

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

---

2017

## Against Egology: Ethics and Style in George Eliot and Emmanuel Levinas

Athanassia Williamson  
*University of Oxford*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

Williamson, Athanassia, "Against Egology: Ethics and Style in George Eliot and Emmanuel Levinas" (2017).  
*The George Eliot Review*. 1.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## AGAINST EGOLOGY: ETHICS AND STYLE IN GEORGE ELIOT AND EMMANUEL LEVINAS

By Athanassia Williamson

But who could say he had not seized the thread which may somewhere hang out loosely from the web of things and be the clue of unravelment? (George Eliot, *Theophrastus Such*)

The interruptions of a discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity. (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*)

It is difficult for any essay on George Eliot's moral philosophy to chart new territory in the field of Eliot criticism. Eliot's moral philosophy has been written about copiously in a critical literature that now spans much of the broad landscape of philosophical ethics from Aristotle to Spinoza, Kant, Feuerbach, Mill. It is an irony, perhaps, that so many critics have been ready to find philosophical models in Eliot's fiction when she herself appeared to reject grand moral theorizing in novels: too often, she chides in *Adam Bede* (1859), novelists forget 'common, coarse people', preferring 'to frame lofty theories fit only for a world of extremes' (258). If novels are in Eliot's thinking a means of working through (and for) our true moral condition, does not criticism go awry as soon as it resituates her texts at the nexus of a theoretical discourse? Eliot, of course, does not reject theory per se; she rejects those grand and simplifying theories that are abstracted from reality, and indifferent to the complex texture of our experience. Rather than privileging philosophy as the critical lens that sees to the bottom of the text, the reader of Eliot does better to stage a critical encounter between literature and philosophy.

Such an encounter is likely to reveal contradictions and non-congruencies between texts; a philosophical aesthetic will, after all, seem far removed from the world of realist mimesis or 'faithful representing'. But to treat Eliot as a dedicated realist, committed to the work of understanding reality, is problematic in its own way. Problems arise when criticism neglects the sceptical aspects of her thinking, which gain force from *Daniel Deronda* (1876) onwards, and of which there is an early intimation in her novella 'The Lifted Veil' (1859). Eliot's later writings evince a growing hostility toward legislative, ethical rule-giving on the grounds that is compatible with realism (as well as causing trouble for it); her moral scepticism, anticipated early on by her critique of the 'men of maxims' in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), finally stretches, to its breaking point, the moral realist mode. In the later phase of her writings, systematizing moral realism gives way to a more flexible or pluralistic psychological realism, of which there are strong signs in *Middlemarch* (1871-2). *Daniel Deronda* gives full expression to this turn in Eliot's thinking; the common identification of Eliot as a moral realist breaks down here under the pressure of an expansive ethical pluralism with a far more complex agenda than any normative ethics. In her last work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), the intradiegetic narrator Theophrastus archly tells us that he has been tempted to 'object[t] to Aristotle as too much of a systematiser, and ... prefe[r] the freedom of a little self-contradiction as offering more chances of truth' (16). This last

text stands as the most performative, Carlylean work in the Eliot canon, enacting self-contradiction throughout Theophrastus's philosophical discourse. 'Self-contradiction', a byword of recent work on realism, is a valued characteristic of criticism that emphasizes ambivalence and self-consciousness about epistemological, experiential and moral truth claims, seeing these qualities as distinctive, even constitutive, of the realist mode (Levine 207). In Eliot, self-contradiction might finally be the key of resistance to a totalizing discourse. Her ambivalence, an ingrained scepticism about the degree to which moral truth claims can or should be legislative, is an always present and arguably definitive aspect of her realism – the clue of its unravelment.

In the interest of bringing into relief the sceptical turn in Eliot's later work, this essay will explore the philosophical convergence of her fiction with the works of the twentieth-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Recently, K. M. Newton has made analogous use of a paired reading by situating Eliot's ambivalent moral narratives in relation to Derrida's notion of 'undecidability' in *Modernizing George Eliot* (163). The Levinasian dimension of Eliot's writings undergoes, however, relative neglect by Newton, who allies, somewhat simplistically, Levinas's mode of ethical thought with the 'moral absolutism' that Eliot habitually challenges in her work (191). Conversely, Rachel Hollander (2009) rightly identifies a correspondence between the ethical thinking of Eliot and Levinas, but does not supply, with a full account of both writers' ethical formulations, sufficient comparative intensity.

I will argue that the ethical pluralism characteristic of Eliot's late writings anticipates Levinas's rejection of legislative, deontological ethics in the early 1960s, especially from *Totality and Infinity* (1961) onward. Both Eliot and Levinas problematize an intellectualist or theoretical ethics that fails to attend to our moral experience as an embodied and affective process. They are both sceptics of their inheritances of moral theory, and in their work attempt self-consciously to re-orient or reconstruct that inheritance. For Eliot, Feuerbach is a major encouragement to rethinking the grounds for moral agency; for Levinas, it is the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger that forms the basis of his ethical programme. Levinas's radical (even hyperbolic) stance against Western philosophy as it had hitherto existed, his attack on the Enlightenment narrative as a structure that subsumes the individual into a higher totality, is not the spontaneous articulation of a new philosophical position. His stance is *responsive*, incorporating recent Continental philosophical influences alongside a profound influence from the Talmudic writings. Notably in *Daniel Deronda* and *Theophrastus Such*, Eliot shares with Levinas this debt to the Talmud, and shares also his welcoming disposition towards an increasingly multi-ethnic society.

