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Responsible Responding: the ethics of a literary criticism of the Other

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requirements for the award of the degree of Master in English in
Literature and Modernity**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

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Derek Attridge's insight that, 'Coetzee's works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility towards the Other?' (Attridge 2005: *JM Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, xii), is conceptually rooted in Attridge's *tour de force* on the theory of literary invention, *The Singularity of Literature*. In it he spins a complex, nuanced and powerful idea about the nature of literature as event in which the notion of otherness, or *alterity*, plays a primordial part in the advent of the literary. In this thesis, I develop a critique of the way in which a particular strand of literary criticism, which has blossomed in the field of Coetzee Studies, appropriates the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in its creation of an ethics-based, theme-reliant interpretive framework. While Derek Attridge, Mike Marais and Stefan Helgesson have each contributed greatly to this critical outlook, which I abbreviate as the 'Levinasian Approach', I choose to focus my research on the work produced by Attridge.

My argument unfolds across two main sections. Section 1 contains a disquisition on pertinent aspects of Levinas's ethical philosophy to literary aesthetics (Chapter 1). Section 2 consists of two chapters where the first (Chapter 2) is a study of the interface of Levinasian ethics with Attridge's theory of literature in the event. There, I begin with an exposition of Attridge's theory of literature, exploring its conceptual bearing on Levinas's ethics. I make apparent the extent of his indebtedness to Levinas's ethics by closely examining how and

where, in the gestation of his theory, he borrows from Levinas's ethical writings to develop a discourse on the nature of literature. This I follow up with a look at the nodes of divergence, unveiling the ways in which Attridge departs from Levinasian conceptions in his deployment of Levinasian terms. In conscripting the pseudo-phenomenological and transcendental ethics developed by Levinas into a hermeneutics of aesthetic evaluation and literary judgment, Attridge's position diverges with undesirable consequence from Levinasian ethics.

In the second chapter of Section 2 (Chapter 3) I reveal how Attridge's method of textual analysis in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* goes against the grain of the theory of literary invention he elucidates in *The Singularity of Literature*. Furthermore, I argue that, in converting ethics into an applicative analytic for the audit of texts, with a view to exploring their literariness, he responds irresponsibly in Levinasian terms to Levinasian ethics. If his position is regarded as Levinasian, certain conceptual problems arise for his critical method. Should Levinas's ethics be regarded as the source of Attridge's notion of otherness and alterity, then Attridge's selective appropriation is methodologically at odds with the source of its possibility, with Levinasian ethics.

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Introduction

i) A preliminary word

This effort should be read as sounding a note of caution. In the recent past the nascent field of literary scholarship we may call ‘Coetzee studies’ has developed a methodological branch that relies on the ethics,¹ and its discourse, of the Jewish French philosopher-theologian, Emmanuel Levinas. About this ‘Levinasian approach’, Carrol Clarkson, in her book *Countervoices*, remains unconvinced by it. Her incredulity derives from the fact that its predominant focus is the operations of themes in any given novelistic universe which would seem to chafe against Levinas’s philosophical aversion to figure-grounded modes of seeing and reading (Clarkson, 2009a: 69). According to her reading of Levinas, this trope-heavy approach, which I will address in detail later on, is, to some extent, entropic. It makes use of Levinasian ideas in ways that do not fit with the claims that develop out of his ethical writings.² In the final pages of her contribution on the topic, she encourages those interested in pursuing the matter down a particular path. She says,

I would say that a discussion of a theme in a novel, of a fictionalized ‘staging’ of ideas – even if those ideas have to do with the ethical responsiveness to alterity, or the self-reflexive exploration of the ethics of representation – surely operates at the level of a discussion of the novel’s content, its ‘said’. This is why I think that even the most nuanced and insightful analysis of themes and motifs in a novel could only *superficially* be called a ‘Levinasian approach’ [my emphasis]. And this is the trouble: what *would* a literary aesthetics be (shall we say, a Levinasian *approach*) that did not

¹ I use the term ‘ethics’ as it is conceived, in its specialised sense, by Levinas.

² The reasons for this lack of ‘fit’ will begin to become apparent at a later stage in this introduction in the sections entitled *Ethical Language vs. Systematic Language*, *Art is Being’s ‘be-ing’*, and *A Note on Writing Ethics: to write beyond the verb ‘to be’*.

take into account the themes, motifs, images – loosely, the content of the work?

(Clarkson, 2009a: 70).

I would like to reformat this question Clarkson outlines in lines 5-7 in the form of a conditional interrogative: *if* the ‘Levinasian approach,’ which operates at the level of ‘the content of the work,’ is not properly Levinasian (and is so only ‘superficially’), *then* what would an authentic ‘Levinasian approach’ be? I do so for preparatory reasons, in response to what I perceive as a lack of in-depth explanation present, in the extant scholarship on Coetzee and Levinas, as to why an approach that takes the interpretation of themes as its critical imperative is not properly Levinasian. Clarkson outlines the reasons but with a cursory touch, since the concerns of her study lie with Coetzee’s ‘philosophy of writing’ and not with the conceptual mechanics of Levinas’s ethical project (Clarkson, 2009a: 2). While abstaining from answering the provocation set out in the ‘consequent’ of the above question, I will grapple with its ‘antecedent’. Hence, the horizon of my inquiry is an explanation of why this extant ‘Levinasian approach’ is not properly Levinasian.

Given that this theoretical inquiry involves a thorough-going exploration of Levinas’s philosophical (ethical and aesthetic) position, my study is not literary in the conventional sense of the word: my item of study is not a literary work. Rather, it is concerned with a way of reading, fashioned by a certain set of ideas, and its interface with Levinas’s ethics of responsibility. This ‘Levinasian approach’ can be found, in various guises and to a varying degree, in the book-length studies of three eminent critics, all Southern African by birth: Derek Attridge, Mike Marais and Stefan Helgesson. I, however, have chosen to centre my analysis on Attridge’s analysis for several reasons. Firstly, I am governed by the time and word limit of a dissertation undertaken in a coursework MA. Secondly, his work is, of the three, least thematically inclined; neither Marais nor Helgesson adopts a logic of evaluation that deviates from thematic focus (see footnotes). If Attridge’s trajectory is not properly (but

only superficially) Levinasian, then we can be certain, by a pragmatic sleight of hand, that the others are not either. I should qualify my claim by saying that it is something of a 'straw-man' argument, since Attridge nowhere claims to be following or developing a 'Levinasian approach'. Nevertheless, to assume for the moment that he is, is useful in demonstrating the conceptual difficulties that a Levinasian approach, desiring to accord with Levinasian ethics, must confront. If it is useful to distil the form of my argument, it is best understood as a *reductio ad absurdum*. In assuming that Attridge's theory and criticism are suitably Levinasian, a host of contradictions arise which suggest the unreasonableness of this claim.

The argument my thesis makes is divided into two main sections. Section 1 contains a disquisition on the pertinent aspects of Levinas's ethical philosophy to literary aesthetics (Chapter 1). Section 2 consists of two chapters where the first (Chapter 2) is a study of the interface of his ethics with Attridge's theory of literature in the event. There, I begin with an exposition of Attridge's theory of literature in the event teasing out the lines of connection and influence with Levinas's ethics (2.1). I will make apparent the amplitude of his indebtedness, by closely examining how and where, in the gestation of his theory, he borrows from Levinas's ethical writings to develop a discourse on the nature of literature (2.2). This I follow up with an exposition of the nodes of divergence, unveiling the ways in which Attridge departs from Levinasian conceptions in his deployment of Levinasian terms (2.3). In conscripting the pseudo-phenomenological and transcendental ethics developed by Levinas into a hermeneutics of aesthetic evaluation and literary judgment, Attridge's position diverges with undesirable consequence from Levinasian ethics. In the second chapter of Section 2 (Chapter 3) I reveal how Attridge's method of textual analysis in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* goes against the grain of the theory of literary invention he sketches out in *The Singularity of Literature* (3.1). Furthermore, in converting ethics into an applicative analytic for the audit of texts (3.2 and 3.3), with a view to exploring their literariness, in Levinasian

termshe responds irresponsibly to Levinasian ethics. Should his position be regarded as Levinasian, certain conceptual problems arise in the unfolding of his critical method. An incommensurability of fundamental principles marks the relation of his theory and the ethical language of Levinasian ethics. Should Levinas's ethics be regarded as the source of Attridge's notion of otherness, then Attridge's selective appropriation betrays the provenance of its possibility in Levinas's ethical schema.

Attridge figures ethics as a form of interpretation, thus reducing it to the systematic language of ontology.³ As will become evident later on, Levinas conceives the relationship between ontology and systematic language, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other, as incommensurable. This illustrates why extrinsic forms of criticism, those which attend to their object of analysis in terms of a certain conceptual paradigm, which seek to interpret the literary work on ethical terms, do not agree with, but violate, Levinas's writings on ethics. Not only does his project enter into a dispute with ethics, it also raises conflict with itself. In his theoretical engagement, in *The Singularity of Literature*, he erects a standard of reading which he does not follow in his literary critical analyses in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Hence, he figures ethics as the 'usable paradigm' his theory of literary invention wants to move away from. Despite his reproach of instrumental approaches to the study of literature, his method depends on an instrumental framework of literary appraisal. In *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, as evident in the first chapter, "Ethical Modernism", Attridge correlates Coetzee's modernist form with the ethical force of Levinas's *le dire*, and then reads the content of Coetzee's first three novels in terms of this 'ethical modernism' in order to register their ethical force. In light of this purposive appropriation, I will reveal that Attridge's project does not enact, with fidelity, the responsible responsiveness to alterity that

³ The terms I deploy here – 'ethics', 'systematic language' and 'ontology' – will accrue meaning in Section 1. Thus, the significance of the claim I make here will only register after the content of this section has been brought to bear on the analysis.

it demands of the performance of literature: that is, a responsible responding, as a non-instrumental engagement, with (con)-textual interlocutor(s).

ii) *A comment on Form: footnotes and layout*

I would like to think that the footnotes in my project hold greater discursive heft than would ordinarily be asked of scholarly citation. They perform a function that reaches beyond bearing information pertaining to the origin and recurrence of ideas presented in other published texts. Apart from taking on a referential role, they also exhibit a performative force on an aesthetic and argumentative level. What I mean by this is that their ways of appearing, together with their content, reinforce the chain of claims developed in the main body of text. In anticipation of the argument to come, it is of value to say now that Attridge does not extend the application of his concept of responsible responding, which demands a non-instrumental receptivity to the resonances of a literary text, to his reading of Levinas's philosophy (Clarkson, 2005: 372). In light of this, my footnotes are corrective and self-regarding: I wish to ensure that the discourse I create avoids the very 'mistakes' it points to and that it reveals how certain claims that Attridge reaches about literature via Levinas are not viable on the kind of reading he advocates for literary engagement. These footnotes can be classed according to four types: those which do explanatory work as to the nature of Attridge's argument and claims, those which tease links between Attridge, Marais and Helgesson, those which find conceptual confluences that extend beyond the purview of my immediate concerns, and those which point to nodes of conceptual and terminological homology between Attridge's theory of literature in the event and Levinas's ethics of responsibility.

The peculiar force and resonance which I attach to these footnotes arise on an optic level by contrasting with the appearance of the main text. The stylistic choices I make are inspired by

several sources. These include two of Derrida's publications, *Cinders* and *Parergon* where the arguments developed propositionally are supported by the texts' visual layouts. In *Cinders*, the cinders, those obscure statements which gesture to a forgotten and immemorial origin, are situated alongside, yet separately from, the animadversions, 'which in Latin means "observation," "perception," or "call to attention"' (Derrida, 1991: 26). They illumine that which has been concealed in the coming to presence of the animadversions. In *Parergon* the partially framed gaps that break the seamlessness of the text sensorily destabilise the boundaries of what is inside and outside the text. This ocular presentation supplements Derrida's breaking down of the distinction between the ergon and parergon (Derrida, 1987: 47-50). Derrida says, 'a parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon, the work done, the fact, the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside' (Derrida, 1987: 54). It is both extrinsic to its inside and intrinsic to its outside, an 'ill-detachable detachment' (Derrida, 1987: 59). In short, these fragments of blankness exhibit a synoptic logic – of the absent within the present, the outside within the inside – that has heuristic value to the purpose of my project, since I try to establish the conceptual genealogy of Attridge's theory of literature in the event. The last work which has shaped the aesthetic decisions I have made is Sébastien Marot's *Sub-Urbanism and the Art of Memory*. The bold colouration and assertive font size of the citations calls into question their subsidiary status. These features make it most difficult for the scanning eye to shirk the footnotes in the event of reading (Marot, 2003: 6-7).

Section 1

Chapter 1: The Impossible Fellowship of Ethics and Literary Criticism

1.1) Ethical Language vs. Systematic Language

1.1.a) The Schema of Levinas's ethics

Literature holds an ambivalent place within Levinas's oeuvre – for instance, he cites Dostoevsky with great frequency and alacrity in delineating his ethics (Levinas, 2001: 112, 158, 161, 167, 169). However, if one limits the sphere of one's interest to the claims and implications of his philosophical argument, if one pays due attention to how ethics works as a system of concepts, then an incompatibility between aesthetics and ethics, in Levinas, becomes apparent. On his view, Literature and its commentary are modalities of systematic language.⁴ The ethical relation, the locus of the approach of the Other, is non-phenomenal and non-conceptual. It is, to be more precise, pre-phenomenal and pre-conceptual; it is the transcendental condition of possibility of the sphere of the phenomenal and conceptual. It is not, according to Levinas, available to sensory perception nor available to epistemic procurement mediated by conceptual structures available to intentional consciousness. According to Levinas 'consciousness is always correlative with a theme, a present represented, a theme put before me, a being which is a phenomenon' (Levinas, 1998: 25). Thus, anything intelligible to consciousness is a theme and anything that is a theme is intelligible to consciousness. Furthermore, thematization, the becoming of the theme, is not only correlative with the activity of consciousness but is a function of the freedom of intentional consciousness which strives to determine the Other in the terms of the Same. According to this view, 'thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are

⁴ I explicate the sense in which I use 'systematic language' below.

inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other' (Levinas, 1969: 46).

The other as Other, however, signifies and attains presence without having recourse to the intentional structures of thematization. Thematization is not the condition of its presence, it has a non-phenomenal presence. The approach of the other is experienced only in the phenomenal order as a trace, an absence, a residue, 'of whom we see only the back parts, a posteriori' (Llewelyn, 1995: 109). Strictly speaking, it is not experienced at all if experience requires the workings of consciousness. Levinas says,

the Other alone eludes thematization. Thematization cannot serve to found thematization, for it supposes it to be already founded; it is the exercise of freedom sure of itself in its naïve spontaneity – whereas the presence of the Other is not equivalent to his thematization and consequently does not require this naïve and self-sure spontaneity (Levinas, 1969: 86).

Hence, the ethical relation is always in excess of that which is available to sensory and conceptual structures of perception and understanding. Should the Other be brought to rational account – described, understood, categorised, characterised, known – through the conscious, thinking *I*, with a centrifugal intentionality, it would be assimilated under the logos of Being, denied its very otherness, its alterity (Ponzio, 2008: 118). In this relational mode, governed by thematization, the possibilities of the Other are determined by the *res cogitans*, the 'cognitive subject' (Levinas, 1998: 26). Here, it signifies on the terms set by the *I* rather than on the terms of the Other.⁵

⁵ It is 'that which is the subject of thought' (OED, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/view/Entry/200321?rskey=Q7S7gd&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid, 31/01/13>).

In his essay, “Thematising”, Coetzee, in elucidating a phenomenology of the process of writing, exemplifies the ‘logic’ of thematization sketched by Levinas. According to Coetzee, who meditates on how ‘themes enter the process of writing’, ‘thematising’, which he also refers to as ‘conceptualizing’, involves the ordering and recuperating of the elements of the writing in progress in a moment of reflection (Coetzee, 1993: 289). He says,

first you give yourself to (or throw yourself) into the writing, and go where it takes you. Then you step back and ask yourself where you are, whether you really want to be there. This interrogation entails conceptualizing, and specifically thematising, what you have written (or what has been written out of you) (Coetzee, 1993: 289).

Here, he characterises writing as a vacillation between absorption in the process and reflection on its progress. It is this circuitous movement, this flexuous process of commencement and arrest, that he terms ‘thematising’, or ‘conceptualization’. Of salience for my purposes, is that it involves the bringing to view, and the understanding of, that which has gone before this moment of recuperation. Hence, thematising is noetic, implicated in the bestowal of phenomenality to that which is present, in the achievement of presence through phenomenality. Coetzee’s insight on the processual nature of the arrival of themes in writing coincides with the way in which Levinas deploys the notion of the theme in his ethical schema as the ‘present re-presented’.⁶

Returning to Levinasian ethics, the relation premised on thematization becomes aberrant, according to Levinas, should it sever ties with that which conditions its very possibility, namely the approach of the Other (Douglas, 2010: 119). The ethical relation, in Levinas’s partially phenomenological account of the human subject, is the primordial fact. It is the transcendental condition of humanity (Llewelyn, 2004: 137). Levinas conceives of this

⁶ **Thematization and the ramifications of Levinas’s sense of ‘theme’ on the interface of ethics and literary criticism will be examined in subsection 3.1.**

relation as a summons to responsibility – where responsibility is a radical responsiveness and non-deontological obligation prior to the possibility of debt and the freedom of decision – in the form of ‘speech’, ‘language’, ‘discourse’ and ‘signification’. It puts into question the autonomy of the autotelic, the self-maintaining, self (Robbins, 1999: 23), ‘when through the nakedness and destitution of his defenceless eyes, he forbids murder and paralyzes my impetuous freedom’ (Levinas, 1996: 16). In *Otherwise than Being* he alters this terminology of sheer exteriority to that of the ‘Saying,’ as alterity-within, in order to describe the assignation of the vocative call to responsibility that issues forth from the approach of the Other. He seeks emancipation from the linguistico-conceptual grammar of Western Philosophy, in which the tradition’s primary task is the ‘disclosure of being’ (Levinas, 1998: 29).

