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Ethical Criticism, Semioethics and the Sketch of a Levinasian Orientation

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits ethical criticism from a semiotic perspective informed by Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. It first surveys the development of ethical criticism, considering both its contributions to literary studies and the challenges associated with the incorporation of ethics into literary interpretation. It then reviews the ethics of reading, relevant philosophical developments, and Levinas's contribution to ethical thought, with particular attention to his conception of ethics as first philosophy. Against this background, the paper explores a possible semioethical orientation under a Levinasian rubric for addressing ethical and philosophical dilemmas in literary works. Several key terms are introduced and illustrated through selected literary works and existing Levinasian readings to demonstrate how a Levinas-informed semioethical practice can inform and reconfigure literary interpretation. The paper argues that Levinas's conception of ethics as first philosophy can (de)familiarize the "alien" character of ethical criticism identified by G. G. Harpham and provide a basis for reconsidering the relationship between ethics, semiotics, and literary interpretation. In this sense, a Levinasian approach opens a space for thinking about ethical semiotics as a way of reorienting ethical sensibility in acts of criticism.

KEYWORDS

alterity,
ethical criticism,
Levinas,
literary theory,
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> A sign is given from one to the other before the constitution of any system of signs, any common place formed by culture and sites, a sign given from null site to null site. The fact that a sign, exterior to the system of evidences, comes into proximity while remaining transcendent, is the very essence of language prior to every particular language.
>
> —EMMANUEL LEVINAS, "Language and Proximity"

1. Introduction

Ethical criticism is by far one of the most significant, challenging and misunderstood discourses in classical as well as current literary and critical debates. In Wayne Booth's view, ethical criticism has always been common, yet it is "the most difficult of all critical modes" (Booth, 1998, p. 19). It has been years since Geoffrey Galt Harpham expressed that ethical criticism is an "alien discourse" (Harpham, 1999, p. ix) and it has, to some extent, remained so after about three decades. Ethical treatments of literary works can be critically analyzed, even guiltily condemned and destabilized, as its adversaries such as aestheticists have done. It goes without saying that all "ethical" theories – and all theories in general – have, in one way or another, shortcomings and pitfalls; theoretical perfection is a dream that never comes true. Ever since the publication of Booth's, Martha Nussbaum's, Joseph Hillis Miller's, Tobin Siebers's and others' ethically attuned literary theories, numerous essays and monographs have been written and published on their works to highlight their problematic theses and support or modify them. Ethics remains both a popular and a challenging and risky orientation in literary theory and criticism, even though it has obliquely or directly been in tune for centuries in the forms of moral and didactic judgements.

With all those challenges and rejections within this field of inquiry, ethical studies/readings and critical approaches to ethics and literature keep showing up in prominent literary journals. Their recent treatments are sometimes unsystematic, outlandish and at times highly abstract, making them even opener to debate in terms of their theoretical frameworks and outlines. A critic like Booth was more inclined to the matter of rhetoric, and perhaps more practical in his ethical theory, especially having in mind his more popular books *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* and *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (which specifically highlighted narrative ethics and rhetoric). Other critics such as Miller (in his *The Ethics of Reading and Versions of Pygmalion*) or Robert Eaglestone (in his *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*) were somehow more (anti)theoretical. Nonetheless, they all more or less share the same problem of overindulgence in one of these two extremes: they either pushed too far into theory or riskily receded to pragmatics, seldom uniting the two.

This paper is an attempt to set the semiotic scene and bring some ethical instances into focus. There is no systematic semioethical framework that brings Levinas into dialogue with semioethics in ethical criticism, although there have been critics who have tried to use Levinas's phenomenological vocabulary in their critical practices in recent years. There is thus a need to analyze these instances and develop a systematic framework. The aim of this article is to produce a possible Levinasian framework which is addressed by ethical terminologies in what can possibly be called a Levinasian semioethics. The significance of this undertaking lies in the fact that it can yield a clearer thematic and semiotic approach to literary works in the field of ethical criticism, helping researchers and students read poems, dramatic works, and fiction with a more recognizable semiotic vocabulary. This study also sets the stage for further research into the complex Levinasian ideas and the way they can be addressed and discussed in literary works from semiotic perspective, phenomenological perspective and beyond.

The next section will define literary criticism in general and ethical criticism as the "alien" subcategory of literary criticism. Then a brief survey of a number of the most prominent and

mainstream ethical theories will be presented. This overview also addresses and highlights the recent fusion of literary criticism and continental philosophy. I will then introduce semioethics and its recent debates. The remainder of the essay will discuss Levinas and semiotics, striving to sketch a semioethical terminology and trace it in a number of literary works and some recent Levinasian readings. While I will try to provide the reader with a semioethics delineated along with Levinas, I will also stay cautious about this outrageous "risk" in a Levinasian realm; it will be "antithetical to certainty," as Levinas would note, and a "gratuity to sacrifice" (Levinas, 1991, p. 120). Although Levinas stood against what he called reductive "thematizations," yet any semiotic attempt, as Alexander Kozin (2005) suggests, ineluctably falls into this category (pp. 245–246). We need to present a thematization that can paradoxically highlight and neutralize thematizations, as approximate and committed as possible to Levinas's theory-resistant thought. We cannot help being reductive as it is a quality embedded in the fabrics of language; the moment we begin to speak or write, we partially betray everything. Yet, to borrow from Levinas again, "a fine risk is always something to be taken in philosophy" (Levinas, 1991, p. 20). Following him, we will also witness and expose ourselves to "a fine risk" in literary criticism as well, hoping that ethical criticism can possibly be exonerated and saved through an attempt to open new theoretical and critical pathways. [1]

2. Literary Criticism: An Ethical Activity?

Before embarking upon a brief survey of prominent ethical critics, it is pertinent to remind the reader of what literary criticism in general and ethical criticism in particular are all about. Literary criticism, according to Richard Dutton's (1984) classic definition, is an attempt to understand and appreciate a work of art (p. 7). Charles Bressler (1994), while reminding us of Matthew Arnold's definition of literary criticism, also defines it as follows:

