin.’ We might feel that leaving the narrator out is unjust; we might refer to parts of the story in which the narrator takes an active role, leading the discussion with the Prefect when Dupin seems reluctant. I suggest that what happens in these moments is that we hear the original text speaking through the interpretation. We consider an interpretation to have ‘failed’ when the original text rubs up against it, asking for more to be said, for parts that have been omitted or glossed over to be acknowledged. I rail against Lacan’s omission because the narrator’s voice speaks from the gap between the texts. It is this friction or point of tension in the failure to capture the text in an interpretation that might offer a site of otherness.

The series of readings I am concerned with in this chapter are in some ways quite unique. Each of these readings, seemingly centred around ‘The Purloined Letter,’ are really concerned with reading, analysis and meaning. Poe’s text remains, as an echo, throughout the texts, becoming less and less prominent in each subsequent text. The collection of readings interact with each other and with Poe’s story in interesting ways and it is within these interactions that we can hear the other calling, the echoes of a desire to be heard, to say something to someone and be recognised and made room for.

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, ‘Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”’, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. by John P Muller and William J Richardson, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 28–54 (p. 35).

It is evident from the beginning of Lacan's *Seminar* that his reading of Poe will fail (fail in the sense of producing an open-ended, equivocal type of reading that Derrida seems to privilege, fail to engage with 'The Purloined Letter' as a work of literature and perhaps, as a result, fail to encounter the other). Lacan, from the beginning, makes his goal clear. He plans to use 'The Purloined Letter' as an example, to illustrate the psychoanalytic truth of the repetition automatism and the constitution of the subject by the signifier. He does not claim any more or less of his use of Poe. One might question whether what Lacan presents is even a reading as scholars of literature know it. Despite this, Lacan's 'reading' falls short. It is clever and illustrates his point well but Poe's text is not content with this. It speaks against Lacan's reading. It calls for more dialogue. It asks to be heard. The omissions that Derrida draws attention to – the narrator and his role, the scene of writing – are one example of the text, of the horizon of the 'author', the other asking to be recognised, insisting on being heard, made room for. Poe's text continues to function in Derrida's response to Lacan. The omissions that Lacan makes, creates space for Poe's text to emerge. The gaps left by Lacan are filled by the original text which ruptures the silence and demand to be acknowledged.

There are other places of tension in Lacan's reading. His treatment of Dupin as one of the characters caught in the movement and positioning of the letter is met with resistance from the text.<sup>4</sup> Dupin enters Lacan's analysis in the second triangular formation. He takes on the role of the one who sees all as he spies the letter the narcissistic seer, the Minister D-, thinks is hidden. Dupin then moves to the role of the narcissistic seer as the analyst, Lacan, reveals the truth of the movement of the signifier. As Dupin's position with regard to the letter changes Lacan sees him taking on the feminine characteristics associated with the narcissistic seer. The evidence for this is the 'feminine' rage that resulted in Dupin leaving a note for D- within the decoy letter. Lacan claims those in the possession of the letter are made to adopt the attributes of femininity and shadow which he associates with the act of concealing. We might ask, is Dupin's 'rage' best

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<sup>4</sup> There are three positions that Lacan identifies in the story: the first position is that of the blind, the person who does not see (for example, the King in the first 'scene' who does not see the letter at all). The second position is of one who sees but does not see that they themselves are seen (for example, the Queen who sees that the King has not seen her but does not see that the Minister sees her) and this position can be seen as a narcissistic role, or a case of narcissistic seeing. The third position is the person who sees all (in the first 'scene' this position is occupied by the Minister who sees everything and takes action). The constitution of the subject through the repetition automatism is illustrated by the way each character repeats actions when their role changes.

described as ‘feminine’? He seeks to revenge a past wrong – the details of which are not revealed to us. Dupin’s act of leaving a note for the Minister does not seem to occur in a rage nor does his action appear particularly ‘feminine’. Lacan does not go into detail about why he casts Dupin’s act of revenge as stemming from a feminine rage nor does he explain exactly what he means by this. He does equate the feminine with the act of concealing and ‘shadow’. Certainly there is an aspect of concealment in the Queen and Minister’s actions. They both possess the letter and seek to maintain possession of it without others discovering it. The Queen seeks to conceal the letter from her husband and the Minister from anyone who might remove it from his premises and hence deny him of the power it affords him. It cannot be forgotten, however, that the concealment is out in the open. The Queen leaves the letter, as nonchalantly as possible, face down but in full sight. Her concealment is not characterised by shadow and in the end is not concealment at all. Granted, she was not in a position to hide the letter, she lacked the time and privacy for this. The Minister follows the Queen’s example. Although he had the time and privacy to conceal the letter he also conceals the letter out in the open – he leaves it above (between) the mantelpiece with other correspondence. This action, of hiding the letter in the open, is associated with a different level of reasoning and intelligence in Dupin’s recount of his own search and recovery of the purloined letter.

Dupin suggests that the Prefect can only imagine someone hiding something in the manner in which he would himself hide something. In doing so he is completely unable to find the letter hidden in the open. Dupin’s analysis hints towards the Minister D- having a more sophisticated level of reasoning than the Prefect. Dupin claims, ‘[s]uch a man, I considered, could not fail to be aware of the ordinary policial modes of action. He could not have failed to anticipate – and events have proved that he did not fail to anticipate – the waylayings to which he was subjected.’<sup>5</sup> The Minister D- is able to stay at least one step ahead of the Prefect. Dupin goes on to describe the Minister as having ‘daring, dashing, and discriminating ingenuity’<sup>6</sup>. From my vantage point in the twenty-first century I cringe to suggest that at the time of Lacan’s *Seminar* these are not qualities

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<sup>5</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Tales & Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2002), p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Poe, p. 194.

usually associated with the 'feminine'. On the one hand we have the Minister being a bit crafty, sly or perhaps 'shadowy' but on the other we have someone bold, daring and highly logical – sadly attributes more commonly associated with the masculine in the 1950s. The Minister, when in the role of the narcissistic seer is supposed to hold feminine characteristics but there is not a lot of conclusive evidence for this. There is even less support for Dupin adopting feminine attributes when he possesses the letter.

Lacan claims Dupin has a 'feminine rage' which causes him to seek to not merely recover the letter, nor to simply set D- up for embarrassment in court but to know that it was Dupin himself who swapped the letter and caused the loss of power and humiliation. The text does not suggest a feminine rage. Rather, Dupin appears to engage in some boyish one-upmanship. His assessment of D- shows a certain respect. He speaks of him as a mathematician and poet – this latter aspect affording him heightened rational abilities which allow him to outsmart the Parisian police. Dupin describes the Minister as 'sagacious', 'energetic'<sup>7</sup> and a 'man of nerve'<sup>8</sup>. Critics, including Liahna Klenman Babener, have noted 'a deep affinity between Dupin and his archrival'.<sup>9</sup> John T. Irwin notes that 'Poe suggests a structural kinship between the two opponents, a kind of antithetical "family resemblance"'.<sup>10</sup> This kinship, respect or affinity fits with the ongoing duel the two are involved in. Dupin does not suffer a 'feminine rage' but sees an opportunity to get D- back for a previous wrong. Dupin describes his response to the wrongdoing by D-, 'I told him, quite good-humoredly, that I should remember'<sup>11</sup>. Dupin, ever rational and cool-headed, does not seem to experience anger, anxiety or irritability – all emotions connected to rage – but rather responds in the initial moment 'good-humoredly'. Certainly, he is not going to turn the other cheek but will remember the misdeed and seek revenge when the time is right. Dupin does not strike out against the Minister but bides his time. The mode of action deployed by Dupin seems to be more like boys in a schoolyard looking to out prank or outwit each other rather than adopting some kind of 'feminine'

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<sup>7</sup> Poe, p. 195.

<sup>8</sup> Poe, p. 196.

<sup>9</sup> Eric W. Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 244.

<sup>10</sup> John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution : Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 342, /z-wcorg/.

<sup>11</sup> Poe, p. 196.

characteristic. The nature of Dupin's revenge also screams out against the label of 'feminine rage'.

Throughout his analysis of the case Dupin refers to a couple of games. The first being the childhood game of even or odd where one child holds a number of marbles, either even or odd. The second child is then to guess whether the number is even or odd. The second game involves finding names on a map. Dupin discusses these games to illustrate his deductions and analysis but the motif of games and gameplay can be seen as carried through to Dupin's own response to the Minister. Dupin, as we have noted, seeks to revenge a past misdeed and in doing so he remarks, 'I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clew.'<sup>12</sup> Dupin sees the Minister as worthy adversary – I have already noted the apparent respect Dupin has for him as well as the idea, supported by several critics, that Dupin and the Minister are doubles or even brothers – and his attitude toward him is more in line with the idea of gameplay and one-upmanship. Dupin is keen to 'outwit' the Minister and rather than simply telling the outwitted D- that it was he, Dupin, that ruined his new-found power at Court, Dupin somewhat playfully leaves a 'clew' for the Minister who 'is well acquainted with [Dupin's] MS'<sup>13</sup>. Dupin, throughout, seems in control. He seems analytic, calculating and perhaps a little prideful in his actions but nowhere appears to enter into a rage, feminine or otherwise.

Dupin's actions and words work through Lacan's ill-fitting paradigm. Dupin does not change nor repeat certain characteristics by virtue of possessing the purloined letter. He does not partake of the repetition automatism but stays true to his analytic, self-serving and distant nature. As you read Lacan's *Seminar* Poe's text grates against it. Dupin's actions call out and ask the reader to acknowledge the ways in which Dupin exceeds Lacan's reading. In this example the character and the ways in which he presents more than and other than Lacan's reading, the way he slips between the characterisation Lacan presents of him, signals both a failure of Lacan's text to do *justice* to Poe's story and a sense of the other – of that which goes beyond understanding. One might give a similar analysis for Derrida's reading of Lacan in which omissions and additions rupture

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<sup>12</sup> Poe, p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> Poe, p. 197.

Derrida's reading, urging the reader to acknowledge and hear Lacan's voice, or horizon.