Of great importance to a study of Levinas vis-à-vis literary studies is that he does not construe the terms ‘speech’, ‘language’, ‘discourse’ and ‘signification’, ‘the Saying’, and ‘the Said’ as aspects and functions of a codified system of communication conveying propositional content among interlocutors. The nature of the relations of this utility-based kind of language, as differential units of a sign-system, is ruled by the verb ‘to be’ (by *essance*),⁷ in Totality. Totality is a mode of relation marshalled by the Same- the force that

⁷ There is a link to be made here between Derrida’s *différance* and Levinas’s *essance*, in which both thinkers alter the ordinary French spelling by replacing an ‘e’ with an ‘a.’ The function of each may be instructive to the way the other works in his theoretical context. I will not explore the relation here but will point to Levinas’s ethical endorsement of *différance*, and its slippage between verb and noun, action and entity, and signifier and signified. In “Wholly Otherwise” he alludes to the chiastic relation between ethical language and *différance*:

A system of signs is liberated, a language guided by no full meaning, signifiers without a signified. *Différance* is thus said by way of dissemination in which presence is deconstructed, a postponement without limits to be respected, which time is, or, more precisely, which pass-time itself is. A play in the interstices of Being where the centres of gravitation are not the same as those of the world. But are there centers? Is there

comprehends through neutralizing alterity (imponderable difference), cancelling singularity, assimilating difference into a nexus of meaning that subsumes difference through identification with the already established *I* (Levinas, 1987: 50). Levinas states that,

to understand the non-I access must be found through an entity, an abstract essence which is and is not. In it is dissolved the other's alterity. The foreign being, instead of maintaining itself in the inexpugnable fortress of its singularity, instead of facing, becomes a theme and an object (Levinas, 1987: 50).

The Same describes a state of affairs where all encounters with other, 'non-I' entities, are negotiated with an overcoming of difference by a process of imposition which contracts all else into the identities of the governing order of intelligibility through generalised structures of mediation such as universal categories and concepts. Given that both literature and literary criticism rely on *récit*, on narrative, are they not of the Same? Their currency is language – which unlocks and mediates images, motifs and themes – for the comprehending *I* in the economy of the Same.

In an interview Levinas puts forward a helpful explanation of alterity. It is a (non-)relation of 'dissymmetrical holy-ism' rather than 'symmetrical holism' (Llewelyn, 1995: 176). He says,

it should not be confused with that which has only a formal signification. Logically, within all multiplicity, *a* is the other of *b* and *b* is the other of *a*, but each remains what it is in the *ensemble* [my emphasis] formed by the multiplicity of terms which are formally united (Levinas, 2001: 115).

gravitation? Is there? Everything is otherwise if one can still speak of Being' (Levinas, 1991: 5).

To get to grips with what Derrida means by *différance*, and how it relates to speech and writing, may prove a fruitful from which to explore what Levinas means by *le dire*, the Saying, ethical language. At the risk of distraction, and dilution of the argument, I will not enter into such a discussion here.

Levinas's ethics is not a form of metaphysical holism – it does not hold unity as a primordial basis according to which its varied parts fit in an assemblage of differential and identificatory relations. The *OED* is instructive here: 'ensemble' as a noun, derives from the French *ensemble* and the Latin *insimul*, meaning 'together, at the same time'.⁸ The ethical relation is not one of complementarity and fusion; it is marked by a 'language', 'speech', 'discourse', and 'signification' of fission, non-reciprocity, asymmetry and non-identity that evades simultaneity in the time of history. Levinas remarks in a section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Metaphysics and Transcendence,"

History as a relationship between men ignores a position of the *I* before the other in which the other remains transcendent with respect to me. Though of myself I am not exterior with regard to history, I do find in the Other a point that is absolute with regard to history – not by amalgamating with the Other, but in *speaking* [my emphasis] with him. History is worked over by the ruptures of history, in which a judgment is borne upon it. When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history' (Levinas, 1969: 52).

The 'speech', the 'discourse', the 'expression', and the 'language' of the ethical relation, in which the approach of the Other 'signifies' is not determined by the continuity and vicissitudes of history but breaks its unity, its togetherness, its ensemble. For Levinas traditions of thought that conceive the human being and the interhuman rapport according to the strictures of the ensemble, which prefer 'to see in the human being a simple articulation or a simple aspect of a rational, ontological system', eschew its essential character (Levinas, 2001: 172).

⁸ OED,
http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/search?searchType=dictionary&q=ensemble&_searchBtn=Search, 18/12/12.

1.1.b) The Argot of Ethics: Speech, Expression, Language and Discourse

In *Totality and Infinity* the 'Speech' of the ethical relation is an ineluctable gesture of summons to responsibility for the destitution of the Other that disrupts the instrumental speech of Totality, the systematic language of conceptuality and identity. This 'Speech' is synonymous in *Totality and Infinity* with 'Expression' (Levinas, 1969: 199), 'Language' (Levinas, 1996: 92), and 'Discourse' (Levinas, 1969: 73), which should be distinguished from discourse as narrative (Levinas, 1969: 72).⁹ It is both the condition of possibility and the breaking up of the continuity of the relations of speech *qua* systematic language.¹⁰ It is a rupture in the coincidence of the formal-constitutive act of intentional consciousness and the object of intentional consciousness. Levinas says,

Speech cuts across vision. In knowledge or vision the object seen can indeed determine an act, but it is an act that in some way appropriates the "seen" to itself, integrates it into a world by endowing it with signification, and in the last analysis, constitutes it (Levinas, 1969: 195).

Speech, as the pre-locutionary inter-locution, of the Other with the denuded *I*, is a meta-categorical illocutionary act; it utters a command and plea beyond perception, determination and category. While it is meta-categorical it is not a meta-category; it is beyond the notion of genus and exceeds the horizon of universal law. It is outside of the horizon of perception, exterior to the plane of sight and knowledge. It is before temporal succession and beyond

⁹ For ease of reference I will be referring to these interchangeable terms as 'ethical language'.

¹⁰ The way in which I use the notion of 'systematic language' will gain greater clarity in the subsection entitled 'Systematic language vs. Ethical language'. For now, I will say that it is the language of information-exchange, conceptual mediation, intentionality and identity.

spatial geometric arrangement reliant on the constitutive intentionality of consciousness, the *ego cogito* (Critchley, 2009: 54). Hence, ethical language is before and beyond the ‘stuff’ of literature and exegesis, the language of the Same.

1.1.c) The Saying (Le dire) is within but not of the Said (Le dit)

In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas calls ethical language, the address of the Other, the saying (*le dire*), and systematic and instrumental language – the language of logos, narrative, reason – the said (*le dit*) (Atterton, 2005: 55). Unlike in *Totality and Infinity*, in his work after “Substitution” (1968), Levinas conceives the ethical relation as conditional of, incommensurate with, and *within* the order of Being rather than conditional, incommensurate and *exterior* to it. Wanting to dispense with the language of metaphysics that posits a “world behind the scenes” (Levinas, 1998: 5), Levinas turns to the terminology of the Saying, *le dire* (Peperzak, 1991:59). Here, the ‘Saying’ takes the place of ‘Language’, ‘Expression’, and ‘Discourse’ as ‘ethical language’ (Robbins, 1999: 144). The Saying is the original, conative address which makes possible a signs-based communication among interlocutors. It is unmediated exposure to the alterity of the Other - ‘*language*, interpreted not as the traffic of information but as contact’ (Levinas, 1996: 80). It signifies in a way that cannot be grasped by consciousness, as the ‘the striation of rays across the clarity of the exposable’ (Levinas, 1996: 81).

The distinction between the Saying, ‘ethical language’ and the Said, ‘systematic language’ is elucidated by Levinas in a study of the predicative statement of the form ‘subject-copula-predicate’. He claims that traditional accounts of language do not see the full depth and force of the verb ‘to be’ (Llewelyn, 1996: 180). In the conventional sense, predication, as the establishing of a relation between the subject and the object by the action of the verb, is a single adverbial or adjectival qualification. For instance, the only event of predication in the

statement ‘Socrates is a philosopher’ is the modification of ‘Socrates’ by the property ‘philosopher’. According to Levinas this kind of approach is premised on forgetfulness (Levinas, 1998: 23). It forgets that there is a two-fold predication involved in a predicative statement of the type aforementioned. ‘Being’ is an amphibology, neither wholly nominal nor verbal in function (Levinas, 1998: 38). Thus, it fails to acknowledge the amphibology of Being, the ambiguous nature of its grammatical function (Levinas, 1998: 42). The noun of a predicative statement is, in the way Levinas approaches it, verbal and the verb of a predicative statement is nominal. The conventional approach is unaware of this suppressed duality since fails to hear the reverberation of Being in identity (Levinas, 1998: 41). ‘Being’ (essence) fulfils the noun-function of designation and the ‘Be-ing’ (*essance*) of ‘Be-ing’ carries the verb-function of action. On this view, the subject component of the sentence earlier set out – ‘Socrates’ of ‘Socrates is a philosopher’ – signifies ‘Socrates Socratizes’ (Levinas, 1998: 41).¹¹ ‘Socrates’ is not only nominal but verbal too. Levinas delineates this verblity, the *how*, of Be-ing in terms of tautological propositions of the form ‘A is A’. He says,

already the tautological predication, A is A, in which an entity is both subject and predicate, does not only signify the inherence of A in itself or the fact that A possesses all the characteristics of A. A is A is to be understood also as “the sound resounds” or “the red reddens” – or as “A As.” (Levinas, 1998: 38).

Apart from the work of the copula in the predication of the sentence, an event of verblity, of action, has already occurred. That is, Being’s ‘be-ing’: Being’s active self-essencing, hypostasizing and self-reproduction (Levinas, 1998: 9). To take a step back for a moment, according to Levinas predication is the condition of possibility of monstration, the apparition

¹¹ Levinas does not use this specific example in the way that I do here in *Otherwise than Being*.

of essence and identity. He says, 'in predication the essence of the red, or the reddening as an essence, becomes audible for the first time' (Levinas, 1998: 39). Thus, the verbality that produces the predicative relation, as an event or identity, through the copula, is also always adverbial, modifying and highlighting Being's 'be-ing' (Levinas, 1998: 35).

This amphibology is conveyed in The Said (*le dit*), the order of kerygma, adequation, identity, designation, vision, light, appearance, and phenomenality governed by the operation of the verb 'to be' (Levinas, 1998: 39). Levinas says, 'it is through the already said that words, elements of a historically constituted vocabulary, will come to function as signs and acquire a usage, and bring about the proliferation of all the possibilities of vocabulary' (Levinas, 1998: 37). As Being's be-ing, it is not a passive container for the carriage of meaning but actively constitutes meaning. Levinas says, 'the said, the word, is not simply a sign of meaning, nor even only an expression of a meaning; the word at once proclaims and establishes an identification of *this with that* [my emphasis] in the already said (Levinas, 1998: 37).

However, the amphibology of 'Be-ing' (*essance*) does not saturate signification in its entirety. It fails to account for the primordial incumbency to the Other – *le dire*. According to Levinas, 'the saying... signifies prior to essence, prior to identification, on the hitherside of this amphibology' (Levinas, 1998: 46). The saying is immemorial, irrecoverable in the present, exceeding the retentive grasp of the memory-function of intentional consciousness.

The immemorial is the 'impossibility of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present, the insurmountable diachrony of time, a beyond the said' (Levinas, 1998: 38).

Hence, the force of signification of the Saying is not one with that of the signification of the Said. It is not a function of the verb 'to be', of identity (this as that), of a system of signs.

Thus, the signification of the Saying is not determined by predicative statements, the conjoining of which forms narrative, *récit* (Levinas, 1998: 46).

1.2) *Art is Being's 'be-ing'*

To recapitulate, the predicative movement of language stages the discretization of Being into the identities of being(s), while also housing 'the silent resonance of essence' itself (Levinas, 1998: 40). The latter, less overt, modality of language is staged in the apprehension of art. Art is a mode of Being in which Being shows itself in its be-ing (*essance*); it is a distillation of Being's be-ing, its self-enactment. Art thematizes Being's be-ing, exemplifying the movement, resonance and echo of Being in the Said (Levinas, 1998: 40). However, this does not preclude it as a function of the Said, from being the site for the disruption of the Said by the Saying, for the third type of signification undetermined by the verb 'to be'. Exegesis, probative discourse, or art explanation, on the other hand, cannot accommodate the Saying. By its very function, it (syllogistically) demonstrates the meaning and significance of art, always returning to the Said. Levinas says 'through art essence and temporality begin to resound with poetry or song' (Levinas, 1998: 40). Thus, art, and art appreciation, may not be in conflict with the Saying but to *post facto* analyse for this co-presence is to deny its eventuality.¹²

In his essay, "Reality and its Shadow," Levinas explicitly relinquishes the opportunity to investigate the relation of ethical language and art criticism. He ends his discussion with the coda, 'but we cannot here broach the 'logic' of the philosophical exegesis of art; that would demand a broadening of the intentionally limited perspective of this study' (Levinas, 1989: 143). In *Otherwise than Being*, however, he stretches his critique of art to include the critical practice of the evaluation of art. He turns his attention to art criticism, exegesis, and what he discerns as the call that art makes on its admirers and detractors to articulate interpretations,

¹² Derrida's analysis on the economy of restitution, visited below, supports this claim.

exegeses and analyses of its significations which bring it out of the private moment of subjective appreciation into the public world of discursive judgment (Levinas, 1998: 41). To his wit, art encourages, precipitates and inspires art commentary. Exegesis, as *récit*, is made up of narrative, the succession and coherence of predicative statements, the ‘stuff’ of the Said. Its horizons of signification are circumscribed by the verb ‘to be’; ‘the resonance of essence vibrates within the said of the exegesis’ (Levinas, 1998: 41). Criticism involves approximation, calculation and judgment- all facilities of the Said. It cannot operate independently of predication, of the order of phenomenality, essence and identity. It is a modality of philosophical discourse: it is of the ensemble, fitting together parts to make a coherent, unbroken unity. It is textual, premised on apophansis, the assemblage of predicative statements, and thus has ‘a “syllogical” or “syllogistic” structure’ within the Said (Peperzak, 1991: 52). However, the Saying escapes this jurisdiction. Interpretations that make propositional claims about the Saying in the reading of a work of literature cannot genuinely do so given that its presence escapes identification through conscious apprehension. As Robbins notes, ‘there is an incommensurability between the more originary level of Levinas’s ethical discourse and the discourse of literary criticism’ (Robbins, 1999: 39). The implication of this is that critical approaches which approximate elements of Levinasian ethics, those which signify on the hitherside of the verb ‘to be’, into an interpretive framework are not Levinasian on Levinasian terms.

1.3) *The Paradox of Thematization and the conceptual possibility of the 'Levinasian Approach'*

At this moment in the project, it would be fair to ask how Levinas, if systematic language does not signify on the same plane as ethical language, in his own writing, mobilises ethical language given that a condition of writing is *récit*? It is surprising that none of the Coetzee critics approximating Levinasian ethics into their work on Coetzee's fiction, make mention of this problem: not on how it ramifies on Levinas nor on their own writing projects. Neither Attridge, nor Helgesson consider its implications for the theoretical possibility and success of their projects. While Marais is aware of it, he does not explore how it impacts on his work. He says,

Coetzee's ongoing attempt to negotiate this representational double bind [where the writer is compelled to follow the invisible beyond history from his/her position within history and in the inescapable language of history] forms the subject-matter of much of this study. Representation, I argue throughout, inscribes an irreducible tension between the domain of history and the order of the other (Marais, 2009: xiii).

He acknowledges the resistance of alterity to re-presentation in language. However, he does not remark on how this tension influences the conceptual soundness of his own work. This is evident in the fact that he uses the schema of Levinas's ethics, with its conceptual freight, to interpret Coetzee's texts (Marais, 2009: xiv). For instance, he says

my purpose in these readings of Coetzee's novels is to relate the recurrent quest for the lost child to the metaphor of following the invisible: the child is a deeply self-

reflexive metaphor for the invisible (which, I have pointed out, is itself a trope). The writer writes in order to render visible what is invisible. As the parental metaphor connotes, s/he bears a parental responsibility for the child. S/he has no option but to try to find the child (Marais, 2009: xiv).

For reasons rendered above and for others that will be shared below, this figure-based interpretive gesture does not agree with ethics; it does not provide conditions propitious to the irruption of the ethical language into the domain of systematic language.

Given that there is an absence of such an endeavour in the extant critical conversation surrounding the intersection of Coetzee's fiction and Levinas's ethics, I set this field of inquiry against a conceptual and methodological quandary that threatens to undermine the successful writing of ethics on the part of Levinas. Furthermore, the tension it raises concerns the possibility of a coalescence of literary criticism and ethics. It must be confronted in an inquiry into whether a Levinasian literary criticism is, indeed, possible. As I shall show, this paradox reveals that, insofar as literary critical approaches are evaluative, they cannot but regulate ethical language in accord with an authoritative and overarching systematic language. If literary exegesis is hermeneutic, then it ensures the presence of systematic language over ethical language. Below I will articulate the nature of the paradox aforementioned, its place in the philosophical system of Levinasian ethics and how it bears problematically on literary critical trajectories.

In an interview conducted in 1989,¹³ Levinas is quizzed about the way in which he conceives the relationship between philosophy and literature. He responds,

¹³ Section 1.3 of Chapter 1 was originally part of a conference paper entitled 'Responsible Responding: the ethics of a literary criticism of the other' which I presented at the Symposium 'Recognising the Other: discourses of alterity in J.M. Coetzee and his Contexts' held in Giessen, Germany by Justus Liebig University in late October 2012.

in a certain sense one returns to the logos of reasoning reason once the very negation of its reign is thematized or enunciated or renounced....The logos has the ultimate power of the last word within the reflection on the very signification that escapes it, that is to say, within philosophy.... Moreover, there are doubtless situations in which the signification which acquires meaning absorbs the understanding and adjourns reflective thought. This would already be the definition of music, of literature, of the art of poetry, of that which sings. Except that in poetry and in music too, but after the fact, hermeneutics explicates the song of works that sing and discovers in them a message and folds the poem into the logos while depriving it of poetry (Levinas, 2001: 119).

Here, we find Levinas echoing his critique of art criticism furnished in *Otherwise than Being*. It also articulates the famous paradox that Derrida, in “Violence and Metaphysics,” finds central to the logic of Levinas’s method of exposition in *Totality and Infinity*. There Derrida displays a self-defeating methodological aspect of Levinas’s work, in which Levinas, through gesturing to the beyond of Being, in systematic language, assimilates ethical language into the order of that which it supposedly exceeds and disrupts, the Same. He says,

Infinity cannot be understood as Other except in the form of the in-finite. As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude... the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable. Perhaps Levinas calls us toward this unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond (tradition’s) Being and Logos. But it must not be possible either to think or state this call (Derrida 1978: 114).

To elaborate, to articulate ethics, the putting into question by the originary approach of the Other, constatively nullifies its performativity as ethical by constraining it in the ‘in-finite’ of ontology. To use systematic language (of ontology) to break with, and beyond it, is to remain

within it. To sum up, literary criticism cannot take place without 'the reign of reason and logos'. Should it be called upon, it effects the eclipsing of ethical language by systematic language and the indemnification of systematic language to the 'third' signification beyond the logos, undetermined by the verb 'to be'.