What aligns these writers more than anything else, however, is a self-reflexive scepticism – a scepticism turned inward upon the self and upon the claims to authority of the writer's own philosophy. 'Philosophy is not separable from scepticism', Levinas writes, 'which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it only to find it at once again on its footsteps' (*OBBE* 168). In *Otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas revises and responds to *Totality and Infinity* (and to Derrida's deconstruction of the text in 'Violence and Metaphysics', 1969) with a renewed awareness of the limits of his philosophical method; his philosophy, alert to its own aporia, has to be reworked. *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being* chart (both separately and in their relation to each other) a similar intellectual trajectory to Eliot's increasing ambivalence about the ethical claims of realism. Her realism shows a similarly self-reflexive, increasingly self-questioning relationship to

itself. For Eliot, it becomes gradually evident that realism is not separable from scepticism, and finally that realism is not the only valid vehicle for philosophical reflection on ethics.

This essay will implement a Levinasian reading of Eliot's late fiction, *Daniel Deronda* and *Theophrastus Such*, with some attention also to her earlier novella 'The Lifted Veil' – the three texts least associated with the 'moral realist' mode Eliot was and remains best known for. By putting in dialogue the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas and Eliot's later fictions, the essay will unpick the ethical re-orientation of Eliot's works from a normative ethics grounded in sympathy and compassion for others to the late narratives' experimentation with different ethical modes of being. Like Levinas's 'Ethics of Ethics', Eliot's late moral philosophy engages the ethical complexity of the self-other relation – interweaving dialectically an ethics of responsibility, which privileges *being for the other* over the individual's self-concern, and an ethics of sensibility, which relies on (and cannot dispense with) egoistic self-concern in the making of moral judgements.

### **Realism, egology, and 'I = I'**

The idea of ethical *orientation* resonates with narrative theory's conception of the self-other relation as, largely, a matter of point of view. In what way is the self oriented toward the other, and how is that orientation reflected by the narrative lens through which the world of the story is engaged? Much nineteenth-century literature positions the narrator as an extradiegetic, omniscient agent (godlike in status) who is able, *from above*, to sustain the 'spectacle of the whole of all ordinary human reality' (Davis 392). The relation of such narrators to the world is asymmetric: oriented to the world from a pedestal, the world spun below them as on an axis. This is, implicitly, the relationship of the realist author to the world of their novel – axiologically and topologically privileged, not *extra-* but *supradiegetic*. It is quite different from the worldview proposed by Levinas, who represents the self-other relation as asymmetric yet spatially reversed, who shifts priority of view onto the 'Other' who is above the self. Levinas, like Husserl before him, replaces the Cartesian 'knowledge of consciousness' with a 'reflexive consciousness' that recognizes the intentionality of its object. The subject-object relation is redefined here as a pluralistic relation between subjects, conceptualized hyperbolically by Levinas as the (non-)relation of the subject to an 'absolutely separate' and 'transcendent' Other.

'In the welcome made to the Other I welcome the Most Higher to which my freedom is subordinated', Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* (300). Levinas's language is suggestive (to some readers culpably suggestive) of a theology of the Other. Like God, the Other is irreducibly singular; one *trans-ascends* to the Other in speech. The expansive coup d'oeil of the realist is incommensurable with such a relation, and annuls singularity and plurality alike. For Levinas, a worldview that subordinates the other to one's own knowledge and understanding effects a domineering *totality* (TI 217). The world of the story, in such an ethics, becomes an extension of the narrator's consciousness, the Cartesian 'I' becoming the assertive centre of all existence.

Eliot's early fiction risks such totality, though she is always wary of it. The 'faithful account of men and things as they have *mirrored themselves in my mind*' (221), to which she declares her commitment in *Adam Bede* (1859), is already a cautious step away from the selfless 'substantial reality' she advocates in her review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters, Vol. III* (1856) ('Art and Belles Lettres' 626). For Eliot (as for Levinas), the totalizing tendencies

of the mind, of the perceiving 'I', render impossible the picture of an objective human reality. Eliot's caveat, 'The mirror is doubtless defective ... the reflection faint or confused', rings (or should ring) as loudly as her faith in truth-telling (AB 221). Caution sharpens, however, to a stark cynicism in 'The Lifted Veil' where Latimer's 'microscopic vision' of his fellow-men, a parallel to the realist's penetrating gaze, can violently 'thrust [them] asunder', turning a plurality of different selves into a 'fermenting heap' (14). The ethical collapse articulated by Eliot's novella foreshadows, and gives more Gothic expression to, a pervasive ambivalence in her late fiction, where she is deeply self-conscious about the realist viewpoint as a position of enlightened spectatorship. In *Theophrastus Such*, the eccentric and unreliable narrator reflects that 'To look always from overhead at the crowd of one's fellow-men must be in many ways incapacitating, even with the best will and intelligence' (19). The realist narrator, looking always from *overhead*, is limited, taking the risk of fusing the world's multiplicity into a tyrannical and self-coherent concept.

It is therefore worth attending, more than criticism has conventionally done, to those moments when Eliot elects *not* to look overhead, supradiegetically, but adopts instead a narrative persona – Theophrastus himself, or Latimer in 'The Lifted Veil': characters who, in occupying the role of the storyteller, question the ontological and epistemological (and by Levinas's account, ethical) privileges of an omniscient account. These characters are, as if to exaggerate the possessive grasp of subjectivity, obsessed with their own interiority – an obsession deepened to pathology in Latimer's case. Preoccupied with the history of his own consciousness, he has an ear, but no sympathy, for the psychological interiority of others. The first essay of *Theophrastus Such* is named 'LOOKING INWARD' (3), signposting the beginning of a confessional account which advances introspection as 'the key to other men's experience' (5). Half of Latimer's autobiography is a long meditation on his increasingly alienated 'inward experience' before he decides to 'hurry through the rest' ('LV' 30). The narrative structure of both works registers the psychological and moral structure of the narrator's experience – the fact that their knowledge of the world and others proceeds from egoistic self-knowledge.