The failure to do justice to Poe's text is fairly uncontroversial. This is a common criticism of readings of literature. What interests me, is whether there is a connection to the idea of doing justice to the text and encountering the other. The second of these consequences of the failure of Lacan's reading (the sense of the other) is more controversial and needs further discussion before a link between doing justice to a text and encountering the other can be considered.

### **Failure as a space for otherness?**

Do my simple examples above of Poe's text breaking through and unsettling Lacan's reading really constitute an encounter with the other? When I read Lacan, having read Poe, and find myself thinking, 'that is not quite right, I am sure Dupin was more like  $x$ ' or 'I do not think Lacan can quite justify that statement,' am I encountering the other in the Levinasian sense? Do I find myself decentred, whilst at the same time finding myself aware of my own subjectivity in a world in which there is an other over which I have no power and cannot comprehend? The answer to these questions is quite difficult. I am not considering, for the moment, whether I experience the other when reading Poe, but rather whether Poe's voice breaking through Lacan's reading constitutes an encounter with the other? Structurally and intellectually this example would seem to fit. We have an irrepressible voice, a horizon (that of 'The Purloined Letter') that exceeds the limitation of comprehension placed upon it by Lacan. As readers of Poe we might find the ethical and religious language borrowed from Levinas apt. The rupture of Lacan's *Seminar* by Poe's story, the refusal to be contained, to be reduced to the psychoanalytic totality in which truth is always already decided seems to call to the reader, to place them in a position of responsibility. We might experience the text positioning us as the elected one, the one who is fully responsible for responding to and making room for it. Gadamer would say we need to meet the challenge issued by the text. As Poe's voice clamours to be heard beyond Lacan's reading, we might experience the feeling of being responsible for making room for this voice in the totality of the truth of psychoanalysis.

The nature of the ruptures of Poe's horizon into Lacan's reading, however, might suggest a lack of otherness. To be able to produce the kind of reading Derrida gives of Lacan – namely pointing out the ways in which Lacan is unjust in his reading – requires an *understanding* or at least the claim of an understanding of the original text. There is an implicit sense of 'knowing better' when one stands in judgement of the failure of a reading to allow the text 'to speak'. Derrida must comprehend that the role of the narrator not only plays an important part in Poe's story but that this character unsettles Lacan's neat triangular structure. Derrida comments, '[s]o many reasons to think that the so-called general narrator always adds something, and from before the first dialogue; that he is not the general condition of possibility for the narrative, but an actor with a highly unusual status.'<sup>14</sup> Derrida does not claim to know everything about the narrator but exhibits an understanding of the role, the part he plays in the drama of 'The Purloined Letter'. The narrator does not disrupt Lacan's text in a way that Derrida finds incomprehensible, nor does his reaction to this overflowing horizon seem to be one of crisis (in finding his sense of self mastery disrupted) or even any particular sense of responsibility. Derrida seems to understand the narrator, 'he is not the general condition of possibility for the narrative' and notes that the narrator's discourse is not 'neutral'<sup>15</sup> and is more interested in elaborating his understanding of the narrator and how this role works in Poe's story than letting the narrator speak. Even as Derrida criticises Lacan for not hearing the narrator speak, 'as if his questions and remarks and explanations... added nothing,'<sup>16</sup> he does not make room for the narrator to speak in his text but rather expertly takes his reader on a rhetorical journey in which they find Derrida's masterful understanding is the subject. Derrida takes the position of one who understands, he implies his greater understanding, or comprehension, of Poe's text with statements like 'The exclusion is quite clear'<sup>17</sup> and a repetition of 'as if'<sup>18</sup> places Lacan's reading in a position well inferior to his own.

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 411–96 (p. 430).

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 429.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 429.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 429.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 429.

Derrida seems to find it necessary to respond to the reduction of otherness to the same, of the psychoanalytic tradition of ‘finding itself’<sup>19</sup> in what it seeks but at the same time he does not seem to experience the ethical urgency to respond to Poe’s text with pure responsibility. Derrida appears more motivated, as noted by Johnson, to respond to *Lacan’s* potential readers or *Lacan’s* status rather than Poe’s voice. Derrida begins *Le Facteur de la Vérité* not with Poe but rather with some cryptic statements about psychoanalysis in which he layers the question of truth on his discussion. He hints at Poe’s text but does not mention it specifically in these initial musings. He asks ‘what happens in the psychoanalytic deciphering of a text when the latter, the deciphered itself, already explicates itself?’<sup>20</sup> He continues to say, ‘[f]or example, the truth. But is truth an example? What happens – and what is dispensed with – when a text, for example a so-called literary fiction – but is this still an example? – puts truth onstage?’<sup>21</sup> Derrida sets his sights on psychoanalysis, its treatment of truth and literary works from the beginning. The statements here are clearly aimed at Lacan’s desire to ‘illustrate... the truth which may be drawn from that moment in Freud’s thought’<sup>22</sup> rather than a desire to do justice to Poe or ‘The Purloined Letter’.

Derrida certainly acts *as if*, to borrow one of his oft repeated statements when discussing Lacan’s treatment of Poe, the literary text should be afforded a certain respect, treated in a particular way because of its status as a literary text. He speaks about Lacan’s failure to never examine the status of Poe’s work, he seems concerned that Lacan employs ‘literary writing’ to illustrate a truth and says ‘the text is in the service of the truth’.<sup>23</sup> Throughout these statements we come to understand that Derrida feels that there is a certain *position* one ought to take to a literary text and that Lacan fails to do this. But Derrida also fails. He fails Lacan’s text as already noted above, but he also fails Poe’s text insofar as he

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<sup>19</sup> Derrida begins his essay with several plays on words; he asks,

Where does psychoanalysis, always, already re-find itself, where is it to be re-found?

That in which, finding itself, it is found, if finding itself is found, let us call text. (Derrida, p413.)

The play is centred in the reflexive French verb ‘*se trouver*’ which can mean both to find itself and to be found (Derrida, p413.) Derrida is suggesting here that psychoanalysis finds itself in texts as much as it is there to be found.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, ‘Le Facteur de La Vérité’, p. 414.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, ‘Le Facteur de La Vérité’, p. 414.

<sup>22</sup> Lacan, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, ‘Le Facteur de La Vérité’, p. 426.

concerns himself with responding to Lacan's status, power or potential readers rather than allowing Poe's text to be heard.

Derrida, in his desire to critique Lacan's power, explicitly adds the notion of the phallus and castration and female castration in particular to Poe's text despite Lacan's silence on these issues.<sup>24</sup> Derrida, when discussing what Dupin knows, claims that he knows where the letter must be found so that it can be returned to its proper place and that this 'proper place' is 'the place of castration: woman as the unveiled site of the lack of a penis, as the truth of the phallus, that is of castration.'<sup>25</sup> In appearing to respond to the injustice of Lacan's reading, Derrida draws out Lacan's reading to add aspects to Poe's text that Lacan does not even comment on. Derrida imposes the 'truth' of psychoanalysis onto Poe's text in much the same way Lacan does.

Derrida even goes so far as to claim, 'the letter – place of the signifier – is found in the place where Dupin and the psychoanalyst expect to find it: on the immense body of a woman, between the "legs" of the fireplace.'<sup>26</sup> Poe's text reads, '[a]t length my eyes, in going the circuit of the room, fell upon a trumpery filigree card-rack of pasteboard, that hung dangling by a dirty blue ribbon from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantel-piece.'<sup>27</sup> Certainly the etymology can be traced to the Old English 'mentel which is a sleeveless cloak and later the Anglo-Norman 'mantel' which comes from the Latin *mantellum* which means 'covering, cloak'.<sup>28</sup> One could imagine a fireplace with mantelpiece surround as the legs of a person but it seems more likely that the position of the letter, hanging from the mantelpiece, would have more do to with the motif of concealment in the open. Perhaps Poe intended that 'hiding place' as a metaphorical joke; the letter is 'covered' or concealed by being in plain sight. Certainly, there is little support for the mantelpiece being an 'immense body of a woman'.

These additions to Poe's text that Derrida makes work to cement his critique of Lacan but point to his failure to listen to Poe's voice even as he appears to respond to the injustice of Lacan's reading. At this point it might be useful to reassess where this leaves our attempt to read ethically, to encounter the other in

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<sup>24</sup> Lacan does not mention the word 'castration' once in the *Seminar*

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 439.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 440.

<sup>27</sup> Poe, p. 195.

<sup>28</sup> 'Mantle, N.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

the literary text. I have shown how Lacan's text fails to maintain the otherness of Poe's text before he begins with his stated project to use Poe's text as an illustrative example of how the subject is constituted by the signifier. Lacan never claims to want to work with Poe's text as a literary text to produce a literary reading or to afford Poe's story any particular status beyond its illustrative potential. Lacan even claims that the truth of which he speaks is that which 'makes the very existence of fiction possible'<sup>29</sup>. Lacan does not approach Poe's text as something that might go beyond his understanding, beyond his own self, but rather he sees it as something that relies upon the understanding he has of the world and how subjectivity operates. I then considered Derrida's response to Lacan's *Seminar*. On the one hand it would seem that Poe's story overflows the boundaries imposed on it by Lacan. Derrida can be seen as taking a position of allowing the repressed aspects of the text to speak and be heard as he points out omissions and additions in Lacan's text. On the other hand, I have argued that Derrida does not respond in some kind of Levinasian way to the repressed saying of the other in Poe's story but rather is motivated by critiquing Lacan and Lacan's position. This motivation leads Derrida to equally discard any potential otherness in Poe's text by his own omissions and additions aimed at Lacan.

We might consider that Derrida's text fails *on purpose*, that his text must fail like all other readings. He may be making a performative point about the nature of reading; that all readings or interpretations will fail to grasp a text in its entirety, in its fullness or otherness. But, we might ask, does Derrida's failure here (and contention that every reading will fail) suggest that one simply cannot encounter the other in a literary text? If he had responded in a different way would he have provided us with an example of a Levinasian-type reading? I have suggested that structurally and intellectually the series of texts and readings surrounding Poe's text fit my agenda. One can imagine that the continued critique of subsequent readings stems from a desire to do justice to Poe, to respond to the saying that escapes and exists beyond all that is said but is this enough?