> Matthew Arnold, a nineteenth-century literary critic, describes literary criticism as "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that has been known and thought in the world." Implicit in this definition is that *literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to study, analyze, interpret, and evaluate a work of art*. (p. 3; emphasis added)

There is thus a certain measure of "otherness" in any work of art that needs to be eased or (ideally) eliminated in favor of clarity, comprehension and sameness; critics usually think they have achieved a comprehensive equilibrium with the literary work or artwork they write about, a sameness with what seems to them an "other" at first glance. This also reminds us of the discipline known among philosophers as "hermeneutics" which coincided with the rise of Enlightenment. But prior to that, this suggests that hermeneutics or criticism is an ethical activity before it is anything else in the sense that it is an encounter with what defies our perception and understanding in many ways and whose complexities can never be dealt with completely. It is initially the critic's ethical responsibility to welcome it and establish a perpetual dialogue with it. The ethical critic usually tries to open paths to maintain dialogues with the literary texts rather than enclosing them with senses of finality and closure.

What is ethics and what is ethical criticism? Ethics should first be distinguished from morality/morals: the former is the framework in which the latter can emerge as rules. According to Harpham (2001),

[1] The whole of Levinas's philosophy traces, in fact, such paradoxical practice. But he finds the meaning of ethics precisely in these often-sublime paradoxes: for instance, the other both offers himself in his gross destitution and simultaneously evades any totalizing violence or service. Levinas votes for openness to these paradoxes and cases of otherness.

> "[e]thics is a way of putting things in which a given concept or term is set in relation to another concept or term in such a way that each exerts pressure on the other… such oppositions become 'ethical' when they are seen to constitute a relation of 'otherness' in which the two terms are defined in mutual resistance" (p. 371).

Harpham (2001) goes on to point out the significance of "ought" in ethical discourse: "it is an imperative, a form of urging that recognizes that the issue is not pre-decided, for one is free not to follow it" (p. 371). As if expanding this "ought," Marshall Gregory (1998) defines ethical criticism as "a theory of 'oughtness' about how to live and a line of reasoning about how to achieve life's different 'goods'" (p. 199). Somehow resonating Martha Nussbaum (2011) with slightly different concerns, Gilbert Plumer in a conference points out that ethical criticism is "an approach to literary studies that holds that reading certain carefully selected novels can make us ethically better people, e.g., by stimulating our sympathetic imagination" (p. 1). Eaglestone (2010) defines ethical criticism from yet another perspective, arguing that it "does not refer to a school or critical approach, but rather to an upsurge of interest in the relationship between ethics, literature, criticism, and theory since the late 1990s, often called the 'turn to ethics'" (p. 1). According to him, ethical criticism is an orientation rather than a systematic theory or approach.

How did ethical theories come to vogue in the final decades of the preceding century? Although we can trace ethical and moral criticism back to Neoclassicism, Samuel Johnson and the cult of "didacticism" – even more, we can go back to ancient times, to Plato and Aristotle – ethical criticism began to emerge as an independent critical practice in the second half of the twentieth century, after scholars such as Miller (1987), Booth (1988), Siebers (1988) and Nussbaum (1992) published their books on the subject. Miller emphasized the "otherness" of literary texts and annulled any interpretive closure. For him, (ethical) criticism is an ongoing artistic and ethical commitment to texts. Booth discussed the value of literary works as addressed by their ethical merits; the critic must thereby discern, describe and evaluate those ethical merits. In his idea, literature is inescapably bound to ethics and moral values. Therefore, the more a literary work (rhetorically) highlights the morals and ideal images of life, the greater that work is. Nussbaum took the same route and traced various issues in a number of anthologized writers such as Henry James. She tried to study the way moral challenges and intricacies set the background of literary works. For Nussbaum, critical interpretations must delve into ethical inquiries and judgements through what she calls, among her other coinages, "imaginative sympathy." Such inquiries and judgements build up the canon of "great literature," and link literature to our being-in-the-world. Tobin Siebers's route in his *The Ethics of Criticism* was a bit different, though its basic tenets were the same in studying the intersections of literature and the morals. For Siebers, the very significance of criticism and critical choices is ethical and bound to ethics. In his idea, ethical criticism is the intermediary between literature and human life, what gives meaning and value to both. Siebers discussed different strands of critical inquiry – Foucauldian power studies, Lukacs's Marxist approaches to the Capital, historical-biographical approaches, etc. – and tried to highlight their ethical aspects. According to Siebers's more general and inclusive theses, ethical criticism is an umbrella term which gathers all acts of criticism under its flag.

Another theoretician and critic, Eaglestone, directly works within the field of literature and philosophy, bringing Levinas into dialogue with literary theory and criticism as early as the late-1990s. In his seminal book *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (1997), he traces the problems he sees in critics such as Nussbaum and Miller. He highlights their theoretical ideas, their pros and cons, and goes on to suggest that Levinas's philosophy can help critics with another more rigorous (anti)theory. His study of Levinas is admirable and points to a host of issues a Levinasian ethical orientation can yield. The problem with his book, I think, is its hostility toward any kind of exemplification, theory or framework, leading the reader to nothing in particular but "reducing le dit to le dire" in order to discern (textual) "ruptures" and hear the echo of "the other." Although one

can readily sympathize with Eaglestone, his venture can look abstract and vague for critics. Eaglestone pays considerable tribute to Levinas's evasive thought and his book yields an equally evasive ethical (anti)theory of reading. Yet there are ways to reduce his ideas a little so that we can have a clearer path ahead of us; I will discuss how to clarify it through semiotics in the penultimate section of this essay.

It goes without saying, after all, that these books and their rallying cry for an ethics of criticism or ethical criticism were not uncritically received in academia. The main attack came from one of their most serious antagonists: aestheticists. Aestheticists are those who vote for the autonomy of a literary work, regardless of its moral merits or defects. They either follow and upgrade "new criticism" in disregarding any value other than the art's autonomy – thereby isolating art, i.e. art for art's sake – or are simply the zealous guardians of aesthetic values of art without necessarily neutralizing its moral values. Chief among these figures is Richard Posner, who attacked ethical criticism and was the main spokesperson of aestheticists in relevant seminars.