Their accounts of the world are, as first philosophy, accounts of themselves, offering an archic subjectivity in which the world begins and threatens to end with the self. Whatever Latimer's perceptual insight into the thoughts of his fellow-men in the parallel flow of his 'double consciousness' (21), these insights are ultimately clothed in *his* memory, dressed with *his* ideas, incorporated within his dominant (and hostile) subjectivity. His is a 'conscious grasp [which] is a possession of the Other by the Same' ('Transcendence and Height' 18). Unlike Latimer, Theophrastus shows an awareness of 'self-partiality' as a condition which 'has a starving effect on the mind' (9), but his proffered solution – to guard against the tendency of self-occupation – fails to escape the self-enclosed sphere of the ego. Whatever 'habit of mind' Theophrastus employs to 'kee[p] watch against ... self-partiality', his knowledge of the other begins with a version of his egoism – a sensed 'superiority of the ideal self, the God within, holding a mirror and scourge for our own pettiness as well as our neighbours' (10-13).

Across her fiction, Eliot negotiates, with varying levels of scepticism, the proposition that the 'ideal self, the God within' is the basis for man's moral nature. The first serious articulation of this scepticism, and Eliot's contact with it, can be traced to Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by Eliot in 1854. 'Man, by means of the imagination,

involuntarily contemplates his inner nature; he represents it as outside himself. The nature of man, of the species ... is God' reads Eliot's translation of a key passage (Feuerbach 208). God is, to put the point more bluntly than she does, man's imaginative construct, nothing more than the 'ideal self, the God within'. Here, Feuerbach rejects God as the external author of the moral law. Eliot's oeuvre is a sustained effort to secularize ethics on the basis of this fundamental insight – to rework morality within an anthropocentric framework rather than a theocentric one.

Such was the dominant impulse of realism, as she helped to shape it in the 1850s – seeking to establish a secularization of morals in line with the physicalist principles of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). The redefinition of the moral standard *in* man rather than outside him was already a preoccupation of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century German Romanticism. Eliot, like Arnold, admired Goethe. But she quickly begins to worry that finding in man's soul the moral compass of the world, although happily escaping the ascription of the moral law to a deity, inevitably makes of theology an 'egology', as Levinas warns (*TI* 44). The secularizing move to give ethical agency solely to man does not, of itself, escape a dangerous dichotomy of the inner and outer: the God outside merely becomes as Theophrastus puts it, 'the God within'. Theophrastus's lofty formulation of the 'superiority of the ideal self, the God within' is suggestive, positing a relationship of asymmetry between the privileged 'ideal self' and our neighbours' lower pettiness (13). This positing of the self as prior and coherent is what Levinas terms 'idealism' – producing a self that coincides with itself and the world about it (*TI* 169).

Eliot develops from the late 1850s to the late 1870s an increasingly discernible scepticism towards Feuerbach's account of moral ontology, his (too) self-coherent 'idealism'. Just as Eliot's choices of narrative form suggest a growing desire to scrutinize the epistemological and moral authority of the realist narrator, so there is a self-consciousness about the positing of any man or imaginative 'ideal' constructed by man as the basis for moral measurement. In 'The Lifted Veil', Latimer's 'idealism', the uncanny self-coherence of his world, is sensationally portrayed as disease – a pathology of moral realism reflecting Eliot's own malaise. By the time she came to write *Daniel Deronda*, as will be shown, Eliot was looking beyond Feuerbach's material monism, and testing out the possibilities of giving life to an increasingly anarchic, intersubjective pluralism that tested the limits of realist novel. At the far end of that development, in 1879, Eliot rejected linear narrative form completely: *Theophrastus Such* offers a performative double discourse – a tendency towards self-contradiction or aporia in the flow of Theophrastus's meditations that stylistically *enacts* scepticism. Condemning the moral flaws of one of the characters he adopts, Theophrastus asks, 'What could be more contemptible than the mood of mind which makes a man measure the justice of divine or human law by the agreeableness of his own shadow and the ample satisfaction of his own desires?' (8). Is not the 'ideal self, the God within' precisely a measurement of the justice of divine or human law according to man's own shadow? *Theophrastus Such* is a comedy of the ethical inconsistencies such insight produces.

To say that Eliot took Feuerbach's moral model and used it for the basis for her own mature philosophy of moral agency is giving her insufficient credit. From 1859, Eliot is self-consciously working through the various apparitions and configurations of an 'ideal self' and its relation to the moral law. Through the double discourse of *Theophrastus Such* there surfaces a major and never-resolved point of ambivalence: an attraction towards a reasoned,

intellectualist ethics (one that owes something to Utilitarianism) combined with a (not entirely consistent) view of moral agency that rests on belief in our capacity for native feeling and sympathy, and finds reason an inadequate basis for the moral life.

At this point, Levinas becomes a very interesting source of comparison. For Levinas, intellectualizing comes after ethics; ethics is anterior to being, universality, the state (*OBBE* 116). Ethics or 'Responsibility for the Other' is 'not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in [the subject] ... The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone' (*OBBE* 114). The answer of the self to the Other, *here I am*, is primordial, before I even come into self-conscious being. This is what Derrida means when he observes that Levinas does not offer 'a morality', fully furnished with laws and rules, but proposes instead 'an Ethics of Ethics' (138). Self-concern does not even enter into the ethical question, when understood from this meta-ontological perspective. The answer *here I am* substitutes the 'I' as if it never existed alone. Here is a philosophy of ethics that removes moral agency from the domain of conscious thought.