## **Back to Poe**

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<sup>29</sup> Lacan, p. 29.

To answer the question, 'is this enough?' I will return to where these musings began, back to Poe and his detective story. If we could strip away the web of criticism, the history of readings, interpretations and even the works inspired by the Dupin mysteries, would we have a text that provoked a sense of ethical responsibility? A horizon that appears absolutely other, unknowable, ungraspable and in doing so disrupts the sense of self-mastery and subjectivity of the reader whilst signifying the origin of this subjectivity? Already we are faced with an impossible task. The horizon of Poe's text is no longer framed by the opening words (and what exactly are the opening words – the title, epigraph, first sentence, the first Dupin story, et cetera?) nor does it end with the final words (again, how do we decide?) Likewise, if we go in search of 'the other' in Poe's story we assume a 'truth' and seek to place Poe's story in a context, ironically reducing otherness to the totality of Levinas's philosophy.

We cannot go back and read the story out of this expanded horizon. We might consider remembering our first encounter with the story. Did we get a sense of something beyond the text, of encountering a horizon that is other than our own but at the same time puts our horizon in question? Did we find ourselves utterly responsible for this other in ways that we could not escape but instead placed in a position to respond with generosity? It would be tempting to pretend we could divorce our subsequent readings of Poe's story from our engagement with the critical dialogue surrounding 'The Purloined Letter' but this is impossible. I cannot read the description of the letter hanging from the knob on the mantelpiece or glide over the narrator's questions, interjections and directions without conjuring both Lacan and Derrida's reading and being mindful of the questions that Johnson provokes for proponents of deconstruction. So, why then do I want to return 'Back to Poe?' And, what does this even mean?

I have suggested that Derrida is not motivated by a desire to respond to Poe's voice which begs for room, to be heard, for justice, to be acknowledged in the silences of Lacan's reading. Rather, Derrida is concerned to respond to Lacan, to comment on psychoanalysis and the act of reading, interpretation and statements of truth for all disciplines. His treatment of Poe's text, on first reading, might be to provide a voice for the omissions and additions, to point out the ways in which the otherness (in relation to the totality of psychoanalysis) is repressed or reduced. On a closer inspection, however, it would appear that Derrida sees Poe's

text as uniquely situated for the reading Lacan has produced and the point he wants to make. At the beginning of his essay, Derrida asks,

What happens in the psychoanalytic deciphering of a text when the latter, the deciphered itself, already explicates itself? What it says more about itself than does the deciphering...? And especially when the deciphered text inscribes in itself *additionally* the scene of the deciphering? When the deciphered text deploys more force in placing onstage and setting adrift the analytic process itself, up to its very last word, for example, the truth?<sup>30</sup>

Derrida notes that Poe's story 'deciphers itself,' it 'explicates itself' and 'says more about itself than does the deciphering'. What does this mean and how does it relate to questions of otherness? Derrida seems to be suggesting that Poe's story already offers an interpretation of itself, before Lacan, Derrida, Johnson, Bonaparte or any other reader comes to the text it has already deciphered itself, already placed the question of analysis and truth onstage and in doing so makes an analysis of future reading or interpretation. Poe's story, as we know, is the story of a detective who solves a mystery through analysis, logic and deduction. The manifest subject of the narration is Dupin's analysis that leads to the return of the purloined letter but the latent meaning is about analysis as well. The story does not leave room for the reader to analyse the situation herself. Dupin, on the urging of the narrator, spells out his reasoning, his method of deduction and the full story about how he identified and retrieved the stolen letter.

The bulk of Dupin's ability revolves around his ability to 'get in the head' of his opponent. Dupin explains how he is able to outsmart the Minister by thinking like him, by guessing at the thought-process that D- employs to maintain possession of the letter by hiding it in plain sight. Dupin gives the example of a school boy who is able to win at the game 'even and odd' by similar means. The boy would arrange his face to match that of his opponent and use this to decide on the other boy's intellect. A simple intellect will make a simple attempt at deception, thinking 'I selected even last time so this time I will select odd and fool my opponent' whereas when the child-analyst encounters a more sophisticated intellect he will say to himself, '[t]his fellow finds that in the first instance I guessed odd, and, in the second, he will propose to himself, upon the first impulse,

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 414.

a simple variation from even to odd, as did the first simpleton; but then a second thought will suggest that this is too simple a variation, and finally he will decide upon putting it even as before.’<sup>31</sup> Dupin informs the narrator that the Prefect’s inability to discover the whereabouts of the letter was not a lack of good policing as such but an underestimation of his opponent. The Minister D- is described as a mathematician and poet. The Prefect believes all poets are fools and does not consider that the Minister might not conceal something in the same way in which he himself would conceal something – namely hidden in some out of the way place such as in a hollowed out chair leg or under a loose brick.

The analysis is complete; Dupin even explains that the disturbance on the street was caused by a man in his employ. Like the Prefect’s search of D-’s quarters, Dupin leaves no stone unturned in his explanation of his analysis and retrieval of the letter. The act of analysis runs through the entire text, manifestly and latently. Derrida claims that truth is put onstage in Poe’s story and we can see how this is the case. The story does not waiver in its desire for the truth. We do not find ourselves in any confusion as to what has happened or how it was achieved. Interestingly for both Derrida’s interest in the question of psychoanalysis and its relation to both fiction and the truth and to my interest in the other/Other, Poe’s analysis hinges on a unique idea. Dupin, the great analyst, does not rely upon logic, as we might assume but rather his detective genius relies upon his ability to get inside the head of another person, to know them as well as he knows himself and possibly to know them better than they know themselves. This sentiment is evident in the earlier story, ‘The Murders of the Rue Morgue’ in which we hear Poe’s analysis of analysis laid out, ‘the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods... by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation.’<sup>32</sup>

Dupin must understand his opponent fully. He must be able to accurately assess the intellect and daring of the Minister D- in order to work out where the purloined letter is. The analysis is, at least in part, already a psychoanalysis. The Minister hides the letter in plain sight, believing for whatever reason that this is the safest and most secure position for it. The Minister, we assume, would not

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<sup>31</sup> Poe, p. 191.

<sup>32</sup> Poe, p. 118.

have hidden the letter in this place if he thought his reasoning could be so easily analysed by Dupin (or anyone else). The Minister's reasons for concealing the letter in plain sight are unknown but Lacan suggests the repetition automatism and movement of the signifier as a reason. The Queen hid the letter in plain sight before the Minister ('before' in both a temporal and spatial sense) and the Minister, according to Lacan, is fated to repeat these actions due to the movement of the letter. This goes against Dupin's analysis where he ascribes the Minister a certain level of clear and cunning in his ability to deceive. Dupin's analysis suggests he considers the Minister's intellect as of a different order to that of the Prefect and places his own ability to understand others higher than both the Minister and the Prefect as evidenced by his ability to outsmart them both. Dupin seems to understand the Minister and his subconscious better than the Minister does himself. It might be the case that the Minister consciously weighed up the risks and advantages for his non-concealing concealment of the letter but if he did it is likely he would anticipate someone remembering that the Queen herself hid the letter in plain sight and consider the possibility that he would do the same. It is also possible that the Minister is subconsciously influenced by the Queen's action and this is why he hides the letter by not hiding it. Regardless of his reasons for hiding the letter, either conscious or subconscious or a combination of both, the Minister's psyche is accurately analysed by Dupin, down to the knowledge that he would be able to be distracted by a certain topic of conversation and that street disturbance would attract his attention for long enough for Dupin to swap the letters.

There is an implied analysis of analysis in 'The Purloined Letter' that grants it the ability to access the truth. To step inside someone's mind so fully as to be able to understand them as they understand themselves, or better. This latent assumption, mirrored by the manifest content of the story, is, I believe, the assumption of psychoanalysis that Derrida rails against. Psychoanalysis assumes its access to the truth. The 'truth' it finds is itself, the psychoanalytic truth. Psychoanalysis assumes the ability to understand someone, to unlock the subconscious in the same way one assumes there is a truth to find and decode in a text by unconcealing the true meaning under the cloak of literature.

Does this truth, placed on stage, where the text says more about itself than does the analysis mean that the other cannot be encountered in Poe's story? If

everything is already worked out, if there is an assumption that others can be known entirely, even better than they know themselves then is there anything that escapes the said? Any horizon that slips beyond the text and its apparent meaning? I think there are several ways we could approach these questions but the underlying assumption is that there is a positive answer to them. The first approach is to consider one's own phenomenological reaction to the story. To ask 'do I feel I have encountered something outside myself, something completely other and beyond my horizon when I read 'The Purloined Letter'? This question asks us to examine our gut reaction to the story. It asks us to consider whether we experience the kind of epiphany and sense of crisis and responsibility involved with encountering the other. The second approach is to look to Poe's story to find points of otherness, to look for aspects of the story that go beyond our understanding and emerge as 'other'. The final approach is to respond to Poe in response to Lacan, to hear the voice that seeks recognition against the reduction of it to the totality of the psychoanalytic interpretation.

### **Reading Poe, an honest phenomenological account**

Instinct would suggest that we need a positive answer to the first approach before we consider either of the following. Levinas's account of the encounter places the experience in the phenomenological realm. The encounter with the Other is an experience, a momentary recognition, an epiphany. It is something you *feel* or directly *experience* rather than something you come to by reasons, arguments or analysis. There is an immediacy in the encounter. Without this experience there is no encounter with the other. The moment we begin to move into the realm of analysis or interpretation the other is reduced, it becomes a part of our horizon in a way in which we do not challenge our own prejudice or tradition or sense of subjectivity. So, do I get a sense of the other when reading Poe? Does the text that puts truth onstage, says more about itself and analysis than the analysis of it reveal the other? Does it inspire the epiphany that signifies the primordial encounter with the Other that marks the beginning of subjectivity? Honestly, no. Poe's story has never given me a sense of other. I have never felt that I have touched something beyond myself or experienced something completely other than myself. The

reasons for this are partly explained above. Poe's story, both explicitly and implicitly is about analysis. It is a simple story in which everything is explained, clarified and brought into its proper place. The focus is explaining a slightly bizarre opinion of human interactions in which one person is able to get inside the head of another so fully as to be able to stay one step ahead of them. The story does not invite the reader in, but rather stands before her and lays itself out. The language in the story is simple, straightforward and matches the tone and subject matter.