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1.4) A Note on Writing Ethics: To write beyond the verb 'to be'

1.4.a) Dis-assimilating ethical from systematic language

Up until this point we have seen that both Levinas's theorization of art in *Otherwise than Being* and the paradox of thematization bear negatively on the viability of a Levinasian literary criticism that is more than 'superficial'. I would like to call upon one more argument, however, which arouses scepticism regarding the possibility of a Levinasian criticism, present in Derrida's "At This Very Moment in This Text Here I Am." In it he suggests that the grammars, acts and circuits of reading and writing are of great importance to the question of the ethical. He thinks on the question posed in sub-section 1.3, as to how Levinas crafts an ethical language given that he cannot surmount systematic language, by placing great importance on Levinas's self-disruptive mode of narrative and exposition. In examining how Levinas makes use of the systematic language without reducing the Saying to the Said, he hones in on Levinas's ethic of writing which unravels itself in the moment of its declarations, saying and unsaying itself without rest in order to usher into the order of Being the ethical relation. This implies that it is in the event of reading, in the (sibylline) touch of his words, where one strains necessarily but impossibly to make 'rational sense of them that contact is made with ethical language; it is impossible to approach his work without first of all passing, already, by the re-treat of its inside, namely, the remarkable saying of the work' (Derrida, 1991: 39). In the final analysis, ethics is inseparable from the fragmented discourse that Levinas invokes.

The crucial point that Derrida makes about *Otherwise than Being* is that it does not make its case syllogistically. Instead, it works by performative iteration, what he calls ‘entracement,’ a grammar of self-disruption that (may) create conditions propitious for contact with an ethical sphere of signification beyond systematic language. Regarding the utterance, ‘*il aura obligé*’ (he will have obligated) he remarks,

to say ‘*il aura obligé*’ ...is not to designate, describe, define, show, etc., but, let us say, to entrace (entracer), otherwise said to perform within the intr(el)acement of a seriesure that obligation whose “he” will not have been the present subject but for which “I” hereby respond: Here I am, (I) come (Derrida, 1991: 37).

The presence of the ethical language, to which Levinas has recourse, depends on the disruption of systematic language rather than its (impossible) wholesale absence (Levinas, 1996: 92). This disruption involves a suspension of the displacement of the risk of signifying in excess of the Said. It thus retards Being’s on-going self-reproduction through predication. This narrative stupefaction depends on treating language otherwise, ‘of itself unbound’, as foreign, in a sense, to itself; ‘it is less a matter of exceeding that language than of treating it otherwise with its own possibilities’ (Derrida, 1991: 17). Levinas employs certain ‘strategic negotiations’ which estrange writing from its own self-recognition, writing-for-the-Other. For example, the locution, ‘Otherwise than Being or beyond essence’, suspends formal inclusion in the field of predication thereby signifying as part of a discourse, as a ‘chain of traces’ beyond verballity (Derrida, 1991: 18). To cite another example, Levinas’s oft declaimed, *me voici*, “here I am,” should not be assumed with Levinas in the subject position of the utterance; he presents it in quotation marks, “here I am”. In the sum total of its usage it designates no verifiably determinate subject. The question of who the *I* is remains always unconfirmed. This absence of deictic determinacy, of context, contributes to the rupture of unity, coherence and succession of the text, the textum, which forms narrative. In this

narrative disruption ethical language disturbs and ‘haunts’ the reign of systematic language. Here, ‘another text, the text of the other, arrives in silence with a more or less regular cadence, without ever appearing in its original language, to dislodge the language of translation, converting the version, and refolding it while folding it upon the very thing it pretended to import. *It diassimilates it* [my emphasis] (Derrida, 1991: 18). Later in the essay, Derrida deploys the metaphor of the ‘retied thread’ to mark the resumption of the Said after the disruption of the Saying (Derrida, 1991: 21). This is a recommencement that Levinas cannot consistently suspend given that his technology of writing is systematic language. Thus, his mode of writing, which Derrida calls ‘seriesure’, functions by an irrevocably incomplete ‘enchaining’ and ‘unchaining’ of the Saying by the Said (Derrida, 1991: 31).

1.4.b) *Impossible Response: the economy of restitution*

Derrida's reading of the strategic narrative negotiations of *Otherwise than Being*, in sub-section 1.4.a, bears weightily on the possibility of a Levinasian literary criticism. It asserts that ethics, ethical language, has an umbilical link to ontological *récit*, systematic language, which is always in the process of undermining its own unity and progress. After arriving at this juncture Derrida then wonders if this requires those examining or adopting ethics in writing are required to follow suit in their respective modes of writing. In other words, he asks what it means to respond justly in writing, ethically in a Levinasian sense, to Levinas's writing of *seriasure*, given that ethics is fundamentally asymmetrical. He says,

beyond any possible restitution [for restitution is an economic relation], there would be need for my gesture to operate without debt, in absolute ingratitude. The trap is that I then pay homage, the only possible homage, to his work (oeuvre), to what his work says of the Work (oeuvre): "The work thought to the end requires a radical generosity of the movement in which the Same goes toward the Other. Consequently, it requires an ingratitude from the other." (Derrida, 1991: 13).

The point that Derrida is getting at here is that it is impossible to respond to Levinas in writing, where response may include adaptation, according to the imperative of asymmetry of the ethical relation. To respond with ingratitude, as is demanded, would be to respond with a sense of gratitude (and would be to balk at accurate depiction of Levinas's ideas thus ensuring a non-Levinasian, or superficially Levinasian, response). To respond with gratitude would be to ignore the demand of Levinas thus showing gratitude by affirming his claim of the asymmetricality of ethics. The economy of restitution is, for writing, unassailable (Derrida, 1991: 14). Derrida says, 'if I restitute, if I restitute without fault, I am at fault. And

if I do not retribute...I risk the fault' (Derrida, 1991: 14). Should I respond without debt (gratitude) I am in debt and should I default (ingratitude) I am in debt. Derrida then muses over what it would take to respond to Levinas beyond the economy of restitution which signals betrayal. His solution does not lean favourably towards literary aesthetics, or exegesis - which traffics in themes, identities, motifs, concepts, etc – as a potential paradigm for this just response. He says,

there would have to be a writing that performs, but with a performative without present (who has ever defined such a performative?), one that would respond to his, a performative without a present event, a performative whose essence cannot be resumed as to presence..., a performative heretofore never described (Derrida, 1991: 35).

Since the business of exegesis is kerygmatic and eidetic – it evaluates, judges, interprets, associated, identifies, etc bringing its insights to view, to cognition and, thus, to presence – the nature of its performativity is anything but the kind Derrida thinks apposite. In fact, a demand for a kind of performativity without 'a present' would seem to require that exegesis recuse itself of its very essence, rendering it null and void. Since it cannot do so without ceasing to be what it is, it cannot but respond to Levinas's writing in ways that do not accord with the tenets of his ethics and its writing. To conclude here, theoretical engagement with the possibility of an authentic Levinasian literary criticism, abiding by its conceptual and formal demands in more than a superficial way, suggests the fundamental impossibility of such an undertaking.

Section 2

Chapter 2: Responsible Responding: the ethics of a literary criticism of the Other

2.1) Tracking the relation of Attridge's position to ethics

'And the response to such a work – the responsible response, the one that attempts to apprehend the other as other – is a performance of it that, while it inevitably strives to convert the other into the same, strives also to turn the same to be modified by the other' (Attridge, 2004a: 124).

In the theoretically-minded, *The Singularity of Literature*, and its applicative (theory-in-action) critical complement,¹ *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge develops and tests a theory of what literature is and how and when it exists. He thinks it an act-event of responsible responding, a responding towards the singularity of the Other. Put otherwise, he conceives literature qua literature as a movement of responsibility towards the other in the act-event of the production of the literary work. Throughout his theorizing, emphasis is placed on the importance of responding justly – where just response entails a welcome to the 'new' that does not simply and seamlessly repeat the 'old' - to the other as an act-event of writerly-readerly inventiveness. To elaborate, Attridge defines doing justice as such: 'what I wish to argue is that doing justice to a literary work as a literary work...means doing justice to its otherness; to whatever it is about it that challenges our preferences and preconceptions, that stretches our powers of thought and feeling, that resists the encompassing of our interpretive techniques [my emphasis]' (Attridge, 2004b: 654). Here,

¹ Attridge 'initially intended to write a book which combined discussions of Coetzee's writing with an argument about the literary' (Attridge, 2004a: 141). The discussions on Coetzee and the theory of literature in the event ended up in the separate volumes just mentioned.

‘doing justice’ is a way of engaging - an apperceptive exposure, as scrupulous attentiveness - towards the “linguistic and stylistic details” of the work that does not domesticate the *unfamiliar* under the already established codes of meaning and ‘interpretive techniques’ of the *familiar*. It is a take on justice based on a certain kind of textual encounter: it concerns the acknowledging of the unfamiliar as unfamiliar, that presence of the unfamiliar *auto kath auto* which baulks modes of reading enlisting a ‘singular reductive version of the text’ (Iddiols, 2009: 186). This conception will become increasingly pertinent as an aspect of Attridge’s thinking which depends on certain ‘logic’ of his theoretical strategy with which I shall take issue. Attridge violates it in two ways: he does not apply it to his reading of Levinas nor to his reading of Coetzee. By reading Attridge according to the terms of Levinas’s oeuvre, I wish to show the methodological and interpretive tenability of those thematic readings, which Clarkson remarks, are ‘often cast in Coetzee scholarship as the relation of self to other – or a relation to ‘alterity’, in the sense that Continental philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, uses the term’ (Clarkson, 2009a: 47).²

Moving on, Attridge acknowledges his theoretical debts to the works of certain thinkers on which he relies for the body of ideas that comprise the discursive base of his inquiry: Derrida,

² Clarkson, in a different way, takes this approach to task, arguing that it is at the level of the linguistic character of Coetzee’s works, rather than at the level of their content, that an engagement with alterity may be sought with less chance of conceptual misprision. Clarkson articulates the aporia facing an inquiry that puts Levinasian ethics and literary concerns into conversation. She says, ‘a leading preoccupation in much of Coetzee’s writing is this: how does one write about something else, but within the constraints of a recognisable language and idiom in which the words one chooses have been said before, thus dictating in advance what can be said?’ (Clarkson, 2009b: 107). Clarkson explores ‘the ways in which Coetzee himself confronts the difficulty of bringing meaningfully into linguistic range that which is not immediately recognisable or sayable in language’ (Clarkson, 2009b: 107). She claims that it is at the limits, the pressure points of language, in Coetzee’s fiction, that ethical considerations find a presence saying, ‘throughout his fiction, however, it is precisely in a contingent liminal zone of language, and along contested linguistic borderlines, that Coetzee sustains complex ethical enquiries’ (Clarkson, 2009b: 111). She concludes, ‘in Coetzee...it is the fragmentation of the language itself that has to become the focus of discussion’ (Clarkson, 2009b: 118).

and then Levinas, rest at the centre of his theoretical multiplex.³ In a version of his chapter on ethical modernism, published before *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, he remarks that ‘if there is an exemplary reader whose practice this essay is attempting to understand, it is Jacques Derrida’ (Attridge, 2004b: 654). Moreover, he explicitly states that his ‘appropriation of Levinas’s thought is extremely selective, and also that his own discussions of literature and art do not go in the same direction’ (Attridge, 2004a: 141). Hence, I cannot, given his already conceived knowledge of the limits and scope of his ideas, dismiss his work on the grounds of an unwilling failure of interpretational inaccuracy. Rather, I will use his writing to illustrate why extrinsic-ethical forms of criticism, which seek to interpret the literary work on ethical terms, do not accord with Levinas’s writings on ethics. Another of my goals is to make apparent the magnitude of his indebtedness, by closely examining how and where, in the gestation of his theory, he borrows from Levinas’s ethical writings to develop a discourse on the nature of literature. As a brief aside, he deploys certain aspects of ethics which suit the

³ Attridge remarks, in the appendix of *The Singularity of Literature*, that his greatest debt is to the thinking of Jacques Derrida. He says, ‘the greatest debt of which I am conscious is to the thought of Jacques Derrida, primarily in the form of his published writings but also as manifested in numerous lectures, panel discussions, exchanges of letters, and private conversations’ (Attridge, 2004a: 139). This is evident, in print, in Attridge’s recent book-length publication, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction’s Traces*. In it, an assemblage of discussions regarding Derrida’s contributions to ethics and literature constitute an argument for the exigency of a continued openness and engagement with Derrida’s body of work. In arguing so, Attridge extends his argument about literature, or the literary, as the inventive act-event of reading developed in *The Singularity of Literature*, ‘taking deconstruction to be a name for that inventive mode of reading’ (Attridge, 2011: 2). There are myriad instances, where Levinas on ethics crops up, but always in relation to Derrida’s dependence and departure from his initial positions. For instance in the chapter entitled “Posthumous Infidelity” Attridge investigates bits of *Totality and Infinity* in relation to Derrida’s response to it in ‘A Word of Welcome’ (Attridge, 2011: 102). In this chapter he presents a close engagement with Levinas’s thought, tracking the shifts that Levinas’s notion of justice undergoes from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being* (Attridge, 2011: 105-7). However, the impetus for this analysis is Derrida’s negotiation of Levinas in ‘A Word of Welcome’. This is significant for my purposes, indicating that Attridge’s Levinas is a Derridean Levinas: Attridge’s readings of Levinas are mediated by Derrida’s displacing reconfigurations of Levinas’s arguments. Attridge says, ‘I was also fascinated by Derrida’s rewriting of some of Levinas’s principal arguments – a perfect example of a reading responsible in its very lack of fidelity, which at the same time included an argument for understanding such perversions as necessary rather than contingent’ (Attridge, 2011: 13).

ends of his enterprise (I use the term ethics throughout this disquisition as it is regarded in Levinasian philosophical discourse). In light of this purposive appropriation I will reveal that Attridge's project fails to enact, with fidelity, the responsible responsivity to alterity that it demands of the performance of literature: that is, a responsible responding, as a non-instrumental engagement, with (con)-textual interlocutor(s).

My contention is that a contradiction opens up between his theorization of the other and the rendering of the Other in Levinas's ethical writings. While Attridge claims that an ethics of reading and writing is key to the staging of literature,⁴ in conscripting the pseudo-phenomenological and transcendental ethics developed by Levinas into a hermeneutics of aesthetic evaluation and literary judgment, his position is unfaithful to the ethical position with which it claims concordance. It makes of ethics a category of analysis of being. Attridge contends that a thematic criticism, which develops through the accretive gathering of figures and the recurrence of certain ideas through several discrete narrative iterations, does not agree with the thrust of a reading that does justice to the alterity of the other. Attridge, himself, offers a formulation of this principle-based reading, calling it "critical analysis", which 'operates by means of the application of rules under the aegis of philosophy' (Attridge, 2011: 29). However, in converting ethics into an applicative analytic for the audit of texts, with a view to exploring their literariness, he responds irresponsibly to Levinasian ethics on Levinasian terms. He transfigures ethical language, and its vocabulary of rapport, into an end-focussed tool of textual assessment. This draws ethics into the conceptual order of literary criticism, of exegesis, of the Said. In dislodging the emphasis from his theory and its critical application, to the encounter of the theory with its ethical underpinnings, a performative paradox arises at the centre of the method of Attridge's project.

⁴ Attridge states, 'the Ethics of the literary is less a matter of the exercise of a certain kind of effort on each reading than a disposition, a habit, a way of being in the world of words' (Attridge, 2004a: 130).

Not only does his project enter into a dispute with ethics, it also comes into agonistic contact with itself. Despite his reproach of instrumental approaches to the study of literature, his method depends on an instrumental framework of literary appraisal. He says, ‘an instrumental approach seeks not only to comprehend the text by relating it to known and fixed parameters and values but to generalize its uniqueness and transform its performativity into a static and therefore usable paradigm’ (Attridge, 2004a: 119). In his grasp ethics becomes the ‘usable paradigm’ his theory of literature abjures.

To reveal the lines of disputation I have sketched here, I will engage four key aspects of the aforementioned interface. The first illuminates the internal, structural ‘logic’ of Attridge’s theory of literature while revealing the influence of ethics on it. The second draws attention to the discrepancies of Attridge’s position on ethics to that developed by Levinas. The third explores the application of this theory of literature to Coetzee’s fiction through a manoeuvre I will be referring to as the ‘thematizing approach’. I will consider whether Attridge keeps to his promise made in *The Singularity of Literature* and avoids implementing a thematic literary criticism which disprizes the work of its alterity, singularity and inventiveness.

2.2) *Attridge's theory of Literature in the Event: the conjuncture of the Literary and the Ethical*

As a reminder, in this section I will critically negotiate Attridge's theory of the invention of literature with a view to illuminating the extent to which it co-opts the inter-disruptive relation of the Saying (*le dire*) and the Said (*le dit*).⁵ The dynamism of the (non-) relation of that which is unthinkable yet has a performative effect on the order of that which is thinkable, exemplified in Levinas's contemplations on ethics, is deployed by Attridge in the development of his ideas on artistic invention. This becomes apparent in his thrashing out of the claims his project ultimately advances. He says,

literature, experience of literary works, consistently *exceeds* the limits of *rational* accounting, what I offer is less a *logical* argument than a report and an *invitation*: a report on a certain living-through of the literary [my emphasis] (Attridge, 2004a: 3).

⁵ According to Levinas, 'being makes its apparition, shows itself, in the said' (Levinas, 1998: 43). The Saying is beyond but within, as a breaking-through of, the Said. The Saying is not determined within the Said; rather, it is the rupture of the Said. It is neither wholly extraneous to the Said nor wholly part of it. The codes and structures of systematic language suppress the Saying. Through the grammar of language as a sign system, the Said construes the Subject as subject-for-itself rather than a self in substitution, a self-for-the-other. Proximity,

as a responsibility for the other is the rupture of the Said. Saying is to catch sight of an extreme passivity... in the relationship with the other, and, paradoxically, in pure saying itself. The act of saying will turn out to have been introduced here from the start as the supreme passivity of exposure to another, which is responsibility for the free initiatives of the other (Levinas, 1998: 47).

This unmediated contact, as signification before sign system, Levinas terms exposure (Levinas, 1998: 48). Levinas remarks that 'Saying approaches the other by breaking through the noema involved in intentionality, turning inside out, 'like a cloak', consciousness which would have remained for itself even in its intentional aims' (Levinas, 1998: 48).