In Levinas, conscious thought falls outside of ethics because it fails to recognize the alterity of its object. '[T]he object of representation is indeed interior to thought: despite its independence it falls under the power of thought' (*TI* 123). The subject's intentionality, its ability to form representations, is also its power to totalize objects. The intelligibility of the object to the subject assumes the 'total adequation [sic] of the thinker to what is thought ... in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes' (123-4). In consciousness, 'exteriority' and 'absolute separation' are negated by the subject's representations and ideas. In brief, the 'adequation' of the subject to its idea of the object (the other) is where reasoned, intentional ethics comes unstuck, because the Other *exceeds* my idea of the Other. Intellectualist ethics for Levinas is no true ethics, being incapable of departing from itself and recognizing the otherness of the Other. This is why Levinas substitutes the 'I' with the '*here I am*': subjectivity itself has to be foundationally reconceptualized, made to accommodate an *affective* ethical relation that is also pre-intentional. The problem here, to be later discussed, is that it may be difficult to conceive of a self cognizant of the Other's intentionality when it does not know its own.

The narrative voice of *Theophrastus Such* oscillates between an ethical attitude that belongs to 'the creature with wider reason' and 'quick intellect' (71), namely an intellectualist ethics, and an ethics that stems from feeling, affection, and unconscious impulse. In the essay on 'Moral Swindlers', the narrator satirically draws attention to the supposed 'radical, irreconcilable opposition between intellect and morality' (134). The text however performs its own ambivalence towards that opposition. Theophrastus is clearly of the intellectual sort, but finds in himself all the same a longing 'for approbation, sympathy and love' (6). Morals, he asserts, arrive from 'the fullest knowledge and fullest sympathy' (135). In ethics, he unifies intellect and feeling, and the language of his definition of 'morals' foregrounds his desire for such a union: in morals, one must appreciate a '*dependence* in things', a '*connection*' between duty and the material economy (135, my emphases). However, Theophrastus has also told us, contrarily, 'It is of little use to theorize in ethics while our habitual phraseology stamps the larger part of our social duties as something that lies aloof from the deepest needs and affections of our nature' (131). His unifying theory of ethics is pre-empted by the claim that we *cannot* define or theorize in ethics. Here, the fluctuation is performative. It gestures to an undecidability that even Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* cannot quite attain; indeed,



Theophrastus is enacting a very Levinasian concept – of an object that exceeds my idea of it. A primordial ethical orientation supersedes a legislative ethics in Levinas, and the style of his philosophy strains to capture that orientation; for Eliot, primal needs and affections are given an equivalent priority, and similarly put style under strain.

Eliot's writing, I would argue, is in the end, more adept at enacting its own lawlessness, whereas Levinas's '*here I am*' risks becoming, as Derrida has commented, 'the Law of laws' (138). All Eliot's writing is interested in the moral potentiality of the affections, particularly in the moral feeling that results from 'the ties of inheritance both in blood and faith', which brings her moral inquiry to an end with her reflections on Judaism (*TS* 152). In the last of Theophrastus's essays, 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!', Eliot articulates a stance towards 'Jewish steadfastness' which apparently concludes the debate between an ethics arrived at through intellectual reflection ('mental trick[s]' as Theophrastus dismissively summarizes it, 71) and an ethics of feeling. The conclusion seems to rest affirmatively on the side of feeling and native sympathy. Asking whether the 'worthy child' of the Jewish people is 'bound' to the visions of its prophets, Eliot answers for us:

Yes, for the effective bond of human action is feeling [...]. Will anyone teach the nullification of this feeling and call his doctrine a philosophy? He will teach a blinding superstition – the superstition that a theory of human wellbeing can be constructed in disregard of the influences which have made us human. (165)

The language of 'bound'edness and 'bond'ing, responsibility and obligation echoes through Eliot's last two novels, as they echo also through Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, reflecting the degree to which both writers were influenced by the Talmud.

Both writers create a secular account of ethical responsibility, with close reference to the ethics of Judaism. Levinas's account of the ethical subject as 'host' or 'hostage' reflects the obligation of the Jew as one who 'bears the entire weight of all other men' (*TI* 300; *OBBE* 112; *DF* 173). In a similar movement, Daniel Deronda comes to the realization that the 'religious feelings [of Jews] must have much in common with those of other men' (*DD* 314). Deronda's moral impulse toward interracial understanding is characterized by an 'early-wakened susceptibility' (304), his Jewish ties of inheritance seeming to be the fountain of his deep sympathy. His sympathy is however characterized by the fluctuating authorial voice (anticipating Theophrastus's performative fluctuation) as 'too reflective and diffusive ... in danger of paralysing in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force' (305). As in *Theophrastus Such*, there is an oscillation felt by Deronda himself, but also enacted in the narrative voice, between rational intellectualism (which enables *selectness* and discernment) and the affections.

Deronda, at once typically English and a Jew, embodies the oscillation between two moral ontologies – an ethics of intellectual sensibility and an ethics of affective responsibility; it is, indeed, a version of Arnold's 'Hellenism and Hebraism' – restating the tensions within culture as tensions within ethics. In the second interview with his mother, Deronda foregrounds this conflict of impulses:

The effect of my education can never be done away with. The Christian sympathies in which my mind was reared can never die out of me ... But I consider it my duty – it is the impulse of my feeling – to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people, and if I can see any work to be done for them that I can give my soul and hand to, I shall choose to do it. (557)



His Christian education, the 'rear[ing]' of his mind, is opposed to the 'impulse of [his] feeling', a 'hereditary' duty of the blood. Nurture is opposed to heredity; the intellect to feeling; and so through *Daniel Deronda* echoes Arnold's ineffaceable 'alternations of Hebraism and Hellenism', of 'firm obedience' and 'clear intelligence' – of man's moral and intellectual impulses (Arnold 101-3). However, as crystallized later in *Theophrastus Such*, the dichotomy proves to be problematic and irresolvable. Nature and nurture, intellect and feeling, are not so much in a binary relationship as in an inevitable dialectic, which the style of writing must strive to register.