Personally, I do not get the sense of someone wanting to say something to someone, of some other slipping behind and beyond the words on the page. I get the experience of encountering an other in the Levinasian sense when I read texts like *Ulysses* or *Gravity's Rainbow* where language is pushed to its limit and I understand someone wants to express something, even if I cannot work out what the something is. I find statements such as the following provoke the sense of the other for me:

His lips lipped and mouthed fleshless lips of air: mouth to her moomb.  
Oomb, allwombing tomb. His mouth moulded issuing breath, unspeched:  
ooeeehah: roar of cataractic planets, globed, blazing, roaring  
wayawayawayawayaway<sup>33</sup>

o.... "But it is a curve each of them feels, unmistakably. It is the parabola. They must have guessed, once or twice -- guessed and refused to believe -- that everything, always, collectively, had been moving toward that purified shape latent in the sky, that shape of no surprise, no second chance, no return. Yet they do move forever under it, reserved for its own black-and-white bad news certainly as if it were the rainbow, and they its children".<sup>34</sup>

The first extract above is from *Ulysses*. Some of the words appear to be pure saying, 'ooeeehah', 'wayawayawayawayaway', sounds that express desire to communicate, to acknowledge an other while the rest are recognisable words 'lips,' 'lipped,' 'mouth,' and 'moulded' and constitute the said of language but Joyce pushes this said to the limit and, in my opinion, allows the saying to break through. Likewise, Pynchon's obscure and difficult metaphors, '[i]t is the

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<sup>33</sup> Joyce, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Vintage Classic, 2013), p. 249.

parabola' 'everything...had been moving toward that purified shape latent in the sky' gives me images without understanding on first reading. I experience, in a very immediate and non-verbal way, a sense of *something* being communicated even if I do not understand exactly what that is. What I understand is that there is communication, someone's desire to say something to someone and be heard. I can go back and engage with the passages on a more conscious, analytical and intellectual level but as I do so the sense of epiphany, of encounter, is replaced with understanding and comprehension (or at least some level of understanding and comprehension). A related issue here, and one that will be addressed below, is how one might produce a reading from this type of epiphany. Is it enough to simply say 'I encountered the other in this text in some kind of inexpressible way' or do we want to be able to explore this feeling and experience in more detail? If we do, then how do we move from the pure experience to a discussion of the text?

What does the lack of epiphany, the failure to *feel* that I have encountered the other mean for Poe and my engagement with 'The Purloined Letter' in the context of this thesis? Does my lack of epiphany, the failure to experience the unsettling encounter mean that I should put this story aside? Do the other two approaches I outlined briefly above become moot? And, what does this mean for the status of 'The Purloined Letter'? Is it a lesser form of fiction? Does it fail as a work of literature for failing to inspire the experience of the other? And what does this mean for a Levinasian approach to texts if some simply do not provoke the right response from readers? We might begin by putting these questions aside, for the time being and look to the second of the approaches I outlined above.

Just as instinct suggests we ought to experience the encounter with the other in some kind of revelatory epiphany, instinct also suggests that an attempt to find the other in 'The Purloined Letter' will result in the kind of reduction to the same I criticised in Chapter Two when I looked at ways in which theorists have employed Levinas in their work. To go in search of something in a text, in much the way Lacan reads Poe, assumes that it is there to be found. One's vision is attuned to finding what it seeks and the result can be the kind of additions and omissions found in both Lacan's *Seminar* and Derrida's essay. But, can we look for potential sites of otherness in 'The Purloined Letter' without assuming they are there to be found? Logically speaking, this is possible. We can spell out our prior assumptions and biases and keep these in mind as we read.

## Potential sites of otherness

My beginning assumption has already been stated. I have already assumed we can encounter the other in literature and that somewhere and somehow this is possible in Poe's text as well. So, then, let us consider potential sites of otherness in Poe's story. The first, and most obvious, is the purloined letter itself. In my assessment of the story above I claimed that everything is laid out, no stone is left unturned in Poe's explication of the clever analysis of Dupin. Even as I wrote those sentences I felt 'The Purloined Letter' speaking out against me in the same kind of way the role of the narrator begs for recognition against Lacan's omissions. The letter itself is unknown. It is this very characteristic of the letter that makes the story so appealing to Lacan. Lacan is interested in the way in which the consciousness is structured like language and the way in which the subject is constituted by the movement of the signifier. This story works for his purposes because he considers the letter itself a pure signifier – the reader is unaware of its contents and it acts simply as a sign or symbol dictating the movement and actions of the characters. The contents of the letter are not spelled out to us. We are given an idea of the letter's importance and effect, the letter is of 'the last importance'<sup>35</sup> and taken from 'the royal apartments'<sup>36</sup>. We know that 'the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter'<sup>37</sup> and that 'disclosure of the document to a third person, who shall be nameless, would bring in question the honour of a personage of most exalted station'.<sup>38</sup> These 'clues' lead us to believe the letter is from a lover to the Queen but there is no way of knowing.

The letter certainly lies just beyond our grasp, like its hiding place, it is in full sight but concealed. We know it exists, we know the drama around its theft and eventual return but we do not know the letter itself. Does this unknown aspect of the story constitute the other? Do we merely look for something we do not have full knowledge of when we read and proclaim that we have encountered the other? If this were the case, surely when reading 'The Purloined Letter' we would have had a sense of encountering the other when we are faced with this pure signifier,

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<sup>35</sup> Poe, p. 186.

<sup>36</sup> Poe, p. 186.

<sup>37</sup> Poe, p. 186.

<sup>38</sup> Poe, p. 186.

this unknown quantity. But does the letter, its quality of being undecided, indeterminate and beyond our knowledge give us the sense of encountering something other/Other? Or does the letter actually signify in comprehensive ways despite its status as pure signifier? I think the interesting aspect of the letter for my purposes is the trope of unconcealed concealment.

This idea of concealment in the open runs through the story and perhaps like the theme of analysis constitutes the latent meaning of the story as well as the manifest. At the very beginning of the narration, before we even hear of the purloined letter, the Prefect comments that the matter with which he is concerned is ‘*very simple*’<sup>39</sup> and goes on to say ‘we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair *is* so simple’<sup>40</sup> to which Dupin comments, ‘[p]erhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault’ and ‘[p]erhaps the mystery is a little *too plain*’<sup>41</sup>. My initial reaction to ‘The Purloined Letter’ briefly outlined above, is of a very simple story. It does not push boundaries of language, narrative or characterisation. It lays itself bare. The story explains itself in detail; we know what has happened, how it happened and why it has happened. The story seems to leave nothing unconcealed. I have suggested that this simplicity, this laying bare, is at least one of the reasons that I do not feel I have encountered the other, something completely beyond myself when I read it. But, like the case of the purloined letter, is the difficulty in the simplicity? Does the laying bare work to conceal the other?

Although I do not get a sense of encountering the other from a basic<sup>42</sup> reading of Poe’s story I find that as I read in a more analytic way the simplicity gives way to something more complicated, more unsure, less comprehensible. I noted above that when I read *Ulysses* I experience a sense of the other insofar as I am confronted with language that pushes the limits of sense. I get a sense of the ethical saying working through the said, erupting and disrupting the meaning. I also suggested that when I begin to analyse or critique<sup>43</sup> this kind of text I move

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<sup>39</sup> Poe, p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> Poe, p. 186.

<sup>41</sup> Poe, p. 186.

<sup>42</sup> By ‘basic’ I mean engaging with the story in a one-to-one relation where I read the story without trying to give an analysis or critique of it. The story is read as a story in much the way one reads for pleasure.

<sup>43</sup> Note, by ‘critique’ I mean read other people’s careful and well researched analysis that allows me to understand that the first few pages that I initially found incomprehensible actually describe Buck Mulligan shaving.

into a realm of comprehension and understanding and the otherness slips away. This is underpinned by the immediate and momentary epiphany of the encounter with the Other in Levinas. So, it might seem odd to suggest that as I try to understand Poe's story in more depth that I in fact begin to encounter something other.

The closer engagement with Poe's story makes what was concealed by being in plain sight come clear. As I begin to ask questions of the text I see what was hidden by the simplicity of the narration. The world of Dupin is an aspect of the story that is concealed by the unconcealment. If we bracket off what is known about Dupin from the other two Dupin stories and only allow ourselves to work with the story entitled 'The Purloined Letter' we might find ourselves with more questions than answers. What exactly is Dupin's position? The Prefect clearly holds Dupin in some esteem to approach him for help with such a sensitive case, '[a]nd now, Dupin, what would you advise me to do?'<sup>44</sup> Dupin also claims to align himself with the Queen, stating '[y]ou know my political prepossessions. In this matter, I act as a partisan of the lady concerned'<sup>45</sup>. Dupin appears, in the straightforward, simple and unconcealed narration, as a person of high standing in society. He holds the moral high ground in that he fights on the side of the Queen who has been wronged and in retrieving the letter even seeks to redress the power imbalance that has been in place, 'for eighteen months the Minister has had her in his power. She has now him in hers; since, being unaware that the letter is not in his possession, he will proceed with his exactions as if it was. Thus will he inevitably commit himself, at once, to his political destruction.'<sup>46</sup>

When we begin asking questions of the story we might find ourselves questioning Dupin's intentions and motivations. We might notice that a month separates the Prefect's visits to Dupin's residence. Dupin, in that time, has retrieved the letter. Throughout this month the Queen has been under the power of the Minister D- yet Dupin did not alert the Prefect of its retrieval immediately. This necessitated an extra month of anguish for the Queen and continued domination by D-. Added to this is Dupin's silence on the matter until the Prefect mentions 'paying for' advice. The Prefect sounds desperate as he claims the

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<sup>44</sup> Poe, p. 189.

<sup>45</sup> Poe, p. 196.