He states not long after, ‘literature does seem to be something more than the category or entity it is claimed to be’ (Attridge, 2004a: 5). In asseverating that literature overflows categorisation, the relation he begins to inscribe into his idiom structurally parallels the relation held by ethics and the order of ontology, of the Saying and the Said.⁶ Like ethics, the event of literature is not the sole preserve of rational reflection. And, like ethics, its incomprehensibility does not mean ineffectiveness. Rather, through its very resistance to understanding it signifies through and above the plane of signification of the logos, as a founding ‘invitation’.⁷

The fact that ethical language shapes Attridge’s vocabulary is confirmed in his remarks on the aim of his book, which he says is, ‘to hone in on what makes literature a *singular* phenomenon among all our experiences of language’ (Attridge, 2004a: 14). This is a conundrum he wishes to think through the question, ‘what is entailed in *responding* to *otherness*? [my emphasis]’ (Attridge, 2004a: 15). To reiterate, he asks, in a journal article published after both *The Singularity of Literature* and *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, “Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration”,

⁶ The Other is not encountered in the accusative case; it is not enveloped and integrated into the terms of intelligibility of the Same by a process of objectification. It resists any power to overcome it, to reduce its identity, its alterity. It is privy to an encounter void of the dominating and negating impulse of conceptualisation. It is unmediated acknowledgment, an awareness that is pre-conceptual, pre-thematic, pre-conscious, pre-cognitive, pre-categorical, and pre-lingual. It is ‘vocative’ in mood, a non-subsumptive beckoning towards an unmediated, particular Other as interlocutor (Levinas, 1996: 8).

⁷ Levinas says, ‘the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea. In it the distance between idea and ideatum is not equivalent to the distance that separates a mental act from its object in other representations....The intentionality that animates the idea of infinity is not comparable with any other; it aims at what it cannot embrace and is in this sense the infinite.... [Unlike in Totality] the alterity of the infinite is not cancelled, is not extinguished in the thought that thinks it. In thinking infinity the I from the first thinks more than it thinks. Infinity does not enter into the idea of infinity, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept’ (Levinas, 1987: 54).

what does it mean to ‘do *justice*’ to a work of art, to use a common phrase that has clear *ethical* implications? Or... to do justice to a work of literature? In the first place, it means doing justice, as we’ve seen, to the work’s *singularity, inventiveness, and alterity*, and this means finding some means to respond with an answering *singularity, inventiveness, and alterity* [my emphasis]’ (Attridge, 2005b: 28).

The salient ideas contained in these citations bear the distinct and formative trace of Levinas’s ethical idiom. To elaborate, ‘Singularity’, ‘responding’, ‘otherness’ and ‘alterity’ gather as a cohort of terms that undergird the idea of ethics *qua* ethical relation; that is, as a ‘singular’ ‘responding’ to the ‘alterity’ of the ‘Other’ which puts the *I* in question.⁸ The status of the non-phenomenal face of the Other in relation to the order of Being (Totality: closure, order, ordination), the known and that which is phenomenally recognisable, according to Levinas, is one of radical and inassimilable distance and incomprehension.⁹ Levinas remarks,

the putting into question of the Same by the Other is a summons to respond. The I is not simply conscious of this necessity to respond, as if it were a matter of an obligation or a duty about which a decision could be made; rather the I is, by its very position, responsibility through and through. And the structure of this responsibility will show how the Other (Autrui), in the face, challenges us from the greatest depth and the highest height – by opening the very dimension of elevation (Levinas, 1996: 17).

⁸ Levinas says, ‘for the ethical relation which subtends discourse is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question. This putting in question emanates from the other’ (Levinas, 1979: 195).

⁹ The Face is beyond the theoretical relation; it resists the subsumptive forces of constitutive intentionality. He remarks, ‘The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp’ (Levinas, 1979: 197).

The Other, in its singularity, resists the order of Being, both rupturing and founding the very possibility of consciousness, reason and systematic language. Set against this, it becomes evident that Attridge bestows (adequates and adds up¹⁰) his conception of literary production with the status that ‘alterity’ has in the specialised sense in which Levinas figures the term in his ethics. Attridge connects the singular nature of the experience of literature, within the multifarious experiences that language generates, with a response to otherness such that otherness takes the role of a necessary ground in the becoming of literature (as event). To recoup, Levinas affords the alterity of the ethical relation primacy in his conception of ethics and the formation of the Subject as ethical self. Attridge, in turn, grants primacy to otherness as the condition of possibility of literature. Thus, the dynamics shared between some of the important parts of Attridge’s theoretical program – singularity, responding and otherness – carry a sense continuous with the specialised significations in Levinas’s version of ethics. On this view, Attridge assembles his theory through a process of match-making or variable-exchange. He relieves ethical language from its *in situ* position in Levinas’s writing, inserting it into the ‘ensemble’ of ideas that make up his theory of literary invention which. This proves problematic given the charge of acquisitive violence Levinas lays against thematisation (adequation: idea-ideatum, presentation- representation, signifier-signified, noesis-noema, existence-existent, one-to-one correspondence) in Levinas’s oeuvre on ethics.¹¹

¹⁰ Levinas says ‘the relation between the Other and me, which dawns forth in his expression, issues neither in number nor in concept’ (Levinas, 1979: 194).

¹¹ The comportment of intentional consciousness, in which the act of consciousness envelopes the object of consciousness, is, according to Levinas, subsumptive of the Other in the Same. He says, ‘Consciousness as a conscious grasp is a possession of the Other by the Same; the I dominates the Other and is in a position to withdraw itself through an epoche of all engagement in being which it rediscovers as an intentional object, “bracketed” and entirely at its disposal’ (Levinas, 1996: 18).

In order to answer the central question of his study, ‘how is it possible to think anew?’ (Attridge, 2004a: 136), Attridge depends on a triad of terms which make possible the exploration of the structural relation between the recognisable form and content of the already established field of artistic and literary production, the ‘old, and that which is not contained by this aesthetic conjuncture yet comes to be a part of it through the reshaping and reconstituting effects of its very apart-ness, the ‘new’. His study is concerned with a structural relation between two states: ‘the nonexistence and the existence within a culture of a particular kind of entity’ (Attridge, 2004a: 18). This relation of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’, where the ‘new’ is absorbed into the ‘old’ in order that the ‘old’ becomes ‘new’ is explained through the notions of ‘singularity’, ‘alterity’ and ‘inventiveness’.¹² According to Attridge, literary inventiveness, as an act-event, in which the participants are the author, text and reader, consists in the transformative difference of singularity, as an ‘irruption of otherness, alterity into the cultural field’ (Attridge, 2004a: 136).¹³ Invention is an ‘engagement with potential alterity in the system’ (Attridge, 2004a: 42), that reverberates through an established cultural matrix. Its effects go beyond the created entity, to the cultural conditions of its emergence. Attridge remarks that, ‘what is invented is always ...singular’ (Attridge, 2004a: 20). The alterity of a work of art is not some quality or property that may be present to a greater or lesser degree; ‘it is indissociable from the work’s identity as a recognisable work

¹² Attridge’s theory seems to refurbish Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarisation (making the familiar strange, bringing the ‘strange’ to the ‘familiar’) which distinguishes literary from non-literary discourse. Shklovsky says, ‘art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’ (Shklovsky, 1965: 12). This suggests that Attridge configures a version of literary formalism, a non-hermetic formalism in the very least.

¹³ Attridge defines the literary work as ‘an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or act-events) of writing that brought it into a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read’ (Attridge, 2004a: 60).

(through all its mutations)’ (Attridge, 2005b: 20). This displays his transference of the vernacular of ethics into terms useful to his project of erecting a theory of literature. He says, ‘what the inventor finds in the cultural field is not just material but gaps in the material, strains and tensions that suggest the pressure of the other, of the hitherto unthought and unthinkable’ (Attridge, 1999: 23). Hence, the encounter with singularity involves an impossible apprehension of otherness in the moment of inventiveness.¹⁴ Levinasian ethics provides, to a degree, the amalgam of terms, significations and associative concepts through which he thinks literature.

What Attridge means by act-event is best thought through his concept of ‘performance’. It is the site where the singularity, alterity, and inventiveness of the work – as an exploitation of the multiple powers of language – are experienced and affirmed in the ‘present, in a creative,

¹⁴ He says,

the impulse to do justice to the work, which means to make it happen anew (and always differently) in one’s reading of it, is an ethical impulse: in Levinasian terms, to respond to the other not as a generalizable set of features or a statistic but a singularity. Levinas’s term for the singular other, appearing before me and obliging me to take responsibility for it, is the face – and his use of the term is not metaphorical, although it is not simply literal either. We might *extend the notion of the face, and the obligation it imposes, to the concrete, specific, ungeneralizable work of art* [my emphasis] (Attridge, 2009: 28).

Here, Attridge (knowingly or otherwise) mis-represents the face, which does not ‘appear’ but ‘approaches’ before and beyond sight. It puts the self-reflexive yet centrifugal grasping of intentional consciousness into question and, by extension, its sensory apparatus. Levinas remarks,

the face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content (Levinas, 1979: 194).

This usefully prefigures an issue I take, later on, with Attridge’s use of alterity in his formula of literary eventness. There I argue that he betrays it by giving it a role within his notion of literature. Rather than marking a phenomenal limit of intentional consciousness, alterity becomes a category of analysis with which to describe the event of literature.

responsible reading' (Attridge, 2004a: 136).¹⁵ On this view, literature is an event formed and activated by the 'intentional' coalescence of the author, text, and reader. It is the product of an encounter of *verbal creation*, 'a particular handling of language that allows alterity to impact on the existing configurations of an individual's mental world' (Attridge, 2004a: 19).¹⁶ By extension, it is a response-based event which opens up new possibilities of meaning and feeling (Attridge, 2004a: 60).¹⁷ Attridge terms successful verbal creation 'Innovation'; it recasts the same in new ways, in *altered* modalities, acting in similar fashion to Levinas's irruption of the Saying in the Said (Attridge, 2004a: 38).¹⁸ This disruptive irruption plays out as the 'creation of the other',¹⁹ an utterance usefully ambivalent in that its semantic capaciousness allows it to host both the activity of the act and the passivity of the event peculiar to the act-event of the performance of literature (Attridge, 2004a: 23). It can be construed as the 'creation of the other' and 'creation by the other', without one possibility cancelling the other out, to the extent that the arrival of the new into the pre-existing cultural fold is an undecidability that pauses between an active 'doing' and a passive 'letting be'.²⁰

¹⁵ Attridge reiterates this view in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. He says, 'in literary reading (which I perform at the same time as I perform many other kinds of reading) I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through' (Attridge, 2005a: 39).

¹⁶ Creation can be a private or a public event. If the latter it receives the moniker of originality (Attridge, 2004a: 33). When it brings into being something hitherto beyond the reach of the pre-existing knowledge, assumptions, capacities, and habits of a particular cultural order creation becomes invention.

¹⁷ Invention is always a response (Attridge, 2004a: 92). Attridge says, 'in an inventive response the reader attempts to answer to the works shaping of language by a new shaping of his or her own' (Attridge, 2004a: 93).

¹⁸ Creation or invention is 'success in allowing a confrontation with "alterity" – that which lies beyond the established horizons of a culture – to take place' (Zamir, 2007: 419).

¹⁹ Attridge stages Creation, the reconfiguration of the cultural field, against that of reproduction, the non-transformative redeployment of cultural materials in a pre-existing state (Attridge, 2004a: 25).

²⁰ Attridge mentions that this idea of creation as ambivalence echoes a comment of Coetzee's about the process of writing. Coetzee says,

it is naïve to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write

Both an intentional passivity and activity are involved in the bringing of the new into the familiar (Attridge, 1999: 21). As a consequence, the relation of the created work to its formative acts of conscious creation is not one of unidirectional *sine qua non* cause and effect. The coming into being of the 'wholly new requires some relinquishment of intellectual control,²¹ and the other is a possible name for that to which control is ceded' (Attridge, 1999: 21). The similitude between the face of the ethical relation and the otherness of literary creation is, once again, apparent.²² Both resist (complete) understanding and recognition within the order of knowledge and conceptuality. Both, however, have a productive, performative, supervening and conditional force on the very paradigm to which they remain indeterminable.

because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago (Coetzee, 1992: 18).

²¹ It is simultaneously intentional and accidental. A consequence of this is that the event of literature is attached to risk: it may not happen given that it is not wholly controllable (Attridge, 2004a: 26). The risk of creation - the ceding of control involved in trusting to the unpredictable and unknowable future - is mimetic of the risk of passivity and exposure in the approach of the Other, who may be deceptive. Furthermore, in formulating inventiveness through the notion of alterity there is an acknowledgement that the introduction of the Other may be harmful, detrimental to the culture of its reception (Attridge, 2004a: 60). Levinas states, 'what we call the face is precisely this exceptional presentation of self by self, incommensurable with the presentation of realities simply given, always suspect of some swindle, always possibly dreamt up' (Levinas, 1979: 202).

²² In *Transcendence and Height* Levinas remarks that,

the relation with the Other does not immediately have the structure of intentionality....The absolutely other is not reflected in a consciousness; it resists the indiscretion of intentionality....The resistance of the Other to the indiscretion of intentionality consists in overturning the very egoism of the Same; that which is aimed at unseats the intentionality which aims at it (Levinas, 1996: 16).

The proximity of the relation to the face of the approach of the Other is one of irreducible distance that, due to this incommensurability, cannot be assimilated into an economy of power where *pouvoir* is predicated on phenomenality and conceptuality (Llewelyn, 1995: 100).

To illuminate further the ampleness of Attridge's theoretical debt, his analysis greatly depends on the distinction between *accommodation* and *assimilation* of the other. The latter consists of a response to alterity as incorporation and divestment of difference and the former consists of a response to alterity as openness to change and a reverence for difference.²³ He says,

while affirming the Other as other, I encounter the limits of my own powers to think and to judge, my capacities as a rational agent. In this way the encounter with a human other is not different in its essentials from the experience of the Other as one attempts creatively to formulate fresh arguments or to produce an original work of art or philosophy' (Attridge, 2004a: 33).

Hence, the disruptive encounter with the unassimilable Other, for Levinas and now Attridge, is a displacing of the sovereignty of the *pouvoir* - power and possibility - of intentional consciousness by the primordial command of the Other.²⁴ The approach (*abordement*) – or the 'uprightness' and 'frankness' (*droiture*) of the command and imperative – of the face of the Other rends the continuity of presence of 'rational agency' (Levinas, 1969: 62), exacting a

²³ He says that 'works of art depend on their resistance to wholesale accommodation, i.e. incorporation, across time; and it is through this resistance that they make further artistic invention possible' (Attridge, 2004a: 49). Furthermore, what prevents the possibility of a slippage from accommodation to assimilation is, in part, readerly hospitality. This, Attridge conceives as the 'readiness to have one's purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding' (Attridge, 2004a: 80). To read creatively is an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text. It is to work against the mind's tendency to assimilate the Other to the Same through a suspension of habits.

²⁴ Totality is the dimension of thought marshalled by the Same- the order of forces that comprehends the Other through neutralizing its alterity (its imponderable difference), enveloping it within terms that expunge its singularity, assimilating it into a nexus of meaning that subsumes its individuality (Levinas, 1987: 50). Levinas states that,

to understand the non-I access must be found through an entity, an abstract essence which is and is not. In it is dissolved the other's alterity. The foreign being, instead of maintaining itself in the inexpugnable fortress of its singularity, instead of facing, becomes a theme and an object (Levinas, 1987: 50).

break in Being, and in the case of Attridge's theory, an opening of novelty,²⁵ where otherness intervenes as the entry of the new, as a force of reconfiguration, into hitherto established cultural matrices of knowledge, value and perception.²⁶ The world of Being is contingent upon, and subtended by, disruption in order that it maintains ties with the ethical;²⁷ literary inventiveness involves disruption in order that it issues in literature as literary invention, as the arrival of the 'new' in the 'old'. Interruption by alterity is the necessary and conditional feature of ethics as well as, in Attridge's outlook, literature.²⁸ He remarks that 'the act of breaking down the familiar is also the act of welcoming the other; the event of the familiar's breaking down is also the event of the irruption of the other' (Attridge, 1999: 22). This deracinative passage carries with it an interminable demand, the *arché*-demand of the unseen force of the face of the Other. The experience of singularity involves a demand made on me, as socially-culturally-historically encumbered subject by that which is foreign, and epistemologically resistant to, my social-cultural-historical horizons. At the heart of the

²⁵ Attridge defines novelty as the 'refashioning of the old, the unanticipated advent of the new' (Attridge, 2004a: 24).

²⁶ He remarks, 'Otherness exists only in the registering of that which resists my usual modes of understanding' (Attridge, 2004a: 27).

²⁷ Commenting on the order of Being Levinas says 'what nonetheless remains behind the scenes is the ethical, an original being delivered over to the other – love. Only justice can modify that, in that justice brings this being delivered over unto the neighbour under a measure, or tempers it by thinking it in relation to the third or fourth, who are my "others" as well. Justice is already the first violence' (Levinas, 2001: 136). Importantly, the dissymmetry of the face-to-face, upon the entry of the third, demands this violence. It demands the presencing of the symmetry of Justice (Llewelyn, 1995: 140). In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas says, 'it will be possible to show that there is only a question of the Said [*Dit*] and of being because Saying or responsibility calls for [*réclamant*] justice' (Levinas, 1998: 45).

²⁸ Attridge re-affirms this posture in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. He says there that,

the singularity of the literary work is produced not just by its difference from all other works, but by the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits: singularity is thus inseparable from inventiveness. And the singular inventiveness of the work is what constitutes its otherness – not as an absolute quality, but one that is meaningful only in relation to a given context; otherness is always otherness to a particular self or situation (Attridge, 2005a: 11).

literary event is a self-displacing attentiveness— akin to what Levinas refers to as disinterestedness²⁹ - which arouses in me a sense of responsibility for the Other, an “ontological courtesy”, a state of being-for-the-other, an un-substitutable substitution (Levinas, 2001: 106). In this event ‘I assume the ‘other’s needs, affirming it, sustaining it, being prepared to give up my own wants and satisfactions for the sake of the Other’ (Attridge, 2004a: 123). He says, in consort with Levinas, ‘responsibility for the other involves assuming the other’s needs, being willing to be called to account for the other, surrendering one’s goals and desires in deference to the other’s’ (Attridge, 1999: 27).³⁰ Attridge articulates what he means by responsibility for artistic creations as a form of effort, a reaching for that which is not readily available or uncomplicatedly clear, resembling in character the responsibility for the human Other. It is a heightened responsiveness,

a strange compulsion involved in creative behaviour, a compulsion that is manifested in a minor way as I grope for sentences to articulate ideas or let a favourite poem work freshly upon me, and more consequentially in major acts of inventiveness, verbal or otherwise (Attridge, 2004a: 124).