### Escaping the 'I'

In his philosophy, Levinas echoes Arnold's (and Eliot's troubled) treatment of the forces of Hellenism and Hebraism as competing systems of human thought. His 1963 essay 'The Trace of the Other' pitches its philosophy as an Old Testament narrative that counters Greek myth: 'To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever'; the narrative of return is opposed to the narrative of wandering that forgets its 'point of departure' (348). Western philosophy (beginning with Socrates's maieutics) is presented, like Greek myth, as a narrative with a recursive structure, ever seeking to return to its point of departure or origin, erasing its footsteps along the way. In contrast, Levinasian ethics presents itself as an Abrahamic narrative that refuses recourse to the same, but responds ethically to the call of the Other, leading to new and uncharted territory. The Abrahamic narrative is rehearsed in the ethical encounter in speech that forms the central part of *Totality in Infinity* – where the Other calls my freedom into question, and language 'puts in common a world hitherto mine' (TI 173-4). In this formulation, language becomes a condition and expression of responsibility – a responsibility to wander, to leave the point of origin, to escape from the 'I'. Language is the movement of the same unto the other, requiring 'a radical generosity' ('Trace' 349).

Levinas's philosophical narrative thus offers to be an escape from the 'I', self-reflexively generous, struggling to get out of its situation and embodiment. To speak, to write, is to escape. This sought-for escape – the 'need to get out of oneself ... the fact that the I [*moi*] is oneself [*soi-même*]' (50) – is the underlying drive of intersubjectivity as he understands it, inscribed in his much earlier work *On Escape* (1935). The nausea of being suffocated in oneself, the tragedy of being riven to oneself, produces a yearning towards something other than ourselves, to what we cannot and do not know. In an equivalent movement, the drive of escape, to escape the totality of one's consciousness, is inscribed in Eliot's fiction as a primary drive – the drive that pushes from a normative moral realism to a sceptical (in part) proto-phenomenological realism in her last 'realist' novel *Daniel Deronda*.

This drive is given much earlier, and aggressively partial representation, in 'The Lifted Veil', which anticipates – as a hyperbolic critique of the realist form – the later sceptical turn in Eliot's poetics. In the novella, the mastering impulse to know the other is countered and supplanted by a thirst for alterity, or difference, that offers relief from the pathology of totalizing knowledge.

So absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life, that if the whole future were laid bare to us beyond to-day, the interest of all mankind would be bent on the hours that lie between. ('LV' 29)

Uncertainty and doubt are the soul's 'breath of life', the breath of our sociality – the conditions that permit the 'I' to escape from itself. Latimer's obsession with Bertha expresses his desperate impulse toward escape. Her essential unknowability compels him towards her. She constitutes (or so he thinks, for a time) an escape from his 'diseased condition', the pathological egoism of the 'I'; she is his 'oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge' (18). Once the veil is lifted from Bertha's consciousness, and she ceases to embody his one 'blessed possibility of mystery', Latimer is repelled by her, and made 'dead' to her influences (31-2). With the melodramatic revelation of her interiority at the scene of Meunier's blood transfusion, Bertha, once Latimer's singular object of desire, only reinforces his nausea – the affliction of his totalizing consciousness. The revelation is already 'familiar', and comes 'like an old pain recurring with new circumstances' ('LV' 42). Latimer's existence is but to him a series of recursions, a wearying process of finding what he already knows.

Latimer's temporary failure to know Bertha or solve her enigma dramatizes in part the experience of exteriority Levinas offers us in *Totality and Infinity*: 'The face resists my possession, resists my powers' (197). Where Latimer fails however, and where his experience differs from Levinas's articulation of transcendence to the other, is in his capacity to be *questioned* by the other. Bertha does not induce Latimer to sympathy, or responsibility, for the other. Even as she 'master[s]' his imagination, she is reified as a 'secret', the 'single hypothetic proposition to remain problematic till sunset' ('LV' 32, 29). She is viewed as empirically knowable, a reduction of the other to the same, equivalent to one of Meunier's scientific problems. Levinas's 'Other' is, by contrast, utterly foreign and in no way empirically knowable. For Levinas's ethical subject, 'The relationship with the Other ... puts in question the world possessed' (*TI* 173), and language is the 'positive act of the one giving the world, his possession, to the other' (252). Latimer, failing to welcome the other, to have his world questioned through generosity and 'giving', fails to escape the prison of the ego.

Where 'The Lifted Veil' stages an extreme (and toxic) form of the realist claim to know sympathetically the condition of the other's selfhood, in *Daniel Deronda* the realist form is working hard to escape and efface itself, to be 'emptie[d]' of itself, as Levinas would put it ('Trace' 350). The fracturing of the cohesive realist worldview into two independent yet intersecting plots is the formal manifestation of the realist narrator/author's split or dislodged egoism. Formally, the novel resists totality – neither narrative is assimilable to the other, as Deronda and Gwendolen are unassimilable to each other's worldviews. The novel creates a vision of intersubjectivity with more at stake than the discovery of an 'equivalent centre of self' in others (*Middlemarch* 208). The priority of the self is challenged by a radical alterity or, in Gwendolen's case, an awareness of plurality previously inconceivable to her, and of her exclusion from 'wide-stretching purposes' and the 'larger destinies of mankind' (*DD* 677). Losing Deronda to greater claims than her own, she is 'dislodged from her supremacy in her own world' (677).