<sup>46</sup> Poe, p. 196.

matter 'is becoming of more and more importance every day'<sup>47</sup> and that he would give his 'individual check for fifty thousand francs'<sup>48</sup> in return for the letter. Dupin, showing little concern or urgency does not confess to possession of the letter but rather taunts the Prefect, 'I really—think, G--, you have not exerted yourself—to the utmost in this matter. You might—do a little more, I think, eh?'<sup>49</sup> After playing with the Prefect, Dupin finally relents and tells him, 'you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter.'<sup>50</sup>

Dupin's actions are confusing. On the one hand, he is the hero of the story; he outsmarts the devious D- and returns the letter to its true owner. He not only puts the letter back in the hand of the Queen but teaches the Minister a lesson by beating him at his own game and swapping the letter for a fake to ensure his humiliation and political destruction in court. On the other hand, Dupin seems petty and moved by selfish motives.

As I try to pin down Dupin's character and motivations I also find myself looking at his love of analysis, his amazing ability to solve the mystery. This particular story takes the detective and his analysis as the central topic. There is no action in the story. The action is entirely situated in dialogues in Dupin's library. The entire interest, one assumes, lies in the lengthy explanation of how Dupin works out where the letter is hidden and how he tricks the Minister to retrieve it. The very form of the story, dialogues in a library, with puffs of smoke encircling the trio, suggests analysis and rationality over action and emotion. What of Dupin's deductive skills? Dupin, on a basic first-style reading, is a master analyst. He bides his time, asks relevant questions, and eventually cracks the problem. He understands that the Minister must keep the letter in his possession to maintain its power; he eliminates the possibility of the letter being concealed in some out of the way hiding place by having the Prefect detail the search the police have made of D-'s apartments and then deduces that the letter must be hidden in plain sight. We even get the impression that Dupin wisely (or perhaps supernaturally) understood the situation prior to the Prefect's explanation when he speaks of the problem being that the case is too simple.

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<sup>47</sup> Poe, p. 190.

<sup>48</sup> Poe, p. 190.

<sup>49</sup> Poe, p. 190.

<sup>50</sup> Poe, p. 190.

The key to Dupin's analysis, however, is not logic. It relies upon the ability to understand another person, their motivations and level of cunning. His skill lies in neither underestimating nor overestimating his opponent but rather getting inside their head. It is this ability that sets Dupin apart. His apparent masterful understanding of human nature and individuals contrasts to the form and subject matter of logical analysis. The insight Dupin has into others and its unfailing accuracy bears the mark of fiction. The story of the child who could measure intellect by arranging his face to match the mind he was trying to read is so fantastical to take us from the careful, rational and systematic analyst to pure fiction. Likewise, Dupin's unerring calculations regarding the Prefect's inability to discover the letter on a second search of D-'s residence and his ability to distract the Minister in conversation and with a street disturbance also signify fiction and fantasy. By looking past the simple which conceals that which is not concealed, I begin to hear an otherness in Poe's story. There is a sense of a worldview that we can glimpse through Dupin's ability to understand others in ways that we cannot. Dupin's analytic ability speaks of a desire to maintain mastery, to not be challenged by the other/Other which is contrasted with the apparent mode of cool, detached, logical analysis. I begin to hear a desire, a fiction that is hidden in plain sight. I could call this something clichéd like the author's desire to be recognised as a clever analyst and observer of human nature, but this would miss the point. There is a voice wanting to be heard that goes beyond the simple detective story.

The discussion regarding mathematics versus poetry also reveals an otherness concealed in plain sight. Just as the analysis in the story spans a divide between logic and instinct, between the rational and the psychic, the discussion of the Minister's character as both mathematician and poet suggests a voice, an other, beyond the text. I am not suggesting that Poe is using Dupin as a mouthpiece to discuss these issues but rather that the text itself, the horizon and worldview presented presents or makes manifest these questions and in doing so plays with what is manifest and what is concealed. We learn that Minister D- is both a mathematician and a poet. The narrator and Prefect seem to hold the position that mathematics is the site of true reason, logic and rational thought and hence mathematicians are the greatest thinkers, the narrator comments, 'the

mathematical reason has long been regarded and *the reason par excellence*.<sup>51</sup> The faith in mathematical reason and truth which is the kind of thinking that is set up as key in ‘The Purloined Letter’. We have a detective who solves a mystery from his armchair. The story does not involve any direct action, simply the recounting of action but the bulk of the narrative involves the explanation of Dupin’s reasoning, his method of *thinking* that solves the case of the stolen letter. It is worth remembering that the character of Dupin inspired other detective stories that focus on analysis and methods of deduction like Sherlock Holmes. Dupin disagrees, however, with the popular opinion of mathematics mastery and states that the Minister is a mathematician and a poet which allows him to ‘reason well’<sup>52</sup> and ‘as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all’<sup>53</sup>. An otherness begins to creep in. What exactly is the role of poetry and what place does it have in Dupin’s esteem? The story, itself a work of fiction that celebrates the logical and rational, finds itself interrupted by its own status as fiction. Derrida mentions the scene of writing and indeed we find many references to books and other texts throughout the story. The story appears to be one thing (a simple detective story celebrating the genius rationality of Dupin) but finds itself speaking of itself as a work of literature. This self-referentiality, in which a voice seeks to be heard beyond the manifest meaning or beyond the apparent desire of the text to say one thing, suggests an otherness, a fleeting glimpse of something beyond ourselves and our comprehension.

## **Toward understanding**

One might argue that I am looking too hard here. Dupin is clear, after all, about his views on poetry and mathematics. It is not the case that the text explicitly purports throughout to a lesser view of poetry and a celebration of logical, mathematical thought. Besides, surely the fact that I am able to put the eruption of fiction, of the disruption of the very status of the work into words, means that it is not ‘beyond ourselves and our comprehension’. In some ways this is a fair criticism. The difficult thing about a Levinasian approach, and a struggle Levinas

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<sup>51</sup> Poe, p. 192.

<sup>52</sup> Poe, p. 192.

<sup>53</sup> Poe, p. 192.

himself faced as noted in Chapter One, is that as soon as we begin to speak about something we find ourselves in the realm of the said, of the same. We cannot but reduce otherness. What I am trying to argue is that when we begin to look at what is concealed, in plain sight, in Poe's story we get a sense of something that goes beyond the text. The story operates as fiction even as it seems to concern itself with logic and truth.

The play between truth and fiction, between mathematical-type logic and instinctive human understanding and poetry creates an unsettling balance in which the text is more than and other than what it appears to be. It is in this indecision, this standing between whilst also equally holding both views, that suggests an otherness. There is a sense of friction which is not immediately apparent but nevertheless opens the text beyond what it purports to be and in doing so shakes the reader's sense of mastery, sense of self and places her in a position of responsibility. The friction comes from an unheard voice that seeks recognition. Just as my analysis and explanation here fails to capture what is happening in and beyond the story the exact otherness, horizon or worldview that is glimpsed or heard as an echo fails to find a voice in the text. But the sense of something else happening just beyond our grasp, of something someone wants to say or wants us to understand or know calls to us. We find ourselves seeking to find the words to express this sensation and cannot but help feeling that we are not alone in the world but that there is something beyond our understanding.

These are the first two possible approaches I mentioned above; the first was to examine whether we experience an epiphany, feel that we have experienced the call of the other and all that goes along with it and the second approach was to attempt to find points of otherness in the text itself. The first, I claim, fails to give (me) a sense of the encounter with the other in this particular case but the second, for me at least, does seem to inspire the right feeling, sensation or reaction. But, one might argue that these are not readings as such. Both of these approaches allow us to describe the phenomenology of reading and in doing so we might be able to comment on ways in which the text functions, as in my discussion of the second approach, but they do not respond to the text in the way in which a reader usually does. I have not produced an understanding of the matter through dialogue, in a Gadamerian way. The responses I have given do not seek to further meaning, to find connections with other texts, theories or to solve

problems, fill in gaps or suggest a complete understanding. They are, by necessity, singular in their claims. I can say that this is my reaction to this aspect of the text, that I get a sense of encountering something outside of myself but cannot state this as a universal truth or even something that other readers ought to experience despite the language we are compelled to use which works to nail ideas down, to express statements as truth and suggest a universality that we struggle to not express. What of the third approach? In this approach I will attempt to respond to Poe in response to Lacan; I will listen to the voice that rubs up against Lacan's reading and try to give it the world, to make room for it and allow my horizon, my tradition and self to be questioned. Will this offer something more normative or allow us to further our understanding of how we might encounter the other in literature *and* produce a reading that allows us to say something about the text?

This third approach draws upon the second to some degree. It involves moving past our basic reading of 'The Purloined Letter' and attempting to unconceal what was hidden in plain sight. The difference is it involves an expanded frame that incorporates Lacan and Derrida. I have already argued that the voice that breaks through Lacan's reading, refusing to be reduced to the psychoanalytical truth or totality might be experienced as the other, the ethical saying. It is the same kind of situation that I described in the second approach. The text signifies or functions beyond the surface understanding. It comments upon its status and exceeds what is manifest and in doing so creates a rupture that unsettles the reader, that calls for a response, even if this response is destined to fail.

How can we respond to Poe's story in this expanded horizon that includes Lacan in a way that does not result in a decisive reading that reduces the otherness of the text to the same? I have suggested that Derrida fails to respond to Poe's text but rather is motivated by responding to Lacan and in effect quashing the voice that ruptures Lacan's reading. Derrida is perhaps initially moved by the voice that calls for recognition that refuses the restricted limit or frame of the psychoanalytic 'truth' or totality placed upon it by Lacan. At times Derrida seems to sense a responsibility toward this voice, such as his questioning of the role of the narrator. Derrida is quick to point out Lacan's omission with regard to the narrator but does not give this role a decisive interpretation or reading. Derrida, initially, allows the narrator to remain 'other'. He claims, '[t]he narrator (himself doubled into a

narrating narrator and a narrated narrator, not limiting himself to reporting the two dialogues) is evidently neither the author himself (to be called Poe), nor, less evidently, the inscriber of a text which recounts something for us, or rather which makes a narrator speak, who himself, in all kinds of ways, makes many people speak.<sup>54</sup> Here we see Derrida giving voice to the narrator without deciding his status, without ascribing a signified or truth to him. The mode of reading Derrida is giving here is descriptive and questioning. He describes the narrator's role (mostly by claiming what he is not), the narrator 'makes many people speak' but is not 'the author himself' nor 'the inscriber of a text'. In giving this negative description of the narrator Derrida is making room for the narrator to be otherwise. He hears the narrator's refusal to be completely negated, to be left voiceless in Lacan's reading, but rather than claiming a full and complete understanding of the narrator,<sup>55</sup> Derrida acknowledges his importance to the story whilst leaving his role slightly indeterminate. Derrida, when he does discuss what the narrator *is* in this section, takes a problematising approach. He doubles and layers language to push the limit of meaning and signification, again leaving room for the narrator to be voiced without definition, the narrator is 'doubled into a narrating narrator and a narrated narrator'.