He then goes on to articulate the responsible response, the just response, as the attempt to ‘apprehend the other as other’ (Attridge, 2004a: 124). To elaborate, ‘doing justice’ is the action of this responsibility for the performativity of the as yet, and always, unknown and

²⁹ Responsibility is dis-interestedness, ‘taking on oneself the being of the other’ (Levinas, 2001: 108). Levinas says ‘it is a good word because it contains the root *esse*, meaning “being”. Interestedness means to be bound to being, and disinterestedness the self’s withdrawal from being. I always say: dis-inter-estedness’ (Levinas, 2001: 150). *Inter -esse* means between being, as a ‘relation’, and ‘inside being’ (Levinas, 2001: 150).

³⁰ Levinas ponders, ‘does not this putting in question occur precisely when the Other has nothing in common with me, when the Other is wholly other, that is to say, a human other (*Autrui*)? When through the nakedness and destitution of his defenceless eyes, he forbids murder and paralyzes my impetuous freedom?’ (Levinas, 1996: 16).

unfamiliar, the Other. This notion of ‘responsibility for the other’ as the necessary constituent of inventiveness expresses the effect of that which escapes perception and knowledge yet that makes possible the reading of a text as literature. As a result of this epistemic blockage it is overhung by a sense of risk, a risk which opens up in the welcome of that which is unforeseeable, imponderable and unrecognisable. Ethics involves a non-substitutable substitution by the self for the Other, a one-for-the-other (Levinas, 1996: 83); the advent of literature too involves an interminable substitution by the old-for-the-new (hitherto unknown). Attridge’s conception of literature comes to echo the principal claim of Levinas’s ethical programme: the Said, totality, is suspended by an address, a Saying to someone, ‘everything that I am now summarizing and pulling together is addressed to someone; and this always shatters the whole, the totality’ (Levinas, 2001: 144).

As mentioned above, Attridge conceives of literature as an event of responsible responding, where responding follows the movement of responsibility formulated by Levinas. He imagines it as a facing that avoids an ‘odyssean’ intentional circuitry, the looping-back of intentionality, as a journey without return.³¹ It does not confront the Other with a conceptual framework with which to comprehend it.³² Rather, the Other resists such initiative signifying *kath auto*, in and by itself, prior to linguistic signification. *Kath Auto* signification signals a being presenting itself out of itself not through a general structure of appearing which Levinas discerns in the view of inter-subjective relations that ontology conceives. To illustrate, Levinas remarks, ‘total alterity, in which a being does not refer to enjoyment and presents itself out of itself, does not shine forth in the form by which things are given to us, for beneath form things conceal themselves’ (Levinas, 1979: 192). The face signifies prior to

³¹ Critchley remarks, ‘ethics is eschatological, a movement of illimitable desire towards the Other without return to the self’ (Critchley, 2009: 66).

³² The relation with the Other is Abrahamic rather than Hellenic; it is ‘a movement towards the other without return to the self’ (Ponzio, 2008: 119).

and beyond form, not as a differential and discrete sign within a sign system but *kath* 'auto, 'according to itself', as 'autosignification' (Robbins, 1999: 25). The Other signifies 'without context, without mediation' beyond sight in speech (Llewelyn, 1995: 100); it signifies 'unpredicated' by recognisable characteristics, attributes or accidents (Robbins, 1999: 26). Attridge sets responsible reading with something bordering on this view of responsibility as a response across an irreducible distance in mind, saying,

to read a literary work responsibly is to read it without placing over it a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement, and without passing judgment on the work or its author (Attridge, 2004a: 129).

Responsible reading depends on a productive aporia of expectation and surprise. It involves a suspension of habitual modes of interpretation and meaning construction, where the accommodation of the alterity of an inventive work is to be surprised by it (Attridge, 2004a: 83). There is no guarantee that alterity will emerge.³³ I must prepare myself for alterity; yet to be approached by it I must be surprised by it. It must be wholly unexpected, otherwise than predictable, beyond an analysis conceived in advance of its approach.³⁴

³³ In "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other" Attridge says,

reading involves working against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in a particular work. Encountering the other in reading, the mind (understood in the broadest sense) lets itself be carried to the borders of its accustomed terrain by the text. And the other here, once again, is a relation or relating rather than an object; it is the act-event – for it is clearly both – of my reading, now, here, of this particular text (Attridge, 1999: 25).

Responsible responding centres on a displacement of the familiar; 'creatively responding to the Other involves the shifting of ingrained modes of understanding in order to take account of that which was systematically excluded by them' (Attridge, 2004a: 123).

³⁴ Attridge remarks, 'when a reading of a work is literary, it is more than a response to its particular collocation of coded elements; it is a response to a singularity that cannot be analysed, 'yet remains recognizable across all repetitions of reading' (Attridge, 2004a: 87).

2.3) Ethical Divergence: Betraying ethics, Failing his own Standard

2.3.a) Divergence

Now that I have teased out the extent to which Attridge relies on the élan of the ethical relation, to ground his theory of literary inventiveness, it is necessary to flesh out the ways in which his notion of otherness diverges from Levinas's notion of the Other, his reasons for this departure and its implications in Levinasian terms. Should Levinas's ethics be regarded, with due seriousness, as the source of Attridge's notion of otherness then Attridge's selective appropriation betrays the provenance of its possibility. He figures ethics as a form of interpretation, thus reducing it to the systematic language of ontology. This means that, despite his concern being the nature of a responsible responding to the literary, his discursive response to ethics is not, itself, a just response, a responsible responsivity. As witness to the ideas of Levinas, his work does not fulfil its obligation in a non-reductive manner. This becomes apparent in several manoeuvres and articulations of his point of view, concerning otherness, which depart from the ethical position and then flatten its complexity.

While there are many theoretical similarities between the of alterity in literary invention and the alterity of Levinasian ethics, Attridge postures subject(ivity) and its relating to the Other in a fundamentally disparate way to Levinas. He says,

Levinas is aiming for is a transformation of the egological transcendental subject into an ethical subject, one which is not characterised not by its spontaneous, free power, but by its responsibility for the other which comes from the other....As a consequence, ethical sensibility is an affectivity that comes to me entirely from the other, it is a result of being affected by the other's imperative, traumatizing demand. Instead of being open to the other in the mode of intentionality or ecstatic

transcendence, I am, in the very intimacy of my affectivity, always already the other's 'hostage' (Attridge, 2004a: 90).

Attridge's work, on the other hand, affirms an autarchic view of the self where, 'only in relating to me is the other other, and its otherness is registered in the adjustments I have to make in order to acknowledge it – adjustments that may never become wholly second nature to me' (Attridge, 2004a: 30). Here, the subject opens to the other through a re-shaping of intentionality, through a self-reconfiguring act of auto-affectation. The approach of the Other is induced by the initiative and spontaneity enacted by, and from within, the self-constituting subject. The fact of agency adhering to this claim presupposes that the becoming of the self is antecedent to an encounter with the face of the Other.³⁵ This model of subject formation and reconstitution is elementarily at odds with Levinas's conception of the relating of the self and the Other and the possibility of the hypostasizing of an other-directed subjectivity. On Levinas's terms the putting into question of the self posits the Subject; the rational self presupposes the approach of the Other. For Attridge the already-formed subject puts itself into question to invite the approach of otherness. In fact, Levinas claims that this formulation of encounter, with alterity, is no more than a permutation of the Same. In "Metaphysics and Transcendence" in *Totality and Infinity*, he declares, 'the alterity of the *I* that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same: the negation of the *I* by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the *I*' (Levinas, 1979: 37). The point he makes is that a self-inflicted self-displacement is a function of autonomy rather than the heteronomous injunction of the Other which scintillates in the

³⁵ He says 'when I encounter alterity, I encounter not the other as such but the remoulding of the self that brings the Other into being, as no longer entirely other' (Attridge, 2004: 24); and then, 'only in relating to me is the other other, and in coming to be as a singular other it, at the same time, comes to be a part of my world' (Attridge, 1999: 22).

midst of Levinas's writing.³⁶ This self-difference is not induced by the approach of the Other in the ethical relation. It unfolds within totality; it is not a case of the hetero-affection of ethics at play.³⁷ Rather than maintaining a consonance with this Levinasian take on the matter, Attridge aligns his subject-ivity with a mode of transcendental, 'egological' subjectivity where the fact of self-consciousness is independent of, and prior to, all (other) possibilities. On this view the self is subject, where the subject engages with all else through the theoretical relation, according to the distance of the subject-object relation. In this relational mode, signification is always conveyed through a genus, rather than the ethical relation to which Levinas gives primacy in his writings. We should recall that, according to Levinas, the "originary subjectivation" is the instantiation of the Subject and subjectivity in response to the approach of the Other. Here, relationality is not marked by the transitivity of sovereignty and domination but is always already one-for-the-other.³⁸ The hypostasis of the subject qua ethical self is not an auto-affection but a 'heterological affection' (Ciaramelli, 1991: 90).³⁹ Ciaramelli remarks,

³⁶ I refer to 'Levinas's writing' rather than 'Levinas's theory,' or other formulations of the like, to emphasise the performative aspect of his 'disassimilative' inscription of the Saying in the Said.

³⁷ Levinas remarks, 'the metaphysical relation can not be properly speaking a representation, for the other would therein dissolve into the same: every representation is essentially interpretable as a transcendental constitution' (Levinas, 1979: 38). It is more accurately a quasi-transcendental condition in the sense that it has a similar function to an 'analytic or synthetic a priori formal presupposition' (Llewelyn, 1995: 109). However, this does not mean that it is an analytic or synthetic a priori formal presupposition since it cannot become the content of knowledge. Levinas does not conceive the ethical (metaphysical) relation as a part of the known and knowable world with its concomitant categories and systems of thought and explanation.

³⁸ The *I* is posited as 'straightaway for-the-other, straightaway in obligation and straightaway as the only one who is ready to respond and to bear this responsibility' (Levinas, 2001: 117).

³⁹ I do not use 'hypostasis' here in the sense Levinas does in *Existence and Existents* (Levinas, 1978: 83), as the emergence of differentiated being within anonymous Being but rather as a manifestation and an individuation-for, and via, the approach of the Other.

instead of treating the individuation of the Ego in me as an original closure (cloture) constituting the identity of an entity, we can take it as an openness that undoes my ontological identity and which, in the same movement, individuates me (Ciaramelli, 1991: 90).

Attridge, however, affirms a conception of subjectivity founded on auto-nomy rather than hetero-nomy. His notion of the subject is as a self-posed monadic identity, in and of itself, rather than a subject fashioned by heteronomy, by the formative force of Substitution.

2.3.b) *Betraying ethics*

In his genesis of a responsible and responsive reading, the reliance of Attridge's thought on Levinasian ethics is gradually disclosed. Both his acknowledgement of debt at the end of *The Singularity of Literature* book and his continual recourse to the interrelation of the Other, responsibility and ethics in the expatiation of his ideas unveils and reconfirms this borrowing of concepts and principles. However, his position also differs in significant ways. I would like to raise concerns Attridge's characterisation of ethics as a member of a relation of symmetry. Of this, too, as a consequence of Derrida's meditation on the unimpeachable economy of fault in the moment of attempting to write a response in fidelity to the Levinasian position, Attridge can be regarded as fully aware for the implications on the ethicality, in the Levinasian sense, of his project. Given the double-bind that the method of exposition and argument of Levinas's work in *Otherwise than Being* presents to readers and commentators of Levinas, Attridge is aware of the ultimate impossibility of producing a writing that does not assimilate alterity into the order of identity. He cannot but be aware of the discursive impossibility of writing about ethics – the ineradicable entanglement - without betraying it to the language of ontology, to prae-sens, to phenomenality, to the totalizing structure of comprehension. Considering the conditional relation of ethical responsibility and language,

the discourse of the Said, Derrida says that language's response to ethics may be one of interminable betrayal. He says,

without that [ethical] responsibility there would be no language, but it is never sure that language surrenders itself to the responsibility that makes it possible [surrenders to its probable essence]: it may always [and to a certain extent it is probably even ineluctable that it will] betray it, tending to enclose it within the same. This liberty of betrayal must be allowed in order for language to be rendered back to its essence, which is the ethical' (Derrida, 1991: 23).

To affirm 'inventiveness by an answering inventiveness,' as Attridge does, is to advocate a symmetry, an adequation, which is an 'adding up' of elements of an ensemble and thus firmly of the order of Being.⁴⁰ Through this use of ethics, in an affirmation of symmetry and of identification, Attridge makes a peremptory comment about the nature of a suitably ethical response to the event of literature. This opens up a contradiction in which ethics comes to affirm that which it desires to rupture: the language of ontology and the order of Being which his close following of Derrida will have already illuminated for him. Levinas consistently denies that the ethical relation is indeed a relation; it does not consist of mutually recognisable parts that form a unity.⁴¹ Attridge remarks,

⁴⁰ Levinas explicates what he means by Totality, where the possibility of transcendence becomes closed: 'Totality also has for me a concrete, that is, a phenomenological meaning. What does self-totalizing mean? Totality is not only a philosophical intuition, an observation of things taken as a whole, as an ensemble. The word ensemble itself is a mathematical expression. The word totality has a ground, a concrete meaning, and I link it strongly to the economic relationship of reciprocal change' (Levinas, 2001: 142). Within the relation of exchange human beings become 'terms' within an 'ensemble' that makes a 'sum total'. Totality is a relation of 'adding up'; Infinity is not a relation of adding up; 'We are so bound to the concept of an adding up' (Levinas, 2001: 142).

⁴¹ Levinas remarks, 'the relation between the Other and me, which dawns forth in his expression, issues neither in number nor in concept' (Levinas, 1979: 194).

when I, as a literary critic, comment in writing on a literary work I have read or heard I may offer an interpretation or a description, or I may go further and attempt to convey the work's singularity, inventiveness, and alterity in my particular time and place *by taking my readers through the experience of performing, and being performed by, the work* [my emphasis]. Such a commentary will succeed only if it finds readers who, in their turn, will read it responsively and creatively, in conjunction with a similar reading of the original....affirming inventiveness by an answering inventiveness' (Attridge, 2009: 29).

In this symmetrical formulation of just reading the mandate of the response is required to echo the mandate of the address in a relation of reciprocity;⁴² a just critical reading of a literary work, where the critic and the work are "relating" in a non-reductive manner, requires that the readers of the criticism follow suit in "relating" to it in a non-reductive way. Thus, through a claim that presupposes a relation of symmetry Attridge is calling for a dissymmetrical response, as a just response, towards the critical work by its readers in the inventive event. The fact that a path to asymmetry is premised on symmetry signals the inescapable double-bind of the economy of restitution that overhangs any attempt to respond to ethics in a way that adheres to its claims about the nature of the ethical relation. Nevertheless, it also undermines the view that Attridge's theory is harmonious with Levinasian ethics and that his is a 'Levinasian approach' to literature. His criticism depends on an analogical method,⁴³ denying the possibility of responding to the alterity of his work, or any other, with his theorizing in mind, without dissimulating alterity.⁴⁴ He brings alterity

⁴² Levinas strongly denies that the ethical relation is one of reciprocity: 'the relation is always non-reciprocal; love exists without worrying about being loved' (Levinas, 2001: 143).

⁴³ Barthes remarks, 'what adds to the curse of analogy is the fact that it is irrepressible: no sooner is a form seen than it *must* resemble something' (Barthes, 2010: 44).

⁴⁴ In his approach, Attridge wishes to 'affirm the inventiveness and singularity' of the event of literature, 'to bring it into the realm of the familiar - the discourse of literary

under the reign of 'reasoning reason' – within the order of phenomenal vision rather than the vision without optics Levinas avows,⁴⁵ within the light of Being which shields it from ethics.⁴⁶

If there is something to be gained by Derrida's disquisition on the syntactic and narrative strategies that Levinas engages in order to write performatively towards the rupture of the logos, through *seriasure*, it is that the entry of ethical language into the systematic language of Being cannot be denied yet may, now as a matter of degree rather than of the logic of the law of the excluded middle, be truncated by a text which has its conceptual coherence and continuity of statements continually disrupted in simultaneity with the moment of their formation. To mimic Levinas's style, however, does not allow an escape from the circle of restitution (and therefore betrayal) since it rests on the reciprocating structure of symmetry. I have contended that there is evidence in *The Singularity of Literature* which suggests

criticism, for instance - while preserving its otherness' (Attridge, 2005a: 33). The problem with this account, which stresses the importance of literary justice as a 'letting be' of the singularity and inventiveness of the work, is that it is acquisitive, drawing up ethics into a method, with certain ends in mind, for the formation of a theory of literature as literary inventiveness. It thus closes its discourse off to the rupture of alterity in advance of unfolding its particular explanation or angle of understanding.

⁴⁵ In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas remarks, 'ethics is an optics. But it is a "vision" without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type' (Levinas, 1979: 23).

⁴⁶ Levinas says,

theory... designates comprehension [intelligence] - the logos of being - that is, a way of approaching the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes....To theory as comprehension of beings the general title ontology is appropriate. Ontology, which reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom - the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other (Levinas, 1979: 42).

Vision is a relation that happens to reduce the alterity of the Other; it is an opening of experience through a mediation of light, the metaphor of impersonal Being. Commenting on the structure of vision Levinas notes, 'the relation of the subject with the object is subordinated to the relation of the object with the void of openness, which is not an object. The comprehension of an existent consists in precisely going beyond the existent, into the open' (Levinas, 1979: 190). Within this structure, of comprehension as light, the particularity of a being is always subsumed under the universal concept which explains it through sight.

Attridge takes into account this 'logic' in formulating his ideas. However, this does not mean that his figuring of ethics as an evaluative hermeneutics, where alterity is tasked with being a conditional aspect of the work of literature, is faithful to the Levinasian position and therefore appositely termed a Levinasian approach. To recall Attridge's position, he argues that the irreducible otherness resistant to the conventional codes of understanding and aesthetic intelligibility, at the core of the ethical relation, is what gives literature its literariness. Responding to literature as literature, doing justice to its singularity and inventiveness is a logic that Attridge adumbrates via Levinas's treatment of the relation between the subject and its formative encounter with the face of the Other. Attridge endorses an instrumental, analogical gesture in which the event of literature, in his vision of literary creation, digests, into it, the structure of the relation with the face of the Other of Levinas's ethics.