3. Some Aesthetic Challenges and Possible (Levinasian) Responses

The central point in recent controversies about ethical and aesthetic criticism, it seems, is that ethical critics usually deal with irrelevant "judgments" and "good or evil consequences" embedded in literary works as their "end." Marshal Gregory (1998) has summarized these attacks:

> Ethical critics are just censors in sheep's clothing who want to tell artists what they can write and readers what they can read… think it is literature's job to teach moral lessons… are narrow-minded, doctrinaire moralists… naively believe that reading canonical literature automatically elevates readers' morality… are either sexual prudes or religious fundamentalists… are intellectual guerrillas, both anti-philosophical and anti-theoretical… willfully ignore the wisdom of Henry James's dictum that "questions of art are questions [. . .] of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair." (pp. 216–217)

One of the most salient aspects of Levinas's ethics, however, can evade these prevalent critiques through which aestheticists have usually challenged ethical critics. If we follow Levinas, we have little concern for "judging" a work for its ethical merits or moral defects; we never look for canonizing a work for its ethical merits or de-canonizing it for its moral defects. Levinasian readers and critics usually embark upon a "meta-ethical" study of some sort, in which they expose us to (a) an ethics of reading as an ongoing critical encounter and responsibility – a metaphysical exposure, outside the imaginative world of the artwork, which tries to open dialogues with the text disinterestedly – and (b) an ethical dwelling – more importantly an metaphysical dwelling within that fictional world in order to study its (ethical) metaphysics, which differs from Nussbaum's imaginative sympathy in the way it tries to extract otherness rather than synchronization: there is an exposure to the way the textual world is bodied forth as the strange shadow of the real world which can contain and extend its qualities and effects, the way Levinas himself would see the artwork in his famous essay "Reality and Its Shadow" (Levinas, 1987, pp. 1–13). I will return to these two special features in the ultimate section of this essay.

Levinasian readings tend to study the ubiquity and inescapability of "ethics" in its own right and as a metaphysical question in its own right. Prior to caring about the usual judgments regarding the "goodness" or "badness" of a work of art or about the intentions of its author, Levinasian philosophy helps us acknowledge the work of art as the other or the text of the other, as the said within which lurks the saying begging to be heard. Any work of art can include an ethical concern in its heart a la what Levinas has called "ethics as first philosophy." The point lies prior to whether works of art represent (im)morality or maintain silence in that respect. Looked at from this perspective, almost

each and every reading can possibly entail ethical dimensions even when it aims to exclude ethics altogether precisely because we can face the other in art. Levinas's central thesis – ethics as first philosophy – can revolutionize ethical criticism because the very dominant of a literary/critical reception changes into ethics as it first and foremost deals with, to borrow from Edith Wyschogrod (1974), an "ethical metaphysics" (pp. 11, 56–57). [2]

I here briefly address two points that Posner (1997) mentions in his papers against ethical criticism. Firstly, he thinks that ethical critics are usually "put off by morally offensive views encountered in literature" (p. 2). It is true that some critics dispel "immoralities," yet I think this facet of their criticism highly depends on how we define "immorality," and Levinas at least did not propose any Kantian categorical imperative, nor did he directly define anything as immoral. Also, as Levinasian readings show, more recent ethical critics are not by any means "put off" by certain immoral or unethical scenes and behaviors; they usually try to read them in terms of otherness or relations entailing otherness and try to demonstrate the nature and roots of these immoralities and/or their consequences in these terms. Accordingly, Posner's criticism is not tenable as far as recent orientations are concerned.

Secondly, as another of Posner's (1997) attacks reads, "authors' moral qualities or opinions should not affect our valuations of their works" (p. 2). Levinasian critics usually work with the "text" in a scientific and "presentist" fashion and refuse to judge the authors, let alone being affected by their opinions—not least because it can be unfairly reductive, but more significantly because it is precisely un-Levinasian since one or two texts (or even the whole oeuvre) cannot reduce and thematize the author's alterity *as the other*. Authors' beliefs and opinions, if we are ever to *judge* and *thematize* them through their works, are by no means an aspect of Levinasian literary/critical studies.

The stylistic as well as rhetorical facets of Posner's critique against ethical criticism suggest that his work, while it is supposedly an attack on ethical criticism, is itself thoroughly ethical. The point in his essays against ethical criticism – I specifically have in mind his two seminal essays published in Philosophy and Literature journal – is that he somehow deconstructs the works of a number of ethical critics only to reconstruct them in more enlightened and informed readings – and, in effect, with less biased and reductive insights. He criticizes Nussbaum's reductive reading of *The Golden Bowl* which disregards its aesthetic features, but his own reading pays little attention to these aesthetic features, or if it does, it still has an ethical tint; his ideas, however render the "otherness" of the novel and its characters and events in an ethically sensible way that Nussbaum's account did not appreciate. And toward the final pages of his essay, he turns to James B. White's reading of Mansfield Park, but while he has little to say about the defects of this reading, his laconic critical paragraph only marks the legitimacy of White's attempt and contributes to, and extends, its awareness of "law." His seemingly alternative readings against ethical treatments, then, turn out to be extensions of them and he has little to say about what he cries as the so-called "aesthetic values" of an artwork.

Ethical criticism delineated in the present essay is a kind of "semioethics" issued from Levinas's "ethical metaphysics" (Wyschogrod, 1974, pp. 56–61). As it is obvious, it is not detached from aestheticism but can embrace it. There can be a marriage between aesthetics and ethics, as Eaglestone (2004) in an essay on this subject also proposes. An ethical theory thus informed by

[2] Perhaps Shakespeare is a notable exception. Critics who have approached Shakespeare through Levinas's philosophy have occasionally linked his works to Levinasian ethics, partly because of Levinas's own interest in Shakespeare. Sandor Goodhart, for instance, has suggested that *King Lear*'s plot resembles a staging of Levinasian philosophy, while Kent Lehnhof has argued that Cordelia's shadowy, ungraspable presence recalls Levinas's "Other," which ultimately "disincarnates the Divine." These Levinasian readings will be discussed later.