Should Derrida have continued in this vein I would have considered his reading a response to Poe and 'Levinasian' in nature. It is a reading that opens towards the story, which leaves questions unanswered but gives voice to the horizon of the text that ruptures attempts to decide it, to limit it or ascribe a meaning to it. What would a reading of this nature look like and what would it achieve? And, to come back to a question raised earlier, would this really constitute an encounter with the other? A reading of this sort will not be systematic. It is responding to ways in which a text resists a reading of it so it will be unique to the particular texts involved. In this case, Poe's text struggles against Lacan's predetermined path in which the 'truth' received from Freud is illustrated. We might reflect upon the irony of this given the subject of the story in which a letter – which always has a predetermined path, in spite of Derrida's claims that a letter can always fail to reach its destination. Lacan sees a path through Poe's

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de La Vérité', p. 431.

<sup>55</sup> There might still be a sense in which a better understanding of the narrator is implied by Derrida's criticism of Lacan's treatment of this character.

story by which he can highlight and perhaps manipulate the aspects that work with his interpretation and allow the parts of the story that do not fit to fade into the background. It is these parts, the highlighted and manipulated, or those brushed over, that call for a response and will determine the ethical response. One will seek to respond to the ways in which Poe's horizon, the operation of 'The Purloined Letter' that exceed or deny the current interpretation.

This will require attention to the letter of Poe's text, and will require careful description of the part of the story under question in which its meaning is not decided or determined. Take, for instance, my earlier observation that Lacan adds or manipulates details around Dupin's character when he is in possession of the letter. Lacan requires Dupin to take on feminine characteristics to prove the repetition automatism and constitution of the subject by the signifier. To advance his argument he describes Dupin as suffering a 'feminine rage' when he seeks revenge on D-. I argued that this simply was not justified by the text. I recounted ways in which Dupin seemed relaxed, calculating, analytic and good-humoured in his actions. I equated Dupin's attitude to D- to boyish one-upmanship. In giving a determined response – Dupin does not suffer a 'feminine rage' but rather continues an existing relationship of cat and mouse with D- in which each tries to get the better of the other I am resorting to the realm of the same. Certainly I can give textual support for my interpretation but it would seem this is not enough for a Levinasian type of response, Lacan, after all, can give textual support for many of his claims that we would consider to reduce otherness. How might I respond then, to the voice of Dupin refusing the description of a 'feminine rage' without deciding his intentions, without ascribing a meaning to his actions that will cast him in the totality?

Following Derrida's example, I might problematise Dupin's role in this situation. I might point out that he is neither hero nor villain in this drama. I might notice the way in which he saves the day by recovering the letter and outsmarting the Minister but also consider his actions as selfish and self-serving, exacting a financial reward as well as the opportunity to pursue a personal grievance. I might question whether part of Dupin's status as 'hero' is reliant upon his status as 'rogue' by questioning if part of his cleverness relies on his willingness to follow his own motives and desires in pursuit of justice for others. I may also question Dupin's attitude towards D-, they seem both friends and enemies. Dupin

and D- speak quite happily and appear to maintain a close enough relationship for Dupin to know topics of conversation that will intrigue D- and occupy him while Dupin visually searches for the missing letter. D- also seems happy to entertain Dupin in his home. But Dupin is quick to seal his acquaintance's political death and make sure that he knows who sealed his fate. In this kind of response I am attempting to lay out what is missed or manipulated in Lacan's reading but trying to avoid deciding the meaning of what I am laying out. I try to explore rather than reduce difficulties, points of confusion or apparent contradictions. The stance I take, a lesson learned from Levinas and Gadamer, is one of questioning rather than answering. The subsequent reading may disappoint. It would not seek to 'understand' 'The Purloined Letter' nor would it ascribe meaning or value to the work. It would not be a full and systematic approach to the work but rather listen to those marginalised aspects of the text that call out to be made room for. This type of reading relies upon an expanded horizon in which someone else has attempted to read the text, and in doing so, creates space for a voice that calls from beyond this reading. This voice emerges from the original text but relies upon the space created by the reading to be heard.

What I must avoid doing in this kind of reading is respond to Lacan himself. This is the error I claim Derrida makes. Rather than work with Poe's story he responds to Lacan; Lacan's claims, his reading and his status in French thought. It would be tempting to go into the emergence of the idea of 'feminine rage' to get caught up in a discussion about what it even means and keep measuring Poe's text against this. It would be easy to launch into a discussion about the meaning Lacan places upon the text with his additions of the feminine (and are they really additions at all given the Minister's 'feminine' and 'diminutive'<sup>56</sup> hand?) and, like Derrida, ascribe a meaning to Lacan's *Seminar* that propagates the reduction of the other to the same.

This kind of approach meets one requirement of the ethical encounter. The reader of Lacan hears the saying, the ethical demand, of Poe's story exceeding, reaching out beyond the said of Lacan's reading. The reader feels a need to respond to this voice, to make room for it in the world. I suggest this is done by responding to the voice itself, focussing on Poe's text and looking for the points

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<sup>56</sup> Lacan, p. 21.

of difficulty, contradiction or indecision in the text that invite interpretation and reduction on the one hand but on the other resists any meaning placed upon it from outside. But, what of the other requirement? This kind of reading is akin to a good deconstructive reading or a reading that bases itself on Gadamer's hermeneutics. I have couched it in Levinasian terms but these could be replaced by terminology from either of these other two theoretical perspectives. The three approaches certainly have similarities, including a joint history of influences, but what would make the kind of approaches I have outlined here specifically Levinasian? The answer to this is difficult to express in terms of a way of reading texts. I have already raised the phenomenological experience of encountering the other. It is, I argue, this feeling, this gut-reaction that leads us to want to read in this particular way. But what of the second requirement for the Levinasian response? This involves the sense of crisis of finding oneself questioned, no longer alone in the world nor master of it and the related experience of the origin of one's subjectivity.

### **The crisis of self**

We have glimpsed the other in Poe's text, perhaps not on initial reading but there is an unsettling force when we try to understand the text, when we approach it with questions and a desire to comprehend. The otherness of the text results in it saying more about itself than I could, in it slipping out from my attempt to understand or give it meaning. The text asserts itself when read in a reductive way by someone else and I get a sense of urgency to respond, to give voice to that which is marginalised or reduced. Do we find ourselves altered by this experience? This is a difficult question. Surely, I can only speak from my own perspective, give my own phenomenological account of my experience of reading this particular text or set of texts. But is it even necessary to have this sense of crisis and simultaneous birth of subjectivity? In the previous chapters I have argued that Levinas's philosophy sits between empirical and transcendental interpretations. Similar to Kant's sublime, the empirical experiences signify the transcendent – in this case primordial. The beginning of subjectivity, the origin of human consciousness and sense of self, surely belongs to the primordial or transcendent.

It is not the case that I exist in kind of state of nature, moving through the world in complete confidence of the fact that the world is mine; everything in it is at my disposal. Hence, it is also not the case that at some point I come across an Other and find my enjoyment, my *jouissance*, disrupted and in doing so realise that this Other means that I am a separate being, a self in all its meaning. This is a story of origin without origin. There was never a person who existed in this kind of way; rather Levinas suggests it as a kind of structure of human subjectivity. I have argued that empirical experiences that are structurally similar to this primordial origin signify the transcendent and unexperiencable. Through our day-to-day lives we can find ourselves brought up short by an other and experience the demand for generosity. This empirical experience takes us out of our lives briefly to allow us to remember the structure of our human subjectivity. This sense of remembrance of the origin of subjectivity *is*, I argue, a key aspect of the encounter with the Other and is required in our reading, if our reading is to signify the transcendent experience.

So, on a subjective, purely phenomenological level do I experience this structure in which my sense of mastery and *jouissance* is disrupted and my sense of self as self born when I encounter the other in Poe's text in any of the ways explored above? Let us take the second approach described above first. The second approach was when I looked more closely at the text. I tried to ask questions of it to understand it more fully. In doing so, I discovered that what I thought was a simple detective story that laid itself bare, put everything in plain sight, was in fact concealing (by leaving them unconcealed) levels of indecision and indeterminacy. From this threshold came a voice, a desire that was other. It seemed to stand between logic and poetry, between the rational and the intuitive and express something beyond the text, beyond what was said or unsaid in the fiction. What of me? The reader, the one that finds herself responsible for making room for this other in my world? This 'making room' is the site of crisis and regeneration.

In the first approach, my initial or basic reading of Poe's story I claim to not encounter something other. The text, I claim, already analyses itself, it leaves no stone unturned in its explication of its analysis. I maintain my mastery, my understanding and enjoyment of a world in which nothing (in this story) challenges my sense of moving through the world that is there *for me*. I consume

the story in much the same way as I enjoy the crisp autumn air or the juicy bite of an apple. It is there for my enjoyment, I take it into myself, place it in categories of my understanding and move on to the next consumable at my fingertips. The second approach, when I stop to look a little more closely at the story and find that what I thought was there for me actually has a horizon of its own and asserts a demand on me to make room for it in my own horizon means that I discover something outside myself. I can no longer simply consume this story in the way in which I consume an apple but instead see it as something that exists outside *my* world and not only does it exist beyond my power or mastery of the world but I find it making a demand on me. It forces me to give voice to it, to allow it to exist *as itself* rather than as something *for me*. I must acknowledge or come to understand that not everything in the world is there for me, I am taken out of the mode of *jouissance* and placed into a mode of responsibility, of generosity and even of hostage.