Another cause for concern is the formulation that Attridge grants the complex and opaque meaning of the Other - his treatment glosses its undecidability. This results in him staging a reductive account of Levinas's thinking on the Other. To illustrate, he says, 'the other in Levinas's writing, for example – frequently called "Autrui" rather than "l'Autre" to bring out its human dimension – is linked closely to the biblical "neighbour," even though ultimately the otherness in question is that of God' (Attridge, 1999: 23).⁴⁷ This reading fails to take account of the face of the other that intercedes in, and scintillates, the inter(subjective)human sphere of rapport. While it may be that the otherness with which Levinas is concerned is that of God, the nature of his writing ensures that this is not unequivocal or ultimate. The Other has an unmistakable human dimension; 'Autrui in French is a personal pronoun that means

⁴⁷ Attridge includes this belief in *The Singularity of Literature*: 'here I depart significantly from Levinas, who is the source of much of my thinking on the subject of the other; for Levinas, the ultimate other is God, an absolute, unconditioned, wholly transcendent other' (Attridge, 2004a: 29).

the personal other, the other person, the other man' (Ponzio, 2008: 18).⁴⁸ Attridge does not bring to view the prevaricatory use of this term (Llewelyn, 1995: 109), hiding the possibility that Levinas deploys 'God' as a term for the exigency and force of the plea with which the Other calls the self to responsibility rather than as a direct, nominal signifier for a being of divine command. Levinas exclaims in an interview that 'the first, fundamental, and unforgettable exigency of justice is the love of the other man in his uniqueness' (Levinas, 2001: 109). Furthermore he defines spirit as a condition of human rapport. He says it is 'man devoted to the other man, to the love of the stranger, to someone who belongs as it were to another logical genus' (Levinas, 2001: 113). There are many further textual examples of this humanism-for-the-other in Levinas's writings. For instance, in a work preceding *Totality and Infinity*, "Transcendence and Height" he says,

does not this putting in question occur precisely when the Other has nothing in common with me, when the Other is wholly other, that is to say, a human other (Autrui)? When through the nakedness and destitution of his defenceless eyes, he forbids murder and paralyzes my impetuous freedom? (Levinas, 1996: 16).

The ethical relation is the unmediated engagement with the face where the face is not a frame for the comprehension of attributes, qualities and categories of existence. Rather, 'the face is not at all what has been seen' (Levinas, 2001: 144). The Face is 'nakedness, helplessness,

⁴⁸ **The infinite demand to responsible responsivity beckons from the face of the human other. Levinas says,**

the face in its nudity is the weakness of a unique being exposed to death, but at the same time the enunciation of an imperative which obliges me not to let it alone. This obligation is the first word of God....The divinity of God is played out in the human. God descends in the "face" of the other....an incessant responsibility with regard to the other. It is to be unique, as if I were elected to this responsibility, which gives me as well the possibility of recognizing myself as unique and irreplaceable, of saying "I". Conscious that in each of my human endeavours – from which the other is never absent – I respond to his existence as a unique being (Levinas, 2001: 236).

perhaps an exposure to death' (Levinas, 2001: 145), it is 'an appeal but also an imperative' (Levinas, 2001: 115). The Other for Levinas is not one and the same thing as a person but neither is it not a person; it is the radically personal beyond ontology. Levinas does not recuse this notion from bearing on social relations. The Other, on Levinas's account cuts across the dividing line of the either/or; it is not *either* the transcendental *or* the social other. Rather, it is the transcendental Other and the social other. Morgan points out that the Other,

is, for example, the weak, the poor, the orphan and the widow. In social life, I am always confronted by another particular person, who is near or far, friend or foe, present or absent, but always in the world with me and more importantly over against me or before me (Morgan, 2011: 39).

To cite the words of a critic writing in the wake of Attridge's theorizing and criticism,⁴⁹ Iddiols, 'I define a singular interpretation, or singular reading, as a response to the text which reduces its contingencies and multiplicities and instead imposes a 'master meaning' which attempts to sum up what the text 'is about'' (Iddiols, 2009: 187). This approach of 'singular interpretation' is applicable, given Attridge's adumbration of ethics, to the way in which he frames the status of the Levinasian Other.

To take this point further, in the secondary literature on Levinas, two fundamental slopes of understanding the status of the relating of the face-to-face are prominent: the "empirical" and the "transcendental". The former conceives the face-to-face as a social relation of 'concrete experience' (Morgan, 2011: 42). The latter views the face-to-face, the ethical relation, as the (transcendental) condition of possibility of the conscious human order of institutionally

⁴⁹ Iddiols cites Attridge's notion of responsible responding as an attempt to do justice to the otherness of the artwork. She says, 'I suggest that Attridge's conception of responding responsibly can be closely compared to my conception of authentic reading' (Iddiols, 2009: 189). While Attridge asserts doing justice as a non-masterful attentiveness to the singular inventiveness of the work of art, Iddiols asks for modes of reading that do not 'attempt to speak over and for the text itself' (Iddiols, 2009: 189).

governed existence – of justice, language, morality, law, the state, politics, etc.⁵⁰ Bernasconi remarks that ‘Levinas himself seems unable to decide between these rival interpretations’ (Bernasconi, 1989: 23). Levinas does not explicitly endorse either view at the expense of the other, writing, rather, within the space of their ambiguity.⁵¹ He admits ‘that he does not believe that there can be transparency in philosophical method or indeed in philosophy as a whole. If we press him to give us his formula, the most he will say is that his method is the method of *emphasis* [my emphasis]’.⁵² In French, he reminds us, ‘this word can mean provocative and exasperating exaggeration’ (Llewelyn, 1995: 33). On the one hand, the encounter with the face is seen as originary and primordial, an-archically subtending Being and the order of ontology, the world of existence and conscious experience (Morgan, 2011: 44). The face-to-face, however, is not grounded in Being and experience but presents itself beyond Being and beyond the totality of significations of conscious experience: 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’ (Morgan, 2011: 44). The epiphany of the face is not akin to the experiences had in habitual ways in the order of everyday experience; it is extra-ordinary. Morgan says, ‘Descartes’s notion of having an idea of the infinite, as Levinas sees it, cannot designate an everyday experience even if it can designate some kind of experience – or quasi-experience’ (Morgan, 2011: 45).

The face-to-face is a part of the empirical order as primordial event mnemonically irrecoverable within the retentive structure of intentional consciousness. The fact of its

⁵⁰ In *Totality and Infinity* he says, ‘we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself’ (Levinas, 1989: 24).

⁵¹ Bernasconi says, ‘Levinas does not choose between them or attempt to reconcile them. They remain irreducible moments of the logically absurd structure of the *anterior posteriori*....The a priori constitution of the object as performed by the idealist subject takes place only after the event, that is to say, a *posteriori*....’ (Bernasconi, 1989: 32).

⁵² Llewelyn terms this ‘*emphasiology*’ (Llewelyn, 1995: 38).

‘place’ in the order of the empirical does not mean that it is, or can become, the content of an experience for intentional consciousness.⁵³ Rather than being a particular grasped through a genus it is determinative of the order of the genus, namely, the world of being and comprehension itself (Morgan, 2011: 2011: 48). Its apparent undecidability is premised on the fact of its simultaneous part within, and detachment from, the order of Being. Detached due to its ‘identity’ as a transcendental condition on the possibility of the world of experience and the experience of the world (Morgan, 2011: 49); it is ‘a case of grounding our ordinary experience in a fact that is beyond our normal grasp, that is, beyond the orbit of totality’ (Morgan, 2011: 50). Morgan says, regarding the transcendental status of the face-to-face that it is a ‘condition – a fact or event – that is beyond our normal grasp, that tells us how the world is and what the self is, and how they are related, in order for certain experiences, thoughts, and so on to be possible’ (Morgan, 2011: 50). Bernasconi ends his discussion by saying that, ‘if the disputes among the readers of Levinas have largely been a matter of contesting which limb of the dichotomy should be uppermost – the transcendental or the empirical – then we are still a long way from negotiating his language, which operates by a

⁵³ In *Violence and Metaphysics* Derrida reads the relation of totality and infinity as a form of radical empiricism. He claims that Levinas rejuvenates empiricism, ‘with an audacity, a profundity, and a resoluteness never before attained’ (Derrida, 1978: 151). His claim rests on the detail that, for Levinas, the face-to-face is experience par excellence, it is experience as the anterior condition of possibility of concrete experience. As such, the bifurcation of interpretive approaches, into the ‘transcendental’ and the ‘empirical,’ is problematized. Given that Levinas regards the approach of the Other in the demand of the face as primordial experience, opening up experience, as the ultimate experience, means that to affirm one approach against the other is to take a narrow view on Levinas’s stance on ethics. For instance, Bernasconi regards the “blind spot” of many accounts of Levinas’s ethics a failure to acknowledge the relation of ethics and the order of representation – knowledge, justice, being, theory, etc – as one of interdependent ‘double origin’ (Bernasconi, 1989: 32). In many arguments that follow the logic of a transcendental argument, the fundamental condition is posited as a metaphysical structure of beyond the horizon of sensory experience. With Levinas however, the transcendental condition is given concretely, as terrestrially located (Bernasconi, 1989: 33). The face-to-face is not behind the concrete but is primordial concretization itself; it is not a fundamental condition that is spatio-temporally antecedent to that which it conditions.

displacement of their disjunction' (Bernasconi, 1989: 34).⁵⁴ To conclude, Attridge's staging of the Other in Levinas as 'ultimately God' encourages an exiguous reading of Levinas's account of the Other, glossing the displacement of the disjunction between the transcendental and empirical approaches that Bernasconi analyses.

⁵⁴ In *Altered Reading*, Robbins affirms this *and/and* rather than *either/or* interpretation of the site of the ethical relation. She says, 'like other examples for the ethical (tearing the bread from one's mouth, turning the cheek to the smiter, clothing the naked and feeding the hungry), ceding one's place to the other would seem to be located at the intersection between the transcendental and the empirical' (Robbins, 1999: 152).

Chapter 3: The Thematizing Approach

3.1) Against the grain of the Singularity of Literature

Moving forward, I will assess whether Attridge is consistent with his own claim that responsible literary criticism involves a singular inventive response to the alterity, the singular inventiveness, of literature.⁵⁵ As noted in the above analysis, he sanctions a localized mode of reading incommensurate with interpretative judgments that operate systematically, from a grounding principle, rather, tethering it to the instantaneity of a re-iterable but unrepeatable event involving reader, text and author. I have so far illuminated certain conceptual problems that arise in assuming Attridge's ideas on literature in the event are quintessentially of a 'Levinasian approach'. Here, however, I turn my attention from his theoretical engagement in *The Singularity of Literature* to his 'phenomenological' reading-through of Coetzee's fiction in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. I claim that Attridge, in his critical reading(s) of Coetzee's texts, departs from his self-imposed axiomatic call to read inventively without lodging the significance of the work, without remainder, under a rubric of valuation extraneous to the literary event.⁵⁶ Attridge makes a claim about the aesthesis, the processual and perceptive reading-through, of Coetzee's modernist form,

⁵⁵ After explicating Levinas's conceptions of the Saying (*le dire*) and the Said (*le dit*) Peperzak claims that, if we want to respond to Levinas, even to read Levinas, without remanding the Saying within the Said we must 'hear his texts as calls and provocations to which we respond with words of our own' (Peperzak, 1991: 60).

⁵⁶ Attridge remarks,

in *The Singularity of Literature*, I have argued that the literary use of language involves the performing of meanings and feelings, and that what has traditionally been called form is central to this performance. The Literary work is an event (though an event that cannot be distinguished from an act) for both its creator and its reader, and it is the reader – not as free-floating subject but as the nexus of a number of specific histories and contextual formations – who brings the work into being, differently each time, in a singular performance of the work not so much as written but as writing. The meaning of a literary work, then, can be understood as a verb rather than a noun: not something carried away when we have finished reading it, but something that happens as we read or recall it (Attridge, 2005a: 9).

conjoining it with ethical responsibility. He does this by analysing alterity as a formal constituent of this modernism. While, in chapter 2, I revealed how he incorporates it into his theory of literature, here I intend to bring to vision how he conceives it as a constitutive theme of Coetzee's aesthetic agenda. In his journal article "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction," he remarks that 'in J.M. Coetzee's two earliest fictions, *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*, modernist techniques can be especially powerful as a means of involving the reader ethically' (Attridge, 2004b: 653). He claims that Coetzee's modernist representational ploys, as synecdochic of a disruptive alterity calling responsibility, subvert the oppressive representational discourse, here literary realism, of the order of the Same, which in their representation subordinate and disempower the Other. He sets Levinas's Saying over Coetzee's Modernism and the Said over literary Realism. However, this reification of alterity into a theme, into a present re-presented, empties it of ethical import in the Levinasian sense. As such, Attridge's criticism does not allow for an interface with alterity. It searches for alterity at the level of the theme where the Other is dissimulated; it is an unpunctual approach, it is too late. The phenomenological aspect of his account works on the basis that Coetzee's fiction arraigns the reader, calling her into the realm of ethical responsibility, through the perturbation of the fundamental elements of narrative – i.e. temporal linearity, the law of non-contradiction, the intelligibility of systematic language. However, the fact that his argument depends on the fusion of his claim about Coetzee's modernist style with a thematic handling of alterity means that his project undermines its own goal. To follow his logic of reading means to shut down the possibility of a co-incidence of aesthetic experience and ethical relating. Thus, in betraying his own imperative of inventive reading, he ensures that his approach seals off the gamut of its applications to the approach of the Other, the incursion of *le dire*.

Attridge sets out by stating the applicability of Levinasian ethics to Coetzee's fiction by way of Coetzee's aesthetic 'timbre': the farrago of his idiosyncratic form and subject matter entices and baffles readers in one and the same movement.⁵⁷ This arrest is not a paralysing or stultifying confusion but a prevaricatory mode of exposition that urges the reading subject, in the event, to renegotiate continually her established codes of world-directed sense-making and self-directed apperception (Attridge, 2005a: x). This bafflement, raised in the face of the approach of alterity, is posited as indispensable to experiencing Coetzee's text(s) as 'a work of art' (Attridge, 2005a: xi). However, in the same moment, Attridge resorts to a thematising mode of reading inimical to ethics in the properly Levinasian sense. He says, 'my interest is as much in the *specificity* of each work as in the *generalizations* [my emphasis] we might make about Coetzee as a writer, and [I] leave it to the reader to make further extrapolations across the entire oeuvre' (Attridge, 2005a: xi). It is this unhidden passage from the particularity of the event to the universal domain of textual appraisal, from the domain of the token to that of the type, a pattern always captured in a coming to rest with the Said, which marks a fundamental problem for his chosen approach (on Levinasian grounds). In his terms, traditional criticism qua commentary disallows the meaning and value of a literary work from

⁵⁷ This notion of narrative bafflement, which concerns an act of consciousness struck passive in a moment of non-comprehension or meaning fragmentation can be thought similarly to Barthes' notion of "drifting". Barthes remarks,

my pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. *Drifting* occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language's illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable* bliss that binds me to the text (to the world). Drifting occurs whenever social language, the sociolect, *fails me*.... Thus another name for drifting would be: *The Intractable* - or perhaps even: stupidity (Barthes, 1975: 19).

This stupidity is inseparable from bliss where bliss is opposed to pleasure. For Barthes pleasure connotes 'euphoria, fulfilment, comfort' and bliss, 'shock, disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy (Barthes, 1975: 19). In *Roland Barthes* he says, 'and about stupidity, I am entitled to say no more than this: that it *fascinates me*. Fascination is the *correct* feeling stupidity must inspire me with: it grips me' (Barthes, 2010: 51).

being verb-al (performative), consigning it to the nominative impulse of exegesis
(constative).

3.2) *Modernist Form and the Ethics of Otherness*

To reiterate, Attridge asserts that the ethical force of Coetzee's fiction is based on the fusion of the affective valence of the content with the performative force of the formal disruptions which render the possibility of coming to a settled view on the narrative remote. In short, ethical force lies in the staging of alterity (Attridge, 2004b: 660). In the first chapter of *JM Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, he pieces together this way of seeing in exploring Coetzee's three early novels - *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Their formal, modernist framework takes on the impact and force of ethical language. The point I make with regard to this strategy is that, in making this claim, Attridge betrays his theory of literature in the event by flouting its requirements and those provided by Levinasian ethics. This becomes apparent on exploring the genealogy of his argument. To elaborate, he makes sense of the literary event – the manifold of his discrete yet interpenetrative encounters with the texts of Coetzee's first three novels - through two conditional discourses of intelligibility, two entangled *theoria* that antedate the event of his reading(s). With this approach, even those elements wholly resistant to understanding are given over to systematic meaning, according to the privileged principles and procedures of those conditional discourses. To lay out the structural character of this relation as succinctly as possible: *X* is regarded in terms of *A* in order that *X* may be comprehended in terms of *A* giving *X* a specific identity.⁵⁸ This relation is one of adequation, based on the 'ensemble' and is thus of Totality, the Same, the Said. Attridge's use of this logico-deductive method is

⁵⁸ In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says, 'the face in which the Other – the absolutely other – presents himself does not negate the Same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes it; it remains terrestrial' (Levinas, 1979: 203). Llewelyn claims that this passage indicates that the face of the Other is not at odds with the Same. It does, however, resist inscription within the codes of the Same. Its meaning is not derived from the Same, yet it does mean within the Same, through *kath auto* signification (Llewelyn, 1995: 115).

evident on three levels in this chapter. Firstly, its self-interrupting, modernist narrative is analysed in terms of ethics in order that it be given an ethico-political purpose. Secondly,⁵⁹ at the level of the content of the novels, Attridge interpretively *applies* the ethical relation, alterity and responsibility, in order to reveal the depth and detail of the meaning of the inter-subjective relations inhering between the characters of the novels.⁶⁰ Lastly, he finds sodality between the formal contradictoriness, the narrative ambivalence and discontinuity, of the novels and the opacity and epistemic resistance of certain displaced characters which he believes typify “alterity.” The result is that features of modernism and ethics combine in order to disclose the deep meanings of the novels.⁶¹ In summary, he maps ethics onto what he thinks is Coetzee’s *sui generis* formal modernism and then ethical-modernism onto the events, moments and relations of the novels.⁶² Apart from arguing against seeing Attridge’s analysis as Levinasian, this disquisition also serves as a test case, an example of sorts, of Levinas’s claims in *Otherwise than Being* which take issue with exegesis as a discursive practice that can respond amicably to the potential injunction of ethical language.

⁵⁹ The modernist features are subsumed under ethics.

⁶⁰ The content of the novel are subsumed under ethics.

⁶¹ The content of the novel is subsumed under the referred to modernist features which are, in turn, subsumed under ethics.