If escape is a primary drive, for Gwendolen it is painful, even allergenic. Her 'inborn energy of egoistic desire' counters Deronda's 'inborn lovingness' (33, 143). Eliot suggests a difference in their ethical predispositions that is not removed simply by Gwendolen learning to respect his alterity. It may be tempting to find here a kind of genetic determinism or 'natural teleology of descent' (as Gillian Beer does, 194) which relates affectivity and the drive toward plurality to the protagonists' respective genealogies. Certainly, the conception of 'many-sided' sympathy as an immanent habit of the blood (the drive of Jewish heredity) is

suggested with Deronda, and recalled in *Theophrastus Such* as the 'predominant kindliness which must have been deeply ingrained in the constitution of [the Jewish] race' (157). To conceive of Gwendolen's *inborn* egoism as an expression of her genetic inheritance is perhaps not a surprising extension of that thought, and a source of distinction. At their last meeting together, the distance between them is framed by Eliot 'like a difference of native language', which lays stress on the racial dimension of their otherness (*DD* 675).

If in Eliot there is a sense of a primordial ethical relation, it is clearly complicated by racial overtones. However, it is also clear that a racialized ethical dichotomy of the English and the Jews is not at all the vision of *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot's intention is to communicate their stake in a *shared* destiny, as she indicates in her 1876 letter to Stowe, a 'fellowship in religious and moral sentiment' (*George Eliot Letters* 301-2). Critically, the dichotomy must also fall apart because it fails to justify or furnish hope for Gwendolen's regeneration at the end of the novel; the loose 'thread' of her moral future (and its demand for a broader, more inclusive ethics than one of immanent sympathy) unravels the racialized teleology of descent. Her exclusion from 'larger destinies' is not a righteous punishment for her egoism, but a problem that the novel presents for itself and for its own moral philosophy.

In Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, the immanent drive toward the other, a reconfiguration of the Heideggerian death-drive or 'being-towards-death', is named 'extraterritoriality':

[I]n interiority a dimension opens up through which [a being] will be able to await and welcome the revelation of transcendence. In the concern for the morrow there dawns the primordial phenomenon of the essentially uncertain future of sensibility ... [T]he interiority of the home is made of extraterritoriality in the midst of the elements of enjoyment with which life is nourished. This extraterritoriality has a positive side. It is produced in the gentleness [*douceur*] or the warmth of intimacy, which is not a subjective state of mind, but an event in the *oecumena* of being – a delightful 'lapse' of the ontological order ... The Other precisely *reveals* himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness. (150)

The encounter with the Other in speech, my welcoming and hospitality toward the Other, is anticipated in the 'primordial phenomenon' or dimension that constitutes a 'lapse' or break with ontology. This is what Levinas means when he says that ethics is 'first philosophy' (*TI* 48). The ethical relation precedes being; out of my 'concern for the morrow', the 'uncertain future' of living, I experience my first arrival of care. This care answers to my 'Desire for Infinity' (150), and my debt to the generations before and after me.

The problem with Levinas is that he seems here to articulate a narrative that loses its phenomenological roots, becoming awkwardly estranged from perceptible experience. If phenomenology deals in *phenomena*, objects of perception, then the point at which Levinas steps out of human consciousness (to describe an event *anterior* to consciousness) is the point at which he leaves the terrain of phenomenology, at least as he had imbibed it via Husserl and Heidegger. Doubtless, 'Ethics and the Face' is the phenomenological heart, the recourse to experience, of *Totality and Infinity*. But if to justify or anticipate the ethical encounter in speech Levinas resorts to a pre-cognitive narrative of being, he inevitably also has recourse to the kind of theoretical abstraction against which his philosophy laboriously

itches itself. He unavoidably delivers a reflective or theoretically derived ethics – of the kind he criticizes in Husserl.

Levinas's philosophy is trying hard to escape its own discourse, to depart from itself, but only to find itself again trapped in its own language. Moreover, the pre-intentional/primordial is problematic because it fails to give an account of a motivation to act morally – which is where Eliot might find Levinas's ethics wanting. By abandoning reference to *phenomena*, and locating ethics in the pre-conscious, Levinasian ethics leaves the domain of conscious recall; in its immanence, the pre-conscious relation he describes has no experiential reference or tangibility. In this respect, Levinas's 'extraterritoriality' shares the difficulty of Eliot's conception of immanent sympathy. Pulling away from real reference, both writers enact aspirational moral visions or prophecies that push ethics and ethical realism to their respective breaking points.

In a Levinasian reading of Gwendolen's response to Deronda's alterity and the otherness of the world's larger movements, there is an obvious mismatch between the brutal 'shock' she experiences and the 'primordial phenomenon of gentleness' by which the 'Other' is revealed in Levinas (*DD* 678; *TI* 150). In Eliot, the force of this shock is likened to an 'earthquake', to an 'invading army', to the 'dire clash of civil war' (677). For Gwendolen, the shock is traumatic – as indicated by the violence of Eliot's metaphors. It 'thrust[s] her away ... quell[ing] all anger into self-humiliation' (678). Markedly *ungentle*, the shock of alterity is identifiable with the very 'shock negating the I' from which Levinas clearly distinguishes his phenomenon of transcendence-in-immanence (150). Gwendolen indeed becomes a 'hostage' to the 'Other' in the encounter (*OBBE* 112), but with all its more sinister resonances. The welcomed escape of the 'I' is here realized as the involuntary and terrifying obliteration of the 'I'. The force of Deronda's immanent, quasi-mythic sympathy, and of Levinas's ethics, can reduce Gwendolen, the subject, to a 'mere speck' (677). The 'Law of laws' cuts her out of existence. It excludes her, just as she is excluded from the racialized teleology of the Jewish plot.