This new mode of being, the realisation the other causes me to have, means that I suddenly see myself as a self, as a person with a horizon moving through the world as separate and able to say 'I' in relation to the things I discover. But do I actually experience this? Intellectually it is easy to describe the situation in Levinasian terms but what is the phenomenological experience? As I delve into the story more, and begin to hear a voice that exists as echo upon the words written on the page, the sense of horizon beyond the text I do get a sense of disruption. My first readings gave me a sense of mastery, of simple comprehension and understanding but as the text shifts under my gaze and begins to speak beyond the words on the page I realise I stand in a different position to the text. I find myself standing before the text, in much the same way as I might stand before the law rather than having the text before me. When I stand before the text it holds a power over me, like standing before the law, the text dictates my fate. The text places me in question, it calls me out and in doing so means that I must answer its demands, I must come before its summons and, to borrow Levinas's favourite metaphor, like Moses, never return home. I remain changed by my encounter with this other because I am forever aware of my changed relationship to the world. In less (mixed) metaphorical terms, I get a sense of my own limit, of my horizon coming up against something I cannot fully understand

or integrate into my own understanding and in doing so realise that I *have* a limit or horizon.

## Summary

A similar analysis could be made for the third approach explored above<sup>57</sup> and a thorough investigation of this will not add anything new to the discussion. So far I have given a subjective description of my experience of encountering the other in Poe's story (or beyond Poe's story). The sense of encountering the other involves both a subjective aspect in which the reader acknowledges the sense of coming into contact with something outside or beyond themselves but also provides space for a reading in the way in which the reader responds to the demands of the text, the way in which they might seek an understanding through dialogue, allowing their own horizon to be placed in question by that of the text. I have also offered a subjective and phenomenological account of the sense of crisis and origin of self that occurs (or, more accurately, is signified) by this encounter. This aspect of the encounter with the other is an important feature of the experience but does not offer the same room for responding to the text. It is a necessary condition for the first type of response and reading and perhaps offers the possibility for some interesting phenomenological accounts of the reading experience but, as far as I can see, does not invite a reading with the text in and of itself.

Looking at Poe's story and the expanded horizon that includes the theoretical works of Lacan, Derrida and Johnson has given me a concrete example to explore how Levinas's ethics and Gadamer's hermeneutics operate in a text. I have discussed the necessity of failure when reading. All texts will fail to protect otherness as the minute we begin to speak of them, to engage them in dialogue language will work to settle the saying into the said, to reduce the otherness to categories of understanding and ensure the totality of the totality. I have looked at the approaches to encountering the other in this particular story and suggest that each fiction will be unique and work in its own way, the essential of the encounter with the other is its particularity, its singularity. Poe's story offers an interesting

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<sup>57</sup> Producing a response to the voice of Poe that breaks through Lacan's reading.

example as counterintuitively it is only when we seek to understand the story more fully that we find meaning disrupted by the call of the other.

## Conclusion

This thesis has been haunted. Reminiscent of Josephine Carter's reading of Frame's *The Adaptable Man* there has been a ghost lurking within my thesis which cannot be fully understood in the strictly philosophical sense. The sense of the Other, the responsibility toward the Other and the disruption by the Other of the self works between the words on the page, undermines the logic of the arguments presented and silently but urgently pleads for recognition.

Let me explain. I began this thesis with the question, 'can we encounter the Other through the mediation of literature?' I hoped to find an affirmative answer to this question and that this might help explain why works of literature are still relevant, still important and why they persevere when so much of the contemporary world has moved away from literature, or perhaps Literature, with a capital 'L'. I was moved by the sense of responsibility readers of literature feel towards texts and by the intuition that leads us to apply a vast ethical language to our reading and interpretation of works of literature. It seems to me that the experience of reading, of engaging with the text itself, offers an experience that is unique and difficult to put into words. I hoped to find a connection between the intuitively ethical terminology we use to describe interactions with texts and the experience of reading that leaves the reader feeling that they have simultaneously encountered something outside of themselves and become aware of their finitude and that this connection might explain why literary texts are still relevant, important and enduring.

The sense of being haunted prevails. There is something outside of me and my understanding that demands recognition both in my reading of literary texts and in my engagement with the ideas of this thesis. It is these demands that make me read and reread, to be careful with my interpretative choices and to listen for the voice that is unvoiced beyond the text.

To begin my answer to the thesis question I looked to Emmanuel Levinas's idea of the Other and his phenomenological description of the encounter with this Other. I chose Levinas because he offered a purely phenomenological account that did not offer or suggest a method. His work has been increasingly popular in the field of literary studies partly because he escapes

the totalising and potentially damaging style of ethics that was criticised in the 1970s and 1980s, and partly because his description of the encounter with the Other seems so intuitively in line with the experience of reading. I explored and developed an idea of what it would be like to encounter the Other in the Levinasian sense but also identified a problem that has largely been ignored by literary theorists, namely Levinas's antipathy towards works of art, literature and rhetorical language.

I discussed Levinas's concerns with literature which hinge on both a concern with literary language and a view in which the representation that takes place in literature means that literary works of art have a lesser ontological status than items in the 'real' world. I then considered Robert Eaglestone's answer to the problem of literature for Levinas in which he admits that Levinas's earlier work (up to and including *Totality and Infinity*) offers no real possibility for the application of Levinasian ethics to literature but argues that there is a significant shift in Levinas's thinking in the later *Otherwise than Being* that suggests works of literature can in fact partake of the ethical. Eaglestone argues that Levinas's notions of the saying and the said mean that all language, including literary language and texts, have an ethical component and that Levinas actually composes, not a philosophical text, but a work of literature in *Otherwise than Being*.

I reject Eaglestone's 'answer' to the problem of literature for Levinas. I argue that the notions of the saying and the said make their first appearance in *Totality and Infinity* and that the later text does not mark a break from the earlier work but instead offers an expansion upon it. Levinas can be seen as taking ideas introduced in *Totality and Infinity* and expanding them, exploring them and looking at them from a different direction in *Otherwise than Being*. I admit a potential contradiction in Levinas's account of language in which philosophical texts are said to contain the ethical saying, the goal of philosophy is to perform a reduction from the said to the saying, but literary texts are argued to be pure said. I offer the argument that, for Levinas, ethics is first philosophy, all philosophical work is built upon the ethics of the encounter with the Other and the ethical saying which places philosophical texts and language in a different relationship to truth than that literature holds. Essentially I suggest Levinas sees philosophical language as a transparent window to truth and therefore straightforward whereas

literary language seeks to occlude, it does not say what it means but doubles meaning, and aims at fiction, not truth.

I put aside my own reservations about these arguments and claim that for Levinas, Eaglestone's line of argument will not hold. This is where the notion of being haunted begins for my answer to the question of this thesis. I argue that regardless of the water-tightness (or lack thereof) of Levinas's arguments, there is an urgent voice that has not been given words but nevertheless makes its meaning felt throughout his works. I support the interpretation that Levinas is deeply concerned to maintain the ethical encounter as a purely human experience, one that is marked by its singularity, by its immediacy and one, I argue, that stems from his experiences in World War Two. The Holocaust had a major impact on Levinas who was a prisoner of war and lost many members of his family to the Nazi death-camps. The descriptions Levinas provides of the Other and the encounter with the Other are utterly compelling because they mark a completely human experience in which one stands before an other and cannot but act in generosity towards her, one feels the weight of the other/Other's call, demand and plea and experiences what it is to be a human subject in a world with others that are not simply not-me. The insistence on the immediate and face-to-face, I argue, stems from Levinas's own hauntedness, his own desire to respond to the other/Other. To reject this underlying urgency, plea or voice on the basis of traditional logic or philosophical debate, I argue, would be to miss the point of Levinas's ethics altogether. The importance of reading what is not on the page, of listening to the voice that is not given words becomes an essential component of my approach to addressing the thesis question as well as reading literary works if I hope to have an encounter with the other/Other.

Levinas's ethics, the encounter with the Other and the ethical saying, by definition go beyond the usual rules of logic and argument. Levinas's Other marks a break with totality, is completely beyond all understanding, comprehension and not party to the laws of normal debate. To suggest that Levinas's argument is contradictory and therefore wrong misses the point of the ethical encounter altogether. I argue that we must listen to this insistent, urgent voice that haunts Levinas's work, that appears in the cracks and refuses to be brought back to the Same or totality.

The answer to the question of my thesis found itself in doubt at this point. Levinas's antipathy towards literature and the necessity of listening to the voice that places the ethical solely in the realm of the face-to-face and immediate suggested a roadblock to an ethical encounter in literature. At this point I bracket Levinas's concerns for a time, whilst still holding them at the forefront of my inquiry to consider Hans-Georg Gadamer and his hermeneutics in the hope of finding a way to respect Levinas's work whilst also applying his ideas to literature.

Gadamer and Levinas have not been put in dialogue often. Their shared background in phenomenology, particularly Heidegger's influence, and Gadamer's rejection of method, the central role language plays in his thought and respect for alterity all suggest some points of cohesion with Levinas's philosophical work. I traced the question of representation in art through Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and found that both he and Levinas take a mimetic view of art. The two thinkers both see art as imitation but Levinas sees it as pure representation, absent of any claims to truth, and reliant on its signified in the 'real' world for meaning. Gadamer, on the other hand, claims that representation in art is revelatory in that it presents truth that is not reliant on the 'real' world. The work of art, for Gadamer, presents what the artist knows in the only way that it can be presented. Gadamer's idea of representation as revelatory is extended later in the thesis when I look at Jean Baudrillard's idea of representation in photography.

My investigation of Gadamer's hermeneutics allowed me to answer an important question of the thesis, namely, who is the other in literature? I argue that the other in literature is not a character in the text, a position that most literary theorists take when applying Levinas's work to literature, but must be the author. I develop a notion of 'author' using Gadamer's ideas of horizon and historically effected consciousness to mean the worldview that is expressed in a text, the insight into another person's intention to create but I resist a simple idea of author as the person who literally sat down to write the book.