Levinas's thought can, I suggest, be relieving for ethical critics, yet it can also be a risky and reductive job. We must initially try to look at matters specifically from a Levinasian lens which sees ethics as the first and the superior perspective that, along with aesthetics, envelopes everything in itself (other perspectives, e.g. socio-political, rhetorical, Marxist, feminist, etc. can be subordinate to it). As Kozin (2005) argues in his admirable semiotic study of Levinas's thought, "[h]uman communication of the other kind differs from language because it is predicated not on reason but on ethics, that is, responsibility to the Other" (p. 241; emphasis added). Trying to think "beyond being" and to think "otherwise" – perhaps even other-wise, toward that which remains other to me and other than me – are what Levinas was after. This comes to its fullest demonstration in his second philosophical masterpiece, *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence* (1974). It contains a complete demolishment of the totalizing and confined towers of our thought, and a reconstruction of a terrain not vertically—lest it will be another totalitarian tower—but horizontally in order to set the scene and encompass the whole western philosophy. This is a reconstruction in terms of ethics that will lead to an alternative and novel perspective, a perspective defined and addressed by encounters with alterity, the notion of "ethics as first philosophy," and its basic sidelights: humanity, intersubjectivity, alterity and the other's call. In a broader sense, every essay also addresses others (other critics) in a responsible way. Posner is thus first and foremost in an ethical encounter with Booth and Nussbaum. What is his criticism after all if it is not a(n) (ethical) response in the field of critical theory? And what is ethics if it is not, to borrow from Stephen Ahern (2019), "[t]o be open to the pain, the joy, the fear… [as] an ethical imperative that must guide our critical practice" (p. 17)? Criticism in this way incipiently and essentially earns an ethical vitality which is almost impossible to dispel or profane.

Following Levinas, in fact, we should not simply impose a meaning or "signification" upon the text or any work of art, but try to liberate the text from signitive limitations; we try to capture moments of their pre-original ethical significations which are already there and give the text a sense of infinity. Through what Levinas introduced as a "reduction of the said to the hither side of the said," we sense the traces of what is already there in the text, before we can choose to impose a certain understanding on it. Such pre-originality marks the pre-cognitive qualities of ethical (non)significations, as Levinas had in mind, and it is the main focus of a semioethics addressed by Levinas. The subject does not closely impose but is an open receiver, of the idea of the infinite from the other and its dwelling in and out of the text and in the interstices.

4. Semioethics and Recent Debates

This distinction is also important in relation to my previous work. Earlier studies have examined particular Shakespearean texts through Levinasian concepts, including *Macbeth* (Bidgoli & Royanian, 2020), *King Lear* (Bidgoli, 2021), and Shakespearean scenes in relation to phenomenology (Bidgoli et al., 2022). The present essay does not seek to repeat those readings or to offer another single-play application of Levinas. Instead, those earlier analyses serve here, where relevant, as points of departure for a broader terminological proposal. The emphasis is therefore shifted from what Levinasian ethics can disclose about one text to how a set of semiotic phenomena can be identified across different literary situations.

While, as Booth (1998) correctly mentioned, we cannot reduce the landscape of ethical appraisals of a work "to a final list of kinds" (p. 359), yet a general schema can both free ethical (more precisely here and at this moment, Levinasian) readings from their current chaos and can be a starting point for a future, more detailed and more all-encompassing ethical literary/critical theory. In what follows, a few Levinasian landmarks which Levinas himself precisely utilized when he turned to a reading of a work of art will be presented. Secondly, I will provide the reader with a few more recent, more stylized terminologies; this second group of ethical "terms" and "factors" is broader and more critical, resulted from recent meditations on Levinas and literature and how a

possibly (Levinasian) semiotic-ethical literary criticism can function and thereby expand our ethical responses, opening literary works to alternative horizons. This study tries to add a semiotic tint into these theses to contribute to what counts as "semioethics." Yet we will witness that our practice, in certain senses that will be discussed, may, ineluctably, go beyond semiotics.

To begin with, Saussurean semiology (the European discipline) or Peircean semiotics (the American discipline) refers to the study of signs within societies and texts. This science sees the world as a complex network of interdependent signs and reads each word as a signifier that signifies something or leads to a (series of) signified(s). The term "semioethics" consists of two segments: "semio" – which is taken from the word "semiosis" – and "ethics" – which is, as far as this research is concerned, the study of intersubjectivity and the relation of the self and the other. Susan Petrilli (2014) defines it in the following way:

> … "semioethics" alludes to an approach to sign studies that is not purely descriptive with claims to neutrality, but rather extends beyond abstract logico-epistemological boundaries of sign processes to concentrate on problems of an axiological order, that is, on problems pertaining to values, to ethics and aesthetics and to ideology theory. (p. 8)

Petrilli (2014) as the forerunner of this field traces the tendency to normative, "ethical-pragmatic or valuative-operative" orientations of Charles S. Peirce's final years of research (p. 9). In a sense, Peirce was responsible for this subsequent turn to ethics, while he also paid tribute to the familiar notion of "otherness" in the semiotic process of signification. The triad Peirce defines – "immediate interpretant," "dynamic interpretant," "final interpretant" – can assist us in understanding a Levinasian orientation since "the said" in its Levinasian sense constitutes the two former notions, while the "final interpretant," even if reductively, has commonalities with "the saying." As Petrilli (2014) notes, the interpretant "concerns all possible responses to a sign in a potentially unlimited sequence of interpretants" while also alluding to the "signifying potential" (p. 10).