Both Eliot and Levinas use the stylistic device of modified repetition to support an agenda of ethical pluralism, to remedy the narrowness of a legislative ethics. Each repetition gives the sense of an ethics thrown beyond itself (the ethical gesture *par excellence*), creating a language of performative excess. Transcendence is communicated by linguistic *excedence* – a discourse thrown beyond signification. It is within this performative discourse that Levinas can call the self 'a passivity more passive than all passivity' (*OBBE* 146). In the subject's encounter with racialized forms of alterity or the near-complete opacity of the other to the subject, a sympathy (or hospitality) in excess of itself – conceptualized as the drive toward escape from the 'I' and the welcome of the 'Other' – paves the way to a pluralistic ethics. This welcome is required to be unreflective, as it would be annulled by reflective analysis. In *Daniel Deronda*, reflective sympathy is only a little less radically characterized as a poor simulacrum of a stronger native sympathy, which reflection indeed threatens to 'neutralize' (*DD* 305). In his relation to Mordecai, Deronda has to conquer his own reflective tendencies (of speculation, 'hesitation and doubt', 423) to allow his more sympathetic tendencies to flourish.

Deronda's sympathy is *required* to be unreflective and hyperbolic (literally, thrown beyond itself): 'a profound sensibility to a cry from the depths of another soul; and accompanying that, the summons to be *receptive* instead of superciliously prejudging' (419,

my emphasis). The summons to be infinitely receptive is echoed by Levinas: 'It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity' (TI 51). The 'Law of laws' is to *welcome* or *receive*, beyond capacity. Disbelief, self-concern and rational inquiry all have to be readily dispelled to allow the 'Other' to 'exceed the idea of the other in me' (50). Deronda's affective sympathy, described in the novel as 'profound', 'many-sided', 'plenteous, flexible', 'ready, passionate', 'keen', even 'inborn', is characterized by performative excess, gesturing to something more than it can express. Nonetheless, Deronda must still *choose* between speculation and receptivity – a choice the ethical subject is never given by Levinas.

Eliot's vision of ethical pluralism resists literalism as it resists the confines of the realist novel. The nature of Gwendolen's encounter with alterity – the 'sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving' (DD 678) – is not restricted to her experience; the experience is shared by the philosopher, the realist and the reader. The horizon *dipping onward* is a horizon that exceeds my idea of it, irreducible to my comprehension – an infinity that overflows my concept of the Other. The ethical pluralism gestured towards by Eliot and by Levinas, the escape of the 'I', cannot properly be inscribed, because it overflows the language that tries to express it; true pluralism escapes thematization by language.

### Language and ethics

In Eliot's late writings, the realist claim to know the other is persistently undermined by a scepticism at the core of her ethical agenda. In *Daniel Deronda*, a cohesive realism and philosophy of ethics prove to be increasingly untenable, as the lives accounted for ethically in the novel exceed the bounds of the forms it inherited. Deronda, who oscillates between an intellectualist ethics that neutralizes the claims of others, and an expansive ethics of immanent sympathy, never fully escapes the force of a totalizing ethics. The sought-for plurality of a racialized, affective ethics, which gives coherence to the novel's Jewish plot, ultimately fails to respond to Gwendolen's ethical claims. Deronda's inclusive ethics of 'wide-stretching purposes' ultimately cannot be as pluralistic as it (or he) wants to be; like Levinas's 'Ethics of Ethics', it proves as rigid as the 'Law of laws', rendering Gwendolen invisible. She therefore becomes, to return to the metaphor used by Theophrastus, a 'thread' hanging out from the web of things, the 'clue of unravelment' frustrating the novel's totality. The novel's split form, its resistance to forming a unified structure, is a mirror to its split philosophy, and constitutes a significant part of its ethical achievement. This formal experimentation is radicalized in *Theophrastus Such*, where contradictions in the narrative voice *perform* the incoherence of its ethical agenda, rupturing the text's logic, enacting its own scepticism. The adopting of a first-person narrative viewpoint, or viewpoints (such is Theophrastus's inconstancy), in *Theophrastus Such*, as in her earlier novella 'The Lifted Veil', shows Eliot's sustained and growing doubts about the realist form, and foregrounds also Eliot's effort to *escape* and subvert the assumptions that come with it.

In Eliot's later fiction, destabilization of the realist mode highlights both the limits of her earlier moral philosophy and her impulse to depart from legislative ethical philosophy altogether. Formal and stylistic play ultimately allows her to gesture, by fracture or interruption, towards an ethics of alterity. Play offers an opportunity to *interrupt* the

coherence of a discourse – ‘conserved like knots in a thread tied again’ – to use Levinas’s metaphor. Put simply, Eliot’s fiction performs scepticism in a way that moral didacticism cannot. Even Eliot’s early realism is, as acknowledged at the beginning, never cohesive; the moments where the narrator steps outside the text have always been stark, obvious and painfully self-aware – interruptions of the totalizing discourse that would make realism a complete illusion. Levinas’s philosophy, reluctantly inhabiting the language of ontology, and preserving (with however many cautions) much of the language of phenomenology, never quite manages the startling stylistic shifts that Eliot charts across the landscape of her fiction. The range of its stylistic experimentation is, comparatively, remarkably consistent.