⁶² There is a striking similarity between the role Attridge appends to the formal and linguistic disruptiveness of Coetzee’s ethical modernism and that envisioned by Simon Critchley who figures Beckett’s work as exemplary of modernist form as social critique. Critchley remarks,

the best modernist art works, like Beckett’s, in their aesthetic autonomy and their refusal of meaning (hence the superficial accusation of nihilism) function as determinate negations of contemporary society and can give the formal semblance of a society free from domination. Beckett’s work successfully negotiates the dialectic between the necessary autonomy of modernist art and the function of social criticism not by raising its voice against society or protesting against the obvious injustice of the Holocaust but rather by elevating social criticism to the level of form (Critchley, 2004: 26).

Now that I have laid bare the chosen trajectory I take, I continue onwards with a quotation from Attridge's first chapter of *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, in which he makes known the claims and ambitions of his argument.⁶³ He says,

for the otherness which makes demands on us as we read Coetzee's novels is not an otherness that exists outside language or discourse; it is an otherness brought into being by language, it is what two thousand years of continuously evolving discourse has excluded – and thus constituted – as other. Not simply its other, which would, as an opposite, still be part of its system; but heterogeneous, inassimilable, and unacknowledged unless it imposes itself upon the prevailing discourse, or unless a fissure is created in that discourse through which it makes itself felt, as happens at some of the most telling moments in Coetzee's writing (Attridge, 2005a: 29).

Here, Attridge both affirms and denies the notion of the Other qua *Autrui* of Levinasian 'design'. He countenances the way in which Levinas conceives the relation of Totality, and its rupture, with the unbridgeable exteriority of the Other. However, he departs from the Levinasian conception by picturing otherness as the effect of an ontological and systematic exclusion.⁶⁴ It is worth remembering here that, according to Levinas, the Other is not

⁶³ Interestingly, the argument he develops in this chapter is repeated, almost verbatim, in a journal publication. In a footnote of this article Attridge says that ' "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction" first appeared in a different version as chapter one in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*' (Attridge, 2004b: 654). This repetition, without modification, problematizes Attridge's wish to follow a criticism premised on singular response as just response; he eschews his own reading imperative by installing it as a measure-for-other readings of the Coetzee novels under consideration.

⁶⁴ The disjuncture between ethics, as it is framed by Levinas, and ethics and its associated key terms (responsibility, singularity and otherness) presented by Attridge, in *The Singularity of Literature*, is explicable in terms of Attridge's Derridean lens. For instance, Attridge mentions Derrida's collapsing of the architectonic structure of Levinas's conception of the relation of ethics, the domain of infinity, and justice, the order of Totality. This is made evident by Attridge's mention in *Reading and Responsibility* of the way in which Derrida depends and deviates from Levinas. Derrida manages to both betray and follow Levinas's position by complicating the relation of ethics and justice. He does this by entangling illeity and the interruption of the third. He conceives the Other, which

‘brought into being by language,’ rather, it exceeds, precedes and conditions systematic language, in the inceptive, ‘presemiotic’ approach of the demand and plea of the face of the Other (Robbins, 1999: 8). I have spoken in detail of this divergence and its implications above, pointing it out here in order to reveal the logical passage that Attridge makes from his theoretical engagement to an exegetical one. He claims that narrative, which in Levinasian terms is a facet of the Said,⁶⁵ in Coetzee’s writing, is regularly yet unexpectedly ruptured allowing ‘heterogenous, inassimilable’ alterity to impose itself in discourse. Attridge thus begins to deliver on his promise to *apply* his theory of literary invention to the analysis of Coetzee’s texts by honing in on the moments of narrative disruption that ‘appear’ in Coetzee’s early works of fiction.

Immediately after the aforementioned moment Attridge makes a connection between the interruptive and dissonant nature of Coetzee’s modernist form and the re-presentation of the disturbing rapport of inter-subjective relations that cut across race and class boundaries. The strain put on discursive coherence as well as the rupture and reversal of narrative development typifies the seismic potency, before sovereignty, and the trauma, prior to conscious experience, with which Levinas weaves his quasi-phenomenology of the ethical relation. Attridge remarks,

if the language by means of which the life of the servant has traditionally been depicted by the master has been one of the instruments for the perpetuation of

signifies the ethical relation, illeity, and the third, which interrupts the tie of the two parties of the ethical relation, inaugurating justice, on the same plane (Attridge, 2011: 109). Attridge’s concluding words of this segment of analysis further support this claim. He says,

unquestionably, then, Derrida, in his homage to Levinas, is being unfaithful to him, an infidelity clearly signalled, at the same time as it is disguised, in his rhetoric....In being faithful to Levinas, in doing justice to his words, Derrida is necessarily being unfaithful, doing an injustice (Attridge, 2011: 112).

⁶⁵ In Levinas’s thinking, the ‘logical narrative of reflection’ is of the logos, the Said, the order of ontology (Levinas, 2001: 119).

mastery, and realism does not offer a satisfactory alternative, a different literary practice, willing to reveal its own independence on convention and its own part in the exercise of power, may be less repressive. Such a literary practice is what I am calling Coetzee's "modernism" (Attridge, 2005a: 17).

It is my contention, however, that in assessing Attridge in terms of Levinas and his ethics alone, to situate the aspects of formal modernism present to Coetzee's fiction in relation to the alterity of the Other, Attridge assimilates alterity to the Same. By transfiguring ethics into a purposive frame of interpretation, Attridge's exegesis performs the very movement it wishes to undermine. While he wishes to use ethics as a means to inscribe Coetzee's formal, modernist literary practice with an emancipatory performativity, this subsumptive gesture consigns his project to a closure against alterity in the event of reading. To follow his approach as a directory in the event of literature means to always be too late, embedded in a moment where the Saying is eclipsed by the Said. When Levinas refers to the performativity of alterity it is to a demand within, but not processed by, conscious understanding. Ethical language is 'conative and interlocutionary in its orientation, performative in its speech. Not denotative, not a bit of information' (Robbins, 1999: 25). To reiterate, the face signifies, not as a linguistic mark set over a concept within a sign system but *kath' auto*, 'according to itself', as 'autosignification' (Robbins, 1999: 25). Attridge, however, reshapes alterity as a trope, a theme, a present of re-presentation, available to intentional consciousness, after making it a component of a hermeneutic framework.

3.3) *Modernist Form, Ethics and Thematization*

Attridge claims that the (modernist) formal specificity of Coetzee's work, in staging the apprehension of the other, has "ethico-political" implications (Attridge, 2005a: 6).⁶⁶ As I have begun to argue above, this is a gesture of thematization, in which the approach of alterity is elected,⁶⁷ by virtue of its very inscrutability, to a discursive and goal-directed role in Attridge's interpretation of Coetzee's texts.⁶⁸ He finds a place for alterity within a system

⁶⁶ Attridge says, 'my argument, briefly, is that what often gets called (and condemned as) the self-reflexiveness of modernist writing, its foregrounding of its own linguistic, figurative, and generic operations, its willed interference with the transparency of discourse, is, in its effects if not always in its intentions, allied to a new apprehension of the claims, of otherness, of that which cannot be expressed in the discourse available to us – not because of an essential ineffability but because of the constraints imposed by that discourse, often in its very productivity and proliferation' (Attridge, 2005a: 4).

⁶⁷ For Levinas it is ethics which elects the subject into Humanity, not the subject in Humanity which elects ethics. On his outlook individuation can happen in two ways: first, 'as a being who is particular in his genus' as a function of constating his difference from others who reside under the same or alternate genii (Levinas, 2001: 110). The other way is the one which 'permits one to say "I" or "me" without any consultation with regard to the genus to which one would belong' (Levinas, 2001: 110).

⁶⁸ This thematic approach is the preferred mode of analysis of other prominent critics working with Coetzee in Levinasian terms: Stefan Helgesson and Mike Marais. Helgesson, in *Writing in Crisis: Ethics and History in Gordimer, Ndebele and Coetzee*, sets up Levinasian ethics as a hermeneutic rubric with which to make sense of the enigma of Michael K, deploying a 'Levinasian critique of the knowing, sovereign subject' (Helgesson, 2004: 189). He says, 'the novel's blankness should...be read, at least initially, as an existential blankness in the Levinasian sense, undetermined by social circumstances. Specifically, the representation of Michael K *corresponds* [my emphasis] to crucial moments in Levinas's philosophy of the subject and the other' (Helgesson, 2004: 191). Helgesson puts Levinas to use as an instrument in the cause of post-colonial analysis, extolling the fragmentary force of the ethical imperative. He remarks, 'in the present context, Levinas's philosophy could...be regarded as a form of catachresis, akin to the catachrestic writing of Coetzee' (Helgesson, 2004: 195). Here, he shows his hand, subsuming the interruptivity of Levinasian alterity under the concept of catachresis. He says, 'the other uncannily precedes the Same, as in Levinasian ethics' (Helgesson, 2004: 196). He intones, 'the notion of K's passivity does indeed grant us a point of encounter between *Life & Times* and Levinas's ideas on passivity' (Helgesson, 2004: 197). Helgesson's method involves identifying moments of putative correspondence where K's state of being match up to the states of subjectivity that Levinas phenomenologizes ('there is one brief moment of passivity, that places activity in question, but it is no more than a moment's pause in the flush of initiative' (Helgesson, 2004: 198)).

In *Secretary of the Invisible: the Ideas of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*, Marais subordinates Levinasian ethics to other (derivative) hermeneutics of inter-subjective rapport, acting as frames of analysis for certain narrative events, relations and moments

by making it a structural component of Coetzee's modernism: the Other is co-opted into the intentional loop, the return 'home', the identification of the Same with itself. It does not signify on its own terms, *auto kath' auto*, but as a component of a system of meanings where its unfamiliarity, nonphenomenality and unknowability are its significations. This view lends credence to the given explanation of those seemingly inexplicable moments in Coetzee's texts which resist, in Attridge's words, 'rational accounting'. It allows one to call each and every moment of narrative incomprehension an entry of the Other into familiar and recognisable discourse.⁶⁹ On Levinasian terms the Face is defaced, trans-figured into a hermeneutic tool which accounts for the presence of incomprehension.

This view is supported by Attridge's contention that Coetzee writes in a modernist modality which 'valorises an opening onto otherness' as a formal counterpoint to the imperialising aspect of a 'rationalistic', 'humanistic' and instrumentalising modernity and modernism (Attridge, 2005a: 8). He identifies several examples from the three novels in support of this claim that the form of Coetzee's texts has an ethical impact (Attridge, 2005a: 6). For instance, Coetzee denies 'the reader any ethical guidance from an authoritative voice or valorising metalanguage' (Attridge, 2005a: 7). Coupled with the fact that, 'we remain conscious of [his] narrating figures as fictional characters, as selves mediated by a language which has not

within Coetzee early fiction (Marais, 2009: 11). Marais applies Derrida's ideas on the ambivalence of hospitality and the 'logic of dependence' to the content of Coetzee's novel, *Dusklands*. Hospitality becomes a figuring device for an understanding of the nature of the dynamics of the American project in Vietnam and the interface of the early Dutch settlers in the Cape with the Hottentots (Marais, 2009: 4). He says that 'in the communities depicted in *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the guest who has been invited does not arrive and so cannot affirm the host that issues the invitation' (Marais, 2009: 8). He arrives at this insight by reading-in the consequences of Derrida's theorization of the economy of Hospitality where the naming of the stranger marks the absence of that which the name endeavours to signify (Marais, 2009: 8). Marais's analysis of *Dusklands* assumes a staging of Hospitality, where Jacobus Coetzee's ideas, perceptions and beliefs regarding the khoi-san are formulated in the colonial discourse of the home of the host prior to their eventual encounter (Marais, 2009: 10). He extends this mode of critique to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, saying 'like the Vietcong and the Khoi in *Dusklands*, then, the barbarians in *Waiting for the Barbarians* refuse to 'stand up' to Empire. They do not allow Empire to define itself by assuming a position in opposition to them' (Marais, 2009: 13).

forgotten its mediating role,'⁷⁰ ensures that 'we can never remove the aura of something like irony that plays about these representations of human individuals' (Attridge, 2005a: 7). The presence of this de-structuring irony, premised on a highly self-reflexive deployment of language, conjures many of the depicted characters as figures of otherness. It leads to a lack of epistemic certainty which ensures a resistance to the attribution of a closed, unequivocal meaning. Furthermore, it is often enlisted through a strategic narrative contradiction evident in Coetzee's first two novels, *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), as a 'flagrant challenge to the tradition of the realist novel' (Attridge, 2005a: 14).⁷¹ The textual games concerning authority, representation, truth and possibility – 'the disquieting unreliability' (Attridge, 2005a: 23) – constantly undermine the operation of verisimilitude.⁷² This tactic continuously puts into question the power of the narrating voice and consciousness over language and thus of language as an instrument of domination (Attridge, 2005a: 16).

This troubling of internal narrative coherence is glaringly evident in *Dusklands*. It flares up in the traces of 'authorial mockery at Jacobus's self-deceiving rhetoric' (Attridge, 2005a: 20),⁷³ and in the negation of events in the form of Klawer's impossible double death, first by drowning then by illness (Attridge, 2005a: 20). And in *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda provides two different scenarios with which the novel opens and two variant descriptions of her two distinct acts of patricide (Attridge, 2005a: 23).⁷⁴ Hendrik's beating of Magda is narratively retracted and superseded by an act of rape (Attridge, 2005a: 25). Then the rape on the kitchen floor is temporally displaced by a seemingly less brutal encounter of sexual

⁷⁰ For example, the fragmented paragraphs of *In the Heart of the Country* deny the reader the pleasure of suspending disbelief. This foregrounds the fact that the world of the novel is refracted through language (Attridge, 2005a: 21).

⁷¹ Attridge elegantly terms this phenomenon 'the displacements of that mimesis by anachronisms and parodies' (Attridge, 2005a: 21).

⁷² Attridge makes this point in "Ethical Modernism" (Attridge, 2004b: 658).

⁷³ This is repeated in "Ethical Modernism" (Attridge, 2004b: 661).

⁷⁴ These analyses are echoed in "Ethical Modernism" (Attridge, 2004b: 662-4).

coercion in Magda's bedroom (Attridge, 2005a: 26).⁷⁵ Attridge explains the import of these impossible narrative actualities by saying,

we are made aware of the constructedness of the events and the craftedness of the descriptions, as well as of the author's sovereign power to do whatever he pleases with the narrative. The alterity which Hendrik, as coloured, as servant, represents for Magda, could have been compellingly conveyed without the distortions, but these distortions produce a fuller sense of an unknowable other, unknowable to such a degree that the conventions of narrative accounting break down (Attridge, 2005a: 26).

Attridge underwrites these narrative reversions, anomalies, anacoluthons and retractions with the support of thorough analysis of the content of the novel – a close reading approach typical of literary criticism. Here, the analysis of content and form in Coetzee's novel is coupled with ethics in order to build a position on the use and effect of modernist repertoires in Coetzee's hands; ethics has utility. To elaborate, Hendrik, refracted through Attridge's ethical hermeneutic becomes a figure of alterity,⁷⁶ of irreducible difference and incontrovertible unknowability, an 'unknowable otherness' (Attridge, 2005a: 29).⁷⁷ His status as a symbol of alterity is amplified by the deliberate narrative 'distortions' which encourage bafflement and uncertainty rather than conviction and transparency.⁷⁸ Here, Attridge passes judgment,

⁷⁵ This is invoked, once again, in "Ethical Modernism" (Attridge, 2004b: 666).

⁷⁶ He says 'the demands these figures make upon the culture which excludes them are also demands made upon all these familiar discourses, which thereby come under pressure to abandon their universalizing pretensions and to recognize their historical origins and contingent existence' (Attridge, 2005a: 13)

⁷⁷ Attridge remarks, 'Hendrik and Anna remain enigmatic presences, never wholly grasped by the machinery of the text, never securely "in their place"' (Attridge, 2005a: 29). He also states that 'the alterity which Hendrik, as coloured, as servant, represents for Magda, could have been compellingly conveyed without the distortions, but these distortions produce a fuller sense of an unknowable other, unknowable to such a degree that the conventions of narrative accounting break down' (Attridge, 2005a: 26).

⁷⁸ Attridge forges a neologism that conceptually covers this peculiar self-disturbing, self-reflexive language crafted by Coetzee, calling it textualterity: 'a verbal artefact that estranges as it entices...that speaks of that about which it has to remain silent' (Attridge, 2005a: 30). In "Ethical Modernism", Attridge articulates this concept again (Attridge,

supported by close reading, on certain passages from Coetzee's novels, through a figural in-reading of alterity.⁷⁹ He says,

Figures of alterity recur in these novels, usually as members of a subordinated group perceived from the point of view of a dominant "first-world" culture (though one whose claim to any kind of "firstness" is frequently put in question. Instances are the Vietnamese "enemy" and the native South Africans in the two novellas of *Dusklands*; the farm servants in *In the Heart of the Country*; the barbarians in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; Friday in *Foe*; and Vercuiel in *Age of Iron* (Attridge, 2005a: 12).

He sets up the novels as staging the fact of otherness, in the form of figures of alterity at the level of the thematic world of the work, reading it through Levinasian ethics (Attridge, 2005a: 12). This kind of reading engagement involves a backsliding from his stated approach, one that foregrounds the singularity of the reading event in the revolving genesis of literature as event, into the detached subject-position of the critic-clinician commenting on, and arranging, the properties and meanings of the text under observation.⁸⁰ Despite wishing to

winter 2004: 669). As a side note, there is conceptual similitude between this notion and that mentioned by Simon Critchley in *Very Little...Almost Nothing* where he alludes to that peculiar quality of Beckett's texts which undermine their own narrativity and coherence as they unfold. Critchley calls this Beckett's 'syntax of weakness', a literary discourse which continually undermines, undoes and cross-cuts itself as it moves forward (Critchley, 2004: xxvi). Critchley frames it as the 'endlessly proliferating and self-undoing series of sayings and unsayings' (Critchley, 2004: 198), weak because 'Beckett's sentences are a series of weak intensities, antithetical inabilities: unable to go on and unable not to go on' (Critchley, 2004: 199). Furthermore, in developing his idea that Beckett's narrative choices espouse a view that sees meaninglessness as an achievement, Critchley invokes Coetzee. In a footnote (number 85), he refers to an interview conducted with Coetzee who comments on the 'sensuous delight of Beckett' (*Doubling the Point*, p 70) (Critchley, 2004: 212). This is the delight of an existence shorn from the narrative(s) of redemption.

⁷⁹ In a footnote he mentions that Marais reads Coetzee's texts as engaging otherness through 'the terms proposed by Levinas and Blanchot' (Attridge, 2005a: 12).