Levinas's "signifyingness of signification" may seem more radical and evasive – it refers to the signifyingness of language before it is shaped into uttered words or concepts; anything which is "said" is actually conceptualized and crystalized within language's order (ontology and epistemology), while "the saying" in Levinas's thought refers to the process of linguistic utterance as an ongoing dialogue with the other prior to forming concepts and thematizations. According to Levinas, the (pre)original function and condition of possibility of language is to acknowledge and speak to the other. Language is for the other, to be addressed by and address the other: the relationship with the other in Levinas's later thought actually happens through language. Even so, Peirce can offer promising potentials for a possible dialogue between semioethics and Levinas. A paradigm along this line of discussion can release semiotics from its dogmatism "by the capacity for listening and responsibility" (Petrilli, 2014, pp. 11–12; emphasis added). In this way, signs and semiotic relations do not merely produce ethical values; things turn upside down and it is ethics and the relation with alterity that give rise to this process of signification. This can lead us to a Levinasian realm where, to borrow from Wyschogrod (2005):, "[i]t is not the said, the language of ontology that is the ultimate source of signification, but the Saying that signifies prior to language and being, to essence and nomination" (p. 407). [3]

As it is the case in Levinas's philosophy, the idea is not to define normative ethics and moral rules about values and virtues such as goodness, evil, justice, etc.; prior to them, it is rather about how the perception of a subject is (de)formed by alterity and how the problem of knowledge reemerges when one shifts from ontology and epistemology to "ethics as first philosophy." The strange category of "alterity" as a negative effect perpetually haunts subjective totalities and it is

[3] For a discussion of ethical responsibility and listening with regard to Levinas's philosophy, see Hagi Kenaan (2008).

mostly within this negative order that a Levinasian semioethics can work. Alterity can perpetually haunt the semiotic processes and distort any semiotic comprehension that tries to pin down concepts and significations to certain signifieds or series of signifieds. Levinasian semioethics is an acknowledgement of this dynamicity in semiosis.

5. A Possible Levinasian Orientation in Semioethics

Levinasian semioethics would mainly address and study ethical implications that emerge through signs of strangeness and alterity, mostly in interpersonal relations, intersubjectivity and intersubjective signs and the complexities of semiotic processes within these categories. On a broad scale, this branch of semioethics studies the way the (non)concept of "alterity" can be traced in a textual conglomeration of Being, "self," "other" and their tripartite interrelations, from the perspective of a reader/interpretant who is called to encounter the text and navigate through the various perceptions it represents. Literature and literary writings are embedded with this complex network better than any other text; as Petrilli (2022) has written recently,

> Literary writing shows how the meaning of words is never definitive, closed, finalized, and never limited to our everyday needs. Writing and the literary word, is not restricted to the transmission of information, to the pragmatic functionality of the day. Exegesis is in continuous expansion, it renews the sense of the written text, "elevates it to the truth". This is writing that challenges and interrogates the parallelism established by Edmund Husserl between the noetic and the noematic. As though writing, poetics in its essence is dictated from the outside; writing beyond knowledge. (p. 60)

Literature's indifference to our everyday or scientific clarity and closedness yields the best background against which alterity and the other can emerge and beg for attention. Semioethically speaking, alterity as a negative effect interrupts and ruptures semiosis. With this hindsight, semioethics can also be preoccupied with the "nature," the "how" and the "why" of these semiotic complexities, obscurities, obstacles and failures.

5.1. Alterity Effect

Before moving in for the main terminological delineations, it is useful to clarify what I have occasionally called "alterity effect" throughout this article. Active in artistic, dramatic, poetic and narrative works, alterity effect is what gives negative suspense to a literary work in terms of cognitive and perceptual dynamics; ethics in a work of art actually depends on this sense of alterity. It is best sensed at the moments of dramatic/poetic/narrative ruptures or ambiguities. This enigmatic effect offers moments of unsettling obscurities, irreality or antireality, unexpectedness, undecidability and loss, giving a work of art ethical significance especially when these effects are merged with intersubjective rubrics. A salient example often seen in literary works is the misunderstanding that is present between two characters when one party tries to understand the motives and inner feelings and thoughts of another party. When Polonius famously tries to uncover Hamlet's feelings while reducing him to his own experiences and thoughts, the exchange between them is a classic instance of the way the alterity of the other constantly defies the subject's totality and understanding:

> Polonius: My lord, the queen would speak with you, and presently.
>
> Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
>
> Polonius: By th'mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or, like a whale?

Polonius. Very like a whale. (3.2.376–384)

Hamlet here is trying to say that the subject sees the other the way s/he wishes or is aligned to see, neutralizing an infinite array of feelings and thoughts in the other that constitutes his/her alterity. He had already warned Polonius that "You cannot, sir, take from me any thing that / I will more willingly part withal: except my life, except / my life, except my life" (2.2.218–220). Hamlet warns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern similarly throughout the play.

Alterity effect does not, however, imply a simple shortage of information or textual gap or misrepresentations. It keeps us on the edge; it usually posits us on the margins of knowability and unknowability (also see Bidgoli et al. 2022, pp. 36–38). Broadly speaking and on a general scale, each writer's aesthetics can offer a unique version of this effect. They either present it through blurred or even grotesque descriptions, deferrals of closure and disclosure, irrational and illogical incidents, etc. We can say that whenever there is an account about which characters cannot arrive at one final semiotic decision and semiosis is kept at the thresholds of various signifieds none of which can yield finality, we are within the parameters of alterity effect. This becomes specifically ethical when the unknowability is felt in interpersonal encounters. Some writers try to depict this strange dynamicity through delving into one or two characters and narrating from their points of view, leaving us the readers with the impressions we receive from other inhabitants of the art world via a specific person's sight and senses. In this case, characters other than those in focus remain precisely "other" to us as well as the central figures of the story.

Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a special case at hand. Bartleby is a more extreme example, and as Miller (1990, p. 172) has argued, he is so "other" to us that we can never make any sense of him. Melville partly achieves this effect through narrating from a first-person point of view (the lawyer) and more significantly via his remembrance of things past. Therefore, Bartleby as the other is both strange and unknowable and also an ungraspable temporal distance which cannot be captured (also see Bigagli [2010]). Another similar example can be traced in Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*, in which she mainly narrates from a perspective near to Newland Archer; as the critic Sara Kozloff (2001) contends, "we are never taken 'inside' either May or Ellen; everything we learn about them is filtered through Archer's knowledge" (p. 274).

As a 21st-century instance of alterity effect, a further example is J. P. Shanley's historical drama *Doubt: A Parable* (2005). Set in 1964, Shanley (2005) describes his play as a set-piece in which "The old ways were still dominant in behavior, dress, morality and worldview, but what had been organic expression had become a dead mask" (p. 6). It was a time when nothing, not even religious faith and conviction, could overthrow the sense of alterity brought forth by inscrutable and irresolvable doubts. This age of doubts, Shanley (2005, p. 7) writes, deprives modern human beings of their "resting place" of certainty or faith and delves them into doubt qua "infinity," forcing them "to learn to live with a full measure of uncertainty." The play opens with a sermon by the accused character, Father Flynn, who delivers a lecture on the significance of uncertainty and doubt, a view obviously rejected and ignored by most Catholic priests and nuns. The chief believer in certainty, Sister Aloysius, comes in the next scene, described as philosophically "watchful, reserved, unsentimental" (Shanley, 2005, p. 14). Her Achilles' heel is revealed to us, sharply distinguishing her from other doubtful characters such as Hamlet, when she says, "Art. Waste of time" (Shanley, 2005, p. 14), putting it aside as a tool to tackle alterity as Hamlet did with the play-within-the-play. And when she says, "children should think you see right through them" (Shanley, 2005, p. 18), she

clearly shows that she leaves no room for alterity in others. Two scenes later, she hears from Sister James that a Negro boy named Donald Muller went to Flynn's office and came back frightened, with smells of "alcohol on his breath" (Shanley, 2005, p. 25). This is the moment when doubt begins to solidify into certainty for Aloysius, and she spends the rest of the play trying in vain to convict Flynn of child molestation, with no clear proof but what she has heard from others, an idea that is never turned into a fact. The play even keeps the spectators on the edge by avoiding dramatic irony and maintaining uncertainty until it ends with Aloysius obviously lost in the conviction case and Flynn transferred to another school. The play ends with Aloysius irritably sobbing, "I have doubts! I have such doubts!" (Shanley, 2005, p. 52).

Doubt or an uncertainty that is never solidified into a semiotic certainty in this play is a significant case at hand. Many canonized works of literature usually embody various senses of alterity effect. Roland Barthes famously traced what he called "reality effect" in narratives, i.e. moments of nuanced and detailed descriptions which try to remain loyal to the meticulous reality of the fictional world. I think ever since the decline of realism and naturalism and the rise of modernism and postmodernism, a sense of enigma and obscurity replaced that reality effect. Especially in the postmodernist dramatic and narrative works, authors usually *welcome* otherness and strangeness as fundamental metaphysical elements of their fictional worlds. Modernists *lamented* such obscurities and irrationalities, but their postmodernist counterparts appear to *welcome and celebrate* them as a basic and underlying feature or quality of the world. This alterity effect keeps us on the verge of knowledge and simultaneously at a distance from totality. It defies any absolute closure. Great works of art which are entangled with this effect have been the most everlasting and polemical works both among people and in the world of academia. We would usually wish to demystify as it is a tendency, a propensity so integral to us that we seldom look for obvious, clear-cut and God-like omniscient descriptions provided by an Austen or a Tolstoy novel; we would better like to scrutinize a McEwan or Barnes or Auster or Vonnegut novel, and a Stoppard or Pinter or Shanley drama, themselves all full of ruptures and gaps, indicating alterity effect more systematically than most classical works.

Back to semiotics, one can, broadly speaking, suggest that when there is an attempt to force a signifier to a signified in order to give rise to a sign (here I am mostly having ethical and intersubjective signs in mind), there arises the totality of semiosis which tries to enclose the boundaries of signification through language and discourse. On the other hand, when this process of semiosis faces ruptures or deferrals or ambiguities (usually as a result of "alterity," "strangeness" or "uncanniness"), traces of "the saying" can be outlined and discussed as ethical interruptions; these signify, to borrow from the Levinas scholar John Llewelyn (1998, p. 211), "being called" by the other from beyond Being or text. For sure, there can never be any representation without a risk and a reduction, and as Llewelyn (1998) argues, "[s]emiosis, signification as such, remains the unreduced formal structure without which there could be no appearing" (p. 201). If this is the risk that representation demands, then we should perhaps follow an approach to study and analyze the way semiosis is ethically problematized. Asking questions, as Harpham (2001) contends, can be a more demanding and significant critical response than giving answers (p. 385). This is the moment when (ethical) criticism, or, more precisely, semioethics comes in handy. Ethics, in short, is not necessarily to be found in some magical sign signified through some sublimity (e.g. representation of a sublime love), but is sensed in the very overflowing of significations, as a few scholars suggest, in the moments of "erring" (Taylor, 1987, ch. 7), "inflection" (Ziarek, 1994) and "rupture" (Eaglestone, 1997). I suggest that these moments can be delineated more clearly through a few terminological (non)signs, namely silence and ambiguity, tropes and twists of language, signitive inadequacy or signitive imperfection. All of them seem to be more or less "ruptures" or "inflections" of language and semiosis, and they can mark ethical interruptions in different senses. This is where, following a Levinasian lead, "semioethics" can freshly be reintroduced.