I explored the ways in which Gadamer argues one can read a text and seek understanding with that text without annihilating alterity. This rests on the idea of a fusion of horizons in which understanding is reached through a dialogue in which one's own horizon, one's own subjectivity and understanding of the world is put on the line. When I want to read a text I must not simply read it as an

artefact of a tradition that has nothing to do with me but rather put my own tradition in question as I seek understanding. I need to be willing to be challenged and changed by the experience, I must treat the text as a Thou.

Gadamer's hermeneutics certainly suggest similarities with Levinas's phenomenology and offers a non-methodological approach to reading that would allow alterity to be maintained should we discover that the Other can be encountered in literature. Gadamer's description of understanding texts sits neatly with Levinas's phenomenology of the encounter with the Other, if couched in a different vocabulary, and suggests that the experience that Levinas describes is, at least phenomenologically, experienced in reading literature. With Gadamer's clarification of who the other might be in literature and the assurance that we do experience something that appears like Levinas's encounter when we approach a text I continue my exploration of the question of the thesis I return to Levinas and the question of the encounter.

As a result of the discussion of Gadamer I approached Levinas with a new question. Because Gadamer's work is so analogous to the experience Levinas is describing, is there a way in which we can account for this that might allow us to maintain Levinas's insistence on the face-to-face, immediate and unmediated encounter? To address this question I picked up the debate between those who interpret the encounter with the Other as something completely transcendent, primordial and beyond experience and those who see it as something that can and is experienced in everyday life. I argue that we should pay attention to Levinas's own assessment of his project when he claims it lies 'between' the two camps. To understand what he might mean by this I looked at the idea of the infinite in connection with the Other and then argued that the Other as the idea of the infinite is analogous with the Kantian sublime.

The analogy with the sublime allowed me to argue that when Levinas claims his work lies between transcendent and empirical philosophy he means that there is an interplay between the transcendent and empirical in his work, and both are required to experience the encounter yet neither is the experience of the Other in and of itself. I claim that the encounter with the Other is something that cannot be experienced as such. It is beyond experience, primordial and an essential part of being human; to experience it we would need to escape our human subjectivity. In our lived lives we experience certain encounters that are structurally the same

as the encounter with the Other and, like the sublime, they signify not themselves but the encounter with the Other. It is the primordial ~~experience~~ that makes the experiences in our everyday lives elevated and appear like the encounter as described by Levinas. Likewise, it is only through these everyday experiences that we can glimpse or remember the primordial encounter with the Other.

This argument makes space for an encounter with the other in literature because it does not claim the experience to be anything but similar to the encounter with the Other. I do not think this alone works for my purposes. Levinas could argue that, as the only way to experience the encounter with the Other is through every day, empirical encounters with the other then it is these empirical situations that must be face-to-face; he could argue that this simply adds another layer of representation to the encounter in literature.

With this basic structure in place I then looked again at the issue of representation in the hope of finding a way to see literature that would appease Levinas's objections. I picked up the idea of representation as revelatory and truth-producing from Gadamer and looked to extend these ideas by looking at Jean Baudrillard's ideas of representation in photography. Baudrillard argues that photography is unique in its representation because the object of the representation is an active participant, able to shape and influence the representation by posing in a particular way, for example. He also argues that photographs do not represent reality but something other than reality that is more real than real. Baudrillard argues that in a photograph people will pause from their day-to-day lives to pose for the camera, to represent themselves in a particular way. This is presented as a moment in time but in fact the moment never existed except in the resulting image which endures.

I argued that literature can be seen as representing in a similar way to photography. I had already established through my discussion of Gadamer that the other that is encountered in a work of literature is the 'author', the horizon or worldview presented in the work. If this is the case then that worldview is active in its representation in much the same way the object of a photograph is. The author, the creator of the text, is able to shape what is included and how it is represented in the work in the same way the person in front of the lens can pout, tilt or pose to influence the representation. The representation in photography is always, argues Baudrillard, a fiction of reality and a similar case can be made for

literature. Works of literature do not attempt to represent the world but rather present a 'reality' that is otherwise to reality.

The combination of both these arguments, that we experience something very much like an encounter with the Other in our daily lives, and one that signifies the primordial encounter and that works of literature are best seen, not mimetic as Levinas would have us believe, but rather that they are active presentations of a worldview allowed me to conclude that there is a sense in which we can encounter the other in literature. The conclusion is tentative, contains several qualifications and is not unproblematic. I suggest that we can and do experience something like the encounter with the other in literature and that my formulation of the lived encounter means that we can talk sensibly about the encounter in Levinasian terms without destroying the alterity of his work in which the face-to-face and immediate is central.

In the final chapter of this thesis I read a literary text to work through the conclusions and implications of my earlier work. I read Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' through a Levinasian and Gadamerian frame. I attempt to read and reread in ways to understand whilst maintaining the otherness of the text. I also work through exactly what the other is in this text, the sense of something beyond the text that I cannot quite understand or fully grasp and explore the experience in light of my earlier investigations. I discover that it is through rereading the work, through exploring the ideas that are hidden in plain sight that I encounter the other.

To pick up the thread from the beginning of this section of the thesis, what does this mean for the study and enjoyment of literature? I said that I had hoped my investigation would give me some insight into the reason why literature is still relevant today and also into the nature of literary texts but has it done this?

Gary Saul Morson wrote an article for *Commentary Magazine* where he identifies something of a crisis in humanities and English departments in particular. He suggests that courses that offer factual information about texts, where they fit in an author's oeuvre, their connection to a particular genre or literary movement their significance for later works, and so on risk low enrolments. Students know that this information is easily accessible online and do not need to take a course to find it out. He argues that courses must offer students something that they cannot get elsewhere. He argues this lies in the 'reader's

*experience*'.<sup>397</sup> I concur. I suggest that one of the reasons people still read, that more people should read and that readers love reading is for the experience.<sup>398</sup> It is the sense that you have encountered something other than yourself, something that reminds you of your human finitude and that there is something larger than yourself that exists beyond your experience that makes reading relevant. It is the text's ability to haunt us, to make demands and issue pleas, it is the way in which a text is able to remind me of my human finitude at the same time as bringing my subjectivity into being that keeps me coming back to works of literature. I think the relevance and importance of literature, as well as the joy of reading, lies in the way it allows us to be close to another worldview without assimilating that worldview to our own, but rather find our own sense of self challenged and changed through the experience.

As we read we get a sense of responsibility, a feeling that Gadamer can explain by our role in finishing the work as spectator or reader, or the need for a reader to translate the dead words back into living language, and I have talked in the final chapter about doing justice to a text. More needs to be said about how we might do justice to a text in a Levinasian-Gadamerian sense in which we must allow the text to remain otherwise whilst still wanting to say something about it. Further reading of other literary texts with a similar approach to that I have taken with Poe will be illuminating. I am interested if this kind of approach to texts allows us to say something unique and interesting about them or whether we will be left with an other of whom we must not speak and a reading that repeats Levinas's ideas like waves lapping at the shore.<sup>399</sup>

If I am correct, and the experience of encountering the other (in the necessarily limited and qualified way) is what makes the study and engagement with literature valuable and enduring, even in the post-post-modern world, then I suspect this will also allow us to say something about the nature of literary texts. Levinas recognises the intrinsic importance of the face-to-face. The ethical

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<sup>397</sup> Gary Saul Morson, 'Why College Kids Are Avoiding The Study Of Literature', 1 July 2015 <<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/why-college-kids-are-avoiding-the-study-of-literature/>> [accessed 20 August 2015].

<sup>398</sup> It should be noted that 'enjoyment,' 'joy' and 'love' are not words that Levinas would use to describe the person experiencing the ethical relation. The subject is held hostage or traumatised in relation to the Other. I believe my distinction between the empirical and transcendental encounter allows me to use these terms, albeit more as common expressions than accurate descriptions of the encounter.

<sup>399</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 312.

encounter is a vital part of our subjectivity and humanity and he seeks to justify this by maintaining the encounter as immediate and unmediated. I have argued in this thesis that we have a structurally similar experience when we read a work of literature but does this apply to all works of literature? I might find that some texts leave me unmoved, do not give me a sense of encountering something infinite and otherwise. Does this mean that this is a lesser work? Or, does it mean that my argument is incorrect? The consideration of these questions might lead to questions about what constitutes a text as fitting into the category of literature and offer a possible avenue for exploring a definition of literature.

I suspect any work of literature has the possibility to allow an encounter with the other but that the reader might not always take the right position with regard to the text. A reader who approaches the text with an agenda, who leaves their own horizon behind and does not offer up their tradition, self or subjectivity for question is unlikely to feel or experience the otherness of the text, but rather, work to annihilate any alterity. The question of the nature or definition of literary texts still remains. I have made certain claims about works of literature in this thesis that have mostly gone unchallenged. I have claimed that works of literature open a world insofar as they represent or present a fiction of reality. I have claimed that they reveal a worldview and that this is the reason that we get a sense of the other working between the words on the page. But do other texts or art forms also present the fiction of reality, revealing instead a ~~truth~~ truth that does not rely upon 'reality' for its validity but is rather true because it is presented? Do other types of texts or works of art open the encounter with the other to experience in the same way a work of literature does? It is tempting and appealing to argue that there is something unique and particular to the experience of literature that other works of art and other texts do not invite but this needs to be explored further. The particular way in which a literary text represents, the way in which it produces truth and meaning seems utterly connected to the experience of the encounter and does invite further consideration.

I have worked through the question of whether we can have an encounter with the other in literature throughout this thesis not simply to justify the application of Levinas's work to literary study but because the other itself haunts me, as a reader of literature. It is the ethical demand of the text and my intuitive understanding that reading a literary text somehow creates an experience that goes

beyond my understanding or knowledge but that, at the same time, confirms my self and subjectivity that pushes me both towards literature and does not allow me to rest easy with my understanding or intuition. I must continue to reread and question, to open dialogues and maintain distance, to reposition myself and place my horizon up for challenge. The sense of being haunted, the responsibility toward the other is that which both draws me to reading and rereading literature but which also continually stops me in my tracks and perhaps means that I will keep returning to both the question of the thesis and to literature like the waves lapping at the shore.

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