⁸⁰ Speaking of *Dusklands* he says, 'one of its central concerns is a specific version of the self-other nexus that was to be developed further in several later works: the relationship between master and servant' (Attridge, 2005a: 16). Attridge has recourse to a mode of analysis that makes far-reaching claims about themes in Coetzee's novels, insights that exceed their inaugural being in the event (Attridge, 2004b: 658). Furthermore, this resort to

circumvent a universal criticism, one that makes propositional and pervasive judgments on its object(s) of analysis, offering a measure-for-other-readings, by stressing the contingency and singularity of literature, he recourses to the position of a conventional critical outlook.⁸¹ As an aside, Attridge's reading of Levinas through Derrida's refurbishing of the Levinasian stance, made evident in *Reading and Responsibility*, may allow conceptually for his slippage into thematic criticism without undermining the justness of his response. The kind of approach which sees ethics in its critical explorations of fiction, at the level of the content of the novel, finds anecdotal support in Attridge's comments in the chapter, "Posthumous Infidelity," of *Reading and Responsibility*.⁸² However, on Levinasian terms Attridge's effort

thematic criticism suggests that he falls into the risk he mentions when thinking the nature of responsible reading. He says,

this is what it means to be hospitable to the other's thought, to welcome it in the fullest sense: both to allow one's own thinking to be transformed by it, as Derrida's certainly was by Levinas's, and also to treat it as still growing, still in the process of fulfilling its potential. The risk, of course, is that this kind of reading may turn out to be an appropriation in the worst sense, a misreading that twists the original to suit the predilections of the reader; but this is a risk that has to be run (Attridge, 2011: 114).

⁸¹ For a discussion on how Levinas keeps ethics apart from universality see Ciaramelli. He acknowledges that Levinas's conception of ethical precedence differs from universality. He says,

I am individualized by my nonreciprocal relation with another. And in the very impossibility of my absenting myself from this relation, the subjectiveness of the subject becomes universal. That which is universal in this case is the ethical significance of my being the hostage of my neighbour....In this context universality is beyond the logos and does not concern "knowledge" of any kind (Ciaramelli, 1991: 95).

⁸² Attridge finds resonances between Derridean thought and Coetzee's fiction that typify ethics. He says,

Coetzee and Derrida are animated by some of the same concerns and haunted by some of the same fears. Derrida's continuing engagement with the question of responsibility to the other – perhaps most dramatically evident when, in *The Gift of Death*, he explores the consequences of the only apparently tautologous slogan *tout autre est tout autre*, which one might inadequately render as 'every other is wholly other' – is also a thread that runs throughout Coetzee's work, from the American propagandist's relation to the Vietnamese enemy and the eighteenth-century hunter's treatment of South Africa's indigenous inhabitants in the two novellas of his first work of fiction, *Dusklands*, through the many master-servant relations and racial conflicts that occur throughout his writing and the irruption

to respond responsibly to Coetzee's texts involves an irresponsible methodological response to Levinasian ethics, however ineradicable this may be, and his stance on literature in the event.⁸³ To deem his approach Levinasian demands that it be evaluated in relation to ethics and Levinas's writing of it. As a last word on the matter, I have argued that both Attridge's theoretical reflections and critical engagements betray the Levinasian position, calling into question the validity of considering his project as such. He says regarding his angle onto Levinas, 'my own argument comes closer to the suggestion made by Bernasconi and Critchley in their Introduction to *Re-Reading Levinas* that there might be a Levinasian hermeneutics which "would perhaps be defined by its readiness for re-reading because it would have no interest in distilling the content of a text into a 'said'" (xi)' (Attridge, 2004a: 141). In the final analysis, Attridge's argument does not live up to this inaugurating wish.

of unplaceable individuals like Friday in *Foe* and Vercueil in *Age of Iron*, to the devastating staging of one man's failure to acknowledge his responsibility to the other in *Disgrace* (Attridge, 2011: 42).

⁸³ This evaluative and instructive approach is present in "Ethical Modernism". For example, Attridge declaims, 'there are no communicative breakthroughs in Coetzee's fiction; at most there are moments at which a character talks himself or herself into a new mental position, a new constellation of thought and feeling, with no guarantee that the addressee will take the slightest notice' (Attridge, 2004b: 669). It reverberates beyond the singularity of Attridge's reading, finding a place, most recently, in Kannemeyer's biography of Coetzee where the biographer cites the passage verbatim (Kannemeyer, 2012: 281).

Conclusion

i) Levinas's Aesthetics

It would be remiss to perceive Levinas's views on art as dispensable to critical approaches to the study of literature that borrow from his ethics. One cannot forego their implications in examining the relationship of ethics, literature and literary criticism without risking the betrayal of ethical language by overtaking it with the systematic language of the Same. Towards the end of his study in *The Singularity of Literature* Attridge remarks, 'I should add that my appropriation of Levinas's thought is extremely selective, and also that his own discussions of literature and art do not go in the same direction as mine' (Attridge, 2004: 141). Mike Marais, in the adoption of a theme-based, exegetical approach discards Levinas's lament concerning the conjuncture of ethics and the appreciation of art. He says, 'my critical approach to Coetzee's writing takes the form of a close reading of the various works: I trace the intricate, imbricated stock of metaphors in the oeuvre' (Marais, 2009: xv). I now turn to two of Levinas's pieces of writing on art, literature and criticism – "Reality and its Shadow" and "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other". In the movement from one to the other a shift in position with regard to the commensurability of ethics and literature is perceptible (Robbins, 1999: 75). Despite this relent Levinas continues to deny the paradigmatic co-presence of ethics and the kerygmatic drive of exegesis which arranges and arraigns the force and meaning of a literary work according to the sovereignty of reason. While his views on the relation between ethics and art and literature may soften there is no evidence to suggest that he extends this tolerance towards the analysis of art and literature.

In "Reality and its Shadow" Levinas reproaches the logic of interpretation, which is a product of reason, order, themes and categories, and, *a fortiori*, a function of ontology. He argues that it petrifies, gorgonizes and immobilizes persons and inter-subjective contact under the

theme and remands the thinking subject in a state of 'irresponsibility' (Levinas, 1989: 142).

In examining this essay, Robbins comments, 'at issue here is a violence directed not just at a face or at particular faces; the petrification of the face would do violence to the very possibility of the ethical's arising. It would put a stop to the ethical at the level of its condition of possibility' (Robbins, 1999: 49). Literature and literary criticism, as branches of aesthetic absorption, in focussing so fervently on the figural, foreclose the possibility of the arrival of the ethical.

To elaborate, Levinas censures art, and exegesis, for their recourse to forms of signification endorsed by the systematic language of ontology (Levinas, 1989: 141). The temporality of art freezes Being in an instant that endures with no future, a duration without end, a moment he calls 'the meanwhile'. He asserts that,

art brings about just this duration in the interval, in that sphere which a being is able to traverse, but in which its shadow is immobilized. The eternal duration of the interval in which a statue is immobilized differs radically from the eternity of a concept; it is the meanwhile, never finished, still enduring – *something inhuman and monstrous* [my emphasis] (Levinas, 1989: 141).

The aesthetic relation, the absorption that describes the encounter with an artwork, which Levinas terms 'participation', is ontologically hermetic. It locks the cognitive subject and the identity of the art work within the order of Being, under the sway of the logos, eliding the risk of the interruptive approach of the Other in the summons of the face. The subject becomes enthralled, shut off from the ethical relation, by the allure and rhythm of the art work.

Levinas remarks that 'art, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion' (Levinas, 1989: 141). To reiterate, the viewer of the

art is caught up, without consent, through participation, in the rhythm of the artwork which seals her off from the disruption of ethical responsibility (Levinas, 1989: 132).

In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas replaces the concept of ‘participation’ with ‘isolation’, maintaining the same sense, however, of withdrawal from exposure and responsivity. To reiterate, the temporalization exhibited at the site of predicative statements, the essencing of beings, is exemplified in the work of art ‘in isolation. [E]very work of art is in this sense exotic, without a world, essence in dissemination’ (Levinas, 1998: 41). Orhan Pamuk in *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist* elucidates what it is like to be swept up in aesthetic participation. He says,

as I was slowly drawn into the world within the novel, I would realize that the shadows of the actions I had performed before opening the pages of the novel, sitting in my family house in Besiktas in Istanbul – the glass of water I had drunk, the conversation I’d had with my mother, the thoughts which had passed through my mind, the small resentments I had harboured – were slowly fading away (Pamuk, 2011: 6).

What Pamuk lends to Levinas’s notion of ‘isolation’ is a sense of a withdrawal from exigency, an abdication from the concerns that trouble and demand attention by immersion in the alternate and disaggregated temporality of the artwork. Rather than making the subject susceptible to the ethical summons, which Levinas sets as his discursive task, the event of art-appreciation blunts her responsivity to the Other.

If Levinas conceives poetry as a modality of art then it is true to say that his attitude towards art, in the later years of his philosophical career, alters; this is as exemplified in his essay “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other” (1972). While in “Reality and its Shadow” (1948) he asserts that ethical responsibility and art – its production, appreciation and commentary – are

fundamentally incommensurate, in the later essay he modifies his position on the relation of art and ethics. There, he reconfigures the relation of art and ethics, moving it from its previous post of unswerving mutual opposition to an accommodation antecedent to exegesis. That is, his later position allows art to be the locus of the disruption of the ethical relation in the domain of ontology. However, his views on art criticism remain dyslogistic. He does not extend this alteration to include aesthetic evaluation which, as an action of intentional perception and cognition, in bringing signification to account through narrative exposition, is of the Said (Robbins, 1999: 126).

Taking his cue from Celan's comments in his essay "The Meridian", Levinas explores the openness of poetry to the Saying. Celan aligns the speech of poetry with the cause of the 'wholly other'. He says,

I think a hope of poems has always been to speak in just this way in the cause of the strange – no, I can't use this word anymore – in just this way to speak in the cause of an other – who knows, perhaps in the cause of a wholly other (Celan, 2001: 408).

In Celan's poetics Levinas finds a structural similarity with his own strategic narrative preoccupations.¹ Poetry is situated at a pre-cognitive, pre-syntactic and pre-logical dimension, at the level of ethical, rather than systematic, language (Levinas, 1996: 41). Levinas commends Celan's poems, which he regards as self-fragmenting; they disrupt their own coherence, progression and unity in preparation for the approach of alterity.² This disruptive aversion to formal, narrative and thematic integrity Levinas calls 'attention', an extreme

¹ Levinas published this essay (1972) between "Substitution" (1968) and the first edition of *Otherwise than Being* (1974) which suggests he was already in the throes of developing his rejuvenated ethical schema, including its implications for exegesis, of his later magnum opus while thinking it through.

² Given that Levinas makes an aesthetic assertion in this piece of work, such that he falls foul of his own claims about hermeneutic evaluation, the question of whether he is his best interpreter becomes prevalent, though not urgent for my enterprise.

passivity and donation of gesture and address towards the Other (Levinas, 1996: 43). The ethical feature of the poem, according to Levinas, is that it is dialogic and non-thematic before it is discursive; it is address before it is the assemblage of propositions which form narrative (Levinas, 1996: 42). If poetry signifies in its excess of time and place then the poem is sheer address, 'at the moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing', prior to the traffic of themes among interlocutors (Levinas, 1996: 41). On this account, poetry is the 'unheard of modality of the otherwise than Being' (Levinas, 1996: 46). The fact of poetry contains within it the trace structure of the originary substitution, 'the one-for-the-other, the signifying of signification' (Levinas, 1996: 46).

I raise Levinas's treatment of Celan for two reasons: to reveal that Levinas's views on the order of the aesthetic are bound up his ethical position and that, contra Attridge, who reads his analysis of Celan's ethical poetics as placing 'high valuation on one poet' (Attridge, 2004: 141), Levinas does not necessarily mean that it is only Celan's poetry which the ethical intrudes upon to the exclusion of all other instances of the literary. There is a line of argument which challenges the soundness of this claim upon which Attridge's theorization of literature in the event depends. It draws on the links between Levinas's conception of poetry as sheer address, in the Celan essay, and Sartre's argument, in *What is Literature?*, that literature consists in an appeal. While I will not engage this argument much further here, it is of value to future inquiry, in this field, to suggest how it may proceed.³ In crafting his vision of literature as appeal, Sartre considers reading to 'be the synthesis of perception and creation' (Sartre, 1970: 30). The creative aspect lies in the cognitive calibration by the reader of the textual network of perceivable signs. To elaborate, he asserts the necessity of the reader for

³ This argument needs a detailed comparative analysis in which the philosophies of Levinas and Sartre are evaluated in relation to one another, placing a strong emphasis on the status of art and art criticism in their conceptual schemata. What I will say is that this conversation has already, in a sense, begun given that Levinas first published "Reality and its Shadow" in the journal founded and heavily influenced by Sartre, *Les Temps Modernes* (Hand, 1989: 129).

the possibility of meaningful writing in his notion of literature qua ‘directed creation’ (Sartre, 1970: 31); ‘the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents’ (Sartre, 1970: 29). It is due to the consciousness of the reader that the caucus of signs the author encrypts attain meaning. That is not to say that the reader is wholly in charge of their signification. Rather, it suggests that without the presence of a reading consciousness the words of the work would remain semantically moribund. This implies, according to Sartre, that what constitutes literature, in part, is the appeal it makes on its (prospective) readers to be brought out of a semantic dormancy. He says,

since the creation can find its fulfilment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work, all literary work is an appeal. To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language....And since this directed creation is an absolute beginning, it is therefore brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work (Sartre, 1970: 32).⁴

In the polemical process of coming to this insight, Sartre excludes poetry from reckoning in answering his question what is (committed) writing? He argues that writing has a socio-

⁴ This dyadic interface of Sartre and Levinas is open, interestingly, to a third interlocutor in the form of Coetzee as a meditator on the nature of the writing process. In 1974 he offered a post-graduate level course on ‘the social function of the artist’ which included on its reading list Sartre’s *Nausea* (Kannemeyer, 2012: 231). This would suggest that the extent to which Sartre’s ideas on the mechanics and function of writing influenced Coetzee’s own is a question of appreciable value in considering the value of Levinas to ‘Coetzee Studies’. This includes another thinker, Sartre, in Clarkson’s genetic, philosophico-linguistic approach which teases links, by transitive association, between Levinas and Coetzee by noting the pertinence of Celan to Levinas and Celan to Coetzee (Clarkson, 2009a: 52).

political function; it must reflect on social reality with a view to awakening readers to what is required of them in the pursuit of an ethical and just state of 'Society and the human condition' (Sartre, 1970: 13). Poetry, however, is excluded from this form of writing, which he terms 'action by disclosure' (Sartre, 1970: 13), since its topic of interest is language itself rather than the ways it can be used for extra-lingual benefit (Sartre, 1970: 5). It could be argued that Levinas, in affirming poetry as sheer address, critiques Sartre's distinction of prose and poetry as use-ful and use-less, respectively, by extending the reach of the notion of 'committed' writing to include poetry. Together with his calling into question of this opposition, there is also reason to believe, in his essay on Celan, that he is radically re-thinking the very meaning of poetry. This would require an examination of the appeal of literature in accord with trajectories other than those, situated at the hermeneutic level of the Said, preoccupied with themes, motifs and symbols.⁵

⁵ It is on the difference between these two approaches that Attridge makes a category error, in oscillating, with self-contradicting consequence, between a phenomenology of the literary event and an ethics-based hermeneutics (see subsection 3.1).

ii) *A final word*

To conclude, it is worth unpacking the value that this enterprise may have for future inquiries exploring the intersection of ‘Coetzee studies’ and ‘Literary studies’, on the one hand, and Levinasian ethics and aesthetics, on the other. The question with which I opened remains unanswered: if the ‘Levinasian approach,’ which operates at the level of ‘the content of the work,’ is not properly Levinasian (and is so only ‘superficially’), then what would an authentic ‘Levinasian approach’ be? This project has prepared the ground for this consideration to be broached in a theoretically informed way, revealing the conceptual and methodological impediments it must face should it wish to shrug accusations of ‘superficiality’. To recall, a Levinasian criticism – one that agrees with the suppositions of Levinasian ethics and aesthetics – is strictly impossible. The three moments of scepticism, delineated in the propaedeutic remarks of this thesis - the problem of the paradox of thematization (1.3), the inextricability of exegesis from the Said (1.2), and the double-bind of the economy of restitution (1.4) - all point to the impossibility of an applicative Levinasian literary critical discourse. That is, should ‘critical discourse’ be synonymous with either an approach that analyses the form and content of the work in terms of a Levinasian ethical vocabulary or a hermeneutic which analyses the significance of literature through a Levinasian inflected conceptual framework, then the systematic language of ontology will overtake ethical language. It cannot consist in an extrinsic applicative trajectory or a thematic approach: it cannot involve the transfiguring of ethics into a hermeneutic paradigm with which to disclose the ‘meaning’ of a text – thematically, formally, or otherwise. These modalities of the Said reinforce, rather than fray, the hold of systematic language over signification at the expense of ethical language. Both an ethics-based hermeneutics and a thematic Levinasian criticism cannot accommodate ethics. While Levinas concedes that literary works may be open to the injunction of the Saying, exegesis is not. Should a literary

work be the site of the ethical relation one cannot ever say so without remanding the Saying in the Said. The structure and ‘mechanics’ of Attridge’s theory of literary invention, and its critical application to Coetzee’s fictive oeuvre, considered in Levinasian terms, are case studies of these sceptical positions. While theoretical based approaches to the evaluation of literary works may not always have a duty to be attentive, in exactitude, to the philosophical claims of their sources this is not the case with Levinas’s ethics. It is possible to contravene the ethical position in the way one writes about, applies or relates ethics to other fields of inquiry. Since, in the context of Coetzee Studies, ethics and the writing of ethics is put to the analysis of literature and Levinas’s works are sceptical of exegesis, it must be concluded that Levinas is unsuitable as a means for the analysis of literature at the level of the content (and form) of Coetzee’s novels. This, however, does not imply that literary studies need banish Levinas from the possibility of influence in its workings. A responsible responding from within literary studies should take heed of Levinas when he says, ‘but there can be poetry in the hermeneutic logos itself before logic can render an account of this hermeneutic song. And there can be urgency in the ethical vocation of the face, which adjourns reflection on this urgency’ (Levinas, 2001: 119). It may be that the encounter should be explored afresh by investigating Levinas’s thoughts on how and what this ‘poetry’ before prosody signifies. What I can suggest, without opening onto another path of research, is that a poetry prior to logos indicates that the meeting of Levinas and literature demands that Levinas be applied indirectly, to inform reading practices, rather than to the critical readings themselves, which traffic in themes, motifs and symbols. The next step is to consider the two postulant questions: what would a phenomenology of literary address consist in and what would a Levinasian ‘reading practice’ be?

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