As Amit Pinchevski (2005) points out, "[t]he 'knots' made in the discourse attempting to thematize the interruption, in a 'dialogue delayed by silences, failure or delirium' [Levinas 1991: 170] may then be taken themselves as traces of traces" (pp. 222–23). We should thus, semioethically speaking, in one sense look for the loss of signification – or for the non-significations – to celebrate "alterity," the traces of which are somehow dis-signified within the text. Semioethics addressed by Levinas's ethics does seek an *a priori* formulation of different encodings of semiosis, but it also studies the very interruption of this structuralist fashion – even though, in a strict sense, this very semioethical interruption of signitive signs itself be a kind of signitive fashion. Thus understood, semioethics acts as the locus of ethical "interruption" of semiosis, an interruption made, for instance, while the "signifier" is struggling to engulf its "signified" and embody an ultimate (set of) sign(s); or, in another sense, while the "signified" evades its "signifier." To borrow from Pinchevski (2005), while the said gains its signification through "closure," the saying as a pre-originality remains both unbegun and "open-ended" (p. 223)—it is thus anarchic even beyond any ontological senses of anarchy. This quality of open-endedness marks the traumatic ethical hauntings within the closure-seeking, paradigmatic system of semiosis.

5.2. Signitive Inadequacy and Imperfection

The suspension of signifiers or insufficiency of signifieds, and the inability of signifiers to attach themselves to a particular signified, especially while "intersubjectivity" is at stake: these are examples of what can be called "signitive inadequacy." The (non)signs of alterity (like, but not limited to, strangeness, obscurity, grotesqueness and sublimity) can evade semiosis. In reading works of art from an ethical perspective, we need to look for the (intersubjective) moments when the signifiers face this suspension, blocking the tendency to attach them to one or two (or even a group of) signifiers. The ghost of Hamlet's father, for instance, is a (non)phenomenon presumably coming from another realm; we face this difficulty here to attach this signifier to any fixed metaphorical or symbolic signified, e.g. concern for the borders of his country, for his wife and child, for a foreboding war, etc. Horatio's guesses during the first scene of the play are all signitive practices which turn out to be of little relevance, and the ghost can hardly be said to be after anything in particular, not even revenge precisely though the nearest signified is seemingly "justice." Yet even when Hamlet is told of the ghost's message, the ghost's mystery and alterity is not entirely vanquished as, for instance, he is "not allowed" to say more. Such moments in literature are moments of suspension of signifiers and slippage of signifieds.

David O'Hara's (2011) reading of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* is another case at hand which somehow entails this idea. From a semioethical perspective, we can say that Briony actually thematizes a blurred and vague signifier (the scene she sees from afar) which is too slippery to signify "rape" fully and absolutely. The *inadequacy* of evidences leads to Briony's false judgment, which in turn leads to breakups and deaths. In fact, I suggest that in that moment of the novel, McEwan presents a "signitive inadequacy" both for the reader as well as for Briony. Even the reader is ignorant of the true state of affairs until s/he comes to the ultimate section of the novel. And so, more than Briony, it is the reader here who is perpetually challenged by a sense of alterity which pervades the narrative. This gradual decoding of things not only maps out actual events and encounters in real life, but reveals the circular movement from ignorance to partial knowledge, where the Levinasian idea of infinity lies in the fact that this movement will not achieve full knowledge and the face slips its grasp and simultaneously calls for attention and responsibility.

Imperfection or incompleteness is similar to signitive inadequacies. It is usually felt when some characters in a literary work consciously or unconsciously refuse to use language to deliver further information. A classic case at hand is Melville's strange character Bartleby. Bartleby rarely uses language to speak about himself, and when he does, he reiterates seemingly nonsensical or repetitive formulations. Bartleby is the central force of strangeness in the story as his imperfect language keeps everything halfway in the air.

Another case is when a character gives incomplete or imperfect accounts of what seems a crucial and decisive part of another character's vision or destiny or fate. These accounts of otherness usually present a sense of "imperfect signifyingness" that begs for completion; we get an imperfect signifier which can attach itself to a host of signifieds through "thematizations" from the point of view of one character whose sense of knowledge is imperfect. This proves to be tragic in many literary works from the Renaissance to the postmodern period. Thematization inevitably yields reduction and the whole process has the potential to lead to a tragic disaster. These are moments of ethical dwelling and moral choice for characters. And if they acknowledge the ethics of alterity, they are usually open to any semiotic incompletion. But it usually happens that the imperfection is self-sufficiently and self-interestedly thematized by the hero or the leading character. As a classic example, when the Witches provide Macbeth with a number of obscure accounts of his future, he is already restless about the prophecy: "Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more" (1.3.70; emphasis added). And what we subsequently see is his own version of a thematized and usurped kingship which culminates in his ruin. Macbeth later attempts to complete the imperfect puzzle via his own incompatible bits, and the tragedy is inevitable; this has been recently discussed in terms of "time and the other" as Macbeth tries to thematize both (Bidgoli & Royanian, 2020). But the article does not refer to Hamlet as Macbeth's opposite. I suggest that Hamlet is a philosopher in nutshell who keeps the signifier (the Ghost, his uncle, his revenge project, etc.) suspended until the final moments of act five. Even when he has the chance to kill Claudius in his prayers, he thinks that this might signify not a revenge but a deliverance for his guilty uncle. Such signitive incompleteness, I think, pervades most Shakespearean tragedies: Shakespeare in general usually depicts his tragic heroes struggling against senses of knowability and unknowability, where both extremes result in tragic demise, disillusioning the (anti)hero in his final moments.

As a (post)modern example, one can refer to Julian Barnes's novel *The Sense of an Ending*, which introduces a similar modern version of a thematizer who always misses the point due to his imperfect perspective. Tony Webster, the main character, numerous times confronts such signitive imperfections, and each time is left with an incomplete signifier which hardly signifies anything. But each time he thematizes them in the worst way, attaching the suspended signifier to the most likely signified at his limited disposal. Until the end of the novel, he lives with his own made-up signs, and I think this is what drives his girlfriend Veronica away from him. She continually refers to Tony's misinterpretations after their breakup, and as her watchword, she consecutively tells Tony "you don't get it." She refers, I suggest, to the slippery signified which through its incompleteness evades Tony's semiotic trials, and this is what Tony cannot understand. Tony is probably a (post)modern loser who is trapped in a semiotic tragicality.

5.3. Silence and Ambiguity

How can we account for the moments of silence and ambiguity in literary works? These moments can be political—if we follow what the Marxist philosopher Pierre Macherey suggested in his book *A Theory of Literary Production*—as well as ethical. There are certainly ethical moments of silence when the signifier and the signified refuse to find expression in words. Or, if they find expression in words, they often do so very tersely and briefly. Examples of the former are abundant in, for instance, Ernest Hemingway and his followers; in this sense, his "iceberg theory" can functionally be read through a semioethical lens. As for the latter case, I wish to refer to Cordelia's silence during the first scene of *King Lear*.

In fact, Cordelia was supposed to provide the King with a more "opulent" signitive wordplay of love, as her sisters did, to win the more opulent share. But Cordelia, as Kent Lehnhof (2014) has argued in his Levinasian reading of the play, rather presents her face and not merely her words. She chooses silence to preserve her alterity, as Lehnhof suggests: "nothing" she answers her father. This key word can signify many ethical features with regard to the play, its tragicality, its (ethical) themes

and motifs, and its historical and situational significance as it was staged in front of James I. For one thing, Cordelia expresses that she cannot "heave" her (ethical) love from the depths of her heart to the tip of her tongue, and as Gayatri Spivak (2002) suggests, "to put love in the value-form—let me measure how much" is an altogether absurd undertaking for Cordelia (p. 20). Cordelia as such violently (but ethically) breaks the King's semiotic system through maintaining a timely silence and halting the signifier-signified presuppositions. Her "nothing" and lack of voice throughout the play are thus both suggestive of silence (some critics call this her "virtue") and ambiguity as semioethical signs of the other.

5.4. Tropes and Twists of Language

This last semioethical terminology offers a more structural or formal treatment of literary works. Here, one must look for the moments when language is deliberately or unconsciously bent or twisted through figurative and poetic features. These tropes and twists can be called "proliferation of signifieds" resulted from a deformation of signifiers. Proliferation of signifieds usually results from a kind of formal/structural manipulation of language or of dramatic/narrative features, leading to a multifariousness of voices in which the call of the other and alterity can barely be heard. These manipulations of language can be witnessed in works of literature, however, when an author speaks in an alternative or awkward or abnormal language, says little and means much or vice versa.

Dramatic irony – where a facet of alterity is revealed for the audience or reader, but the characters inside the world of the story are ignorant of that – comes to Shakespeare's aid as he depicts twists of language in *King Lear*. The Shakespearean outcast Tom of Bedlam – the disguised Edgar – appears to Lear, Kent and the Fool as "the stranger" who speaks in an awkward language. It is difficult to make sense of his utterances, a fact which can be interpreted as an ethical excess, "the unknowability of the other person," as James Kearney has argued in his essay on Edgar's character (2012). The Witches "anti-language" is another case at hand, where they utter surprisingly poetic and harmonic lines while at the same time twist their words in order to misdirect the mind of the receiver or interpretant or proliferate possible worlds in the future. Sometimes "tropes" and innuendos are deliberately used by poets and novelists in order to multiply the signifieds in labyrinths of proliferation, and this multiplication can, at times, highlight various alterity effects. What Levinas (1961) in *Totality and Infinity* calls "antilanguage" in the Witches of Macbeth can be understood in a similar fashion:

> The inverse of language is like a laughter that seeks to destroy language, a laughter infinitely reverberated where mystification interlocks in mystification without ever resting on a real speech, without ever commencing. The spectacle of the silent world of facts is bewitched: every phenomenon masks, mystifies ad infinitum, making actuality impossible. It is the situation created by those derisive beings communicating across a labyrinth of innuendos which Shakespeare and Goethe have appear in their scenes of sorcerers where speech is antilanguage and where to respond would be to cover oneself with ridicule. (pp. 91–92)

6. Conclusion

I started this essay with an introduction of ethical criticism and tried to link my discussion to this critical orientation. I discussed the earliest systematic accounts of ethical criticism which developed through the influential work of Miller, Booth, Siebers, Nussbaum, and Eaglestone. Then I referred to a few central critiques made against ethical criticism and tried to answer them from a Levinasian perspective. This led us to the jeopardized condition of this mode of criticism in current debates on theory and criticism. I suggested that we need to move this mode to more novel orientations in critical theory, namely semiotics. This combines semiotics and ethics to form a kind of "semio-ethics" which can provide us with alternative perspectives and terminologies to read literature. The

present proposal is intentionally modest: it does not claim to replace existing ethical criticism or to provide a closed method for reading literature. Rather, it offers a vocabulary through which certain recurring moments of semiotic instability may be noticed and discussed in ethical terms.

The main aim of this paper was to present the reader with a semioethical orientation addressed by Levinas's ethical philosophy. The proposed terminology can, of course, be evaluated and criticized, but I tried to introduce terminologies based on a Levinasian semioethical framework that can help students and critics study literary works. The terminologies were alterity effect, signitive inadequacy incompleteness or imperfection, silence and ambiguity and tropes/twists of language. I discussed each one separately and tried to show the rough application of each one to a few literary works or in a few critics' existing critical readings. And each notion can be seen, loosely speaking, as one way "alterity" is sensed in a literary work. Its principal contribution, therefore, is not a new ethical doctrine but an attempt to make Levinasian insights more operational at the level of literary signs, while retaining the irreducibility of alterity that makes those insights ethically significant.

The approach and arguments of this essay were definitely reductive, and I should say that nobody is safe when s/he turns to such a difficult thinker as Levinas, who so grossly evades all restrictions and never offers any framework in his philosophy. But "a fine risk," as Levinas confessed, is always necessary especially when we are dealing with texts and linguistic materials. This is an undeniable fact and Levinas himself could not fully evade reduction as it is built into the very nature and fabric of language and textuality. But I think this orientation can complement ethical criticism and make it a more hopeful critical practice. We should not forget that ethical criticism is still an "alien discourse" for many critics and theoreticians and needs further research and theoretical as well as practical attention.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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