It is, however, worth attending again to the language and style of the moment at which Levinas calls for the replacement of the ‘I’ by the ‘*here I am*’. In that famous formulation, the ‘self’ is not a self proper but a ‘*substitution*’; he substitutes the self (so to speak) with substitution. ‘The self is a *sub-jectum*’, he also writes, ‘responsible for everything’ (116). Here, Levinas’s language is making a crucial philosophical and linguistic gesture, self-reflexively inverting the terms and principles on which a normative subjectivity would conventionally be based. He introduces a series of paradoxes at the heart of the ‘I’, which cannot conceive of itself without being interpellated by the Other. ‘[I]dentity is inverted’, he tells us; ‘the self is absolved of itself’; ‘[t]he non-interchangeable’ – the self, the ‘I’, identity – ‘substitutes itself for others’”(116-7). The *non-interchangeable* is interchanged for others. Levinas’s language is doing a lot of work here; the negation in the ‘non-interchangeable’ suggests the unsayable, gestures toward *more* than it can say, giving the sense of an ethics that is constantly essaying to escape its own thematization. Language in Levinas becomes, like Eliot’s formal shifts, a performative medium, and we see Levinas enacting inversion and substitution through style. In brief, it is a move to challenge the constative discourse of philosophy.

The possibility of a language that evokes infinitude has always been important for Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity*, the Other is an ‘interlocutor’, and the ethical encounter proceeds through speech. Speech is the face; speech, but also language and therein writing, exceeds my idea of it. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas finally tells us, ‘Language is already scepticism’ (170). Philosophy, not separable from language, is necessarily a discourse of interruptions; language (the said) thematizes the saying, but the saying is finally conserved as a ‘trace’ – ‘*the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present*’. In discourse, this ‘trace’ is like Eliot’s loose ‘thread’ – the clue that unravels the cohering web. Eliot’s metaphor is (one might say) a proleptic inversion of Levinas’s knotted ‘thread’ of discourse. But perhaps this is interesting in itself: the thread is *also* the trace. Discourse, in its proliferation of uncertain signifiers, is always the undoing of philosophy and of real reference.

So what if we jettisoned the expectation that speech must be sincere? Levinas does not go so far, but Eliot does. Realism and philosophy are doubtless aligned in their reliance on sincerity of speech (and an early Eliot criticized the poet Young for ‘radical insincerity’, (‘Worldliness’ 366), but it is clear that by *Theophrastus Such*, sincerity for Eliot is no longer a given. *Theophrastus Such* is not an exercise in phenomenological realism from a first-person perspective, remaining a consistent expression of Eliot’s empiricism; Theophrastus’s impressions differ radically from Eliot’s empiricist mode (which we continue to see in *Daniel Deronda*). In Levinas, and in Eliot’s realist texts, sincerity of speech essays a proximity to the truth or ‘Other’ without fusion. In *Theophrastus Such*, this desire for proximity all but seems to disappear. There is a change in the ‘temper’ of Eliot’s writing.



Say that he was endowed with the purest honesty, it would inevitably be dragged captive by this mysterious, Protean bad temper. There would be the fatal public necessity of justifying oratorical Temper which had got its legs in its bitter mood and made insulting imputations, or of keeping up some decent show of consistency with opinions vented out of Temper's contradictoriness. (TS 61)

The 'impression' given here is ironical: bad-tempered Theophrastus hypocritically outlines the hypocrisy of another bad-tempered man. But Eliot's temper, too, has been disrupted – in a way only previously seen in her anonymous reviewing. The performative, contradictory wandering of Theophrastus's discourse is finally not only an experiment with different ethical modes of being, but an experiment (or play) with different aesthetic modes. Speech, here, ceases to be sincere, and we are reminded of Theophrastus's question at the beginning of his impressions: 'can I give any true account of my own [character]?' (3, my emphasis). Empiricism, sincerity and proximity to truth all become new objects of the sceptic's scrutiny, not least when he undertakes to account for himself.

In *Daniel Deronda*, form and language are working hard, through acquired knowledge and felt sympathy, to receive the other beyond capacity; in *Theophrastus Such*, form and language perhaps exist more for themselves, even as they labour philosophically. Theophrastus, abstracted from social relations, largely unread, is not properly *being* for anyone. Here we find in Eliot's last work a license to escape the moral burden of serious reflection. Theophrastus is not, like Eliot in *Adam Bede*, 'in the witness-box narrating [his experience] on oath' (221); his speech departs from the affective, ethical language we recognize in Levinas or in *Daniel Deronda*. Style in *Theophrastus Such* is a vehicle for philosophy, but it is also a vehicle for aesthetic play. The impressions are finally comic, the reader's laugh, perhaps, the first lapse in our own subjective sovereignty as we respond.

#### Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. 1869. Ed. Jane Barnett. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- Beer, Gillian. *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print.
- Davis, Philip. *The Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. 'Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas'. *Writing and Difference*. 1967. London: Routledge, 1978. 97-192. Print.
- Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. 1859. Ed. Carol A. Martin. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- , 'Art and Belles Lettres'. *Westminster Review* 65 (April 1856): 625-650. Print.
- , *Daniel Deronda*. 1876. Ed. Graham Handley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- , *The George Eliot Letters*. Vol. 6. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1954. Print.
- , *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. 1879. Ed. Nancy Henry. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. Print.



- , *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*. 1859. Ed. Helen Small. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- , *Middlemarch*. 1871-2. Ed. David Carroll. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- , 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young'. 1857. *Essays of George Eliot*. Ed. Thomas Pinney. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963. Print.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. 1854. Trans. George Eliot. NY: Harper & Row, 1957. Print.
- Hollander, Rachel. 'Daniel Deronda and the Ethics of Alterity'. *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism through Realism*. Ed. Donald R. Wehrs and David P. Haney. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2009. 264-287. Print.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. 1963. Trans. Séan Hand. Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins UP, 2015. Print.
- , *On Escape = De l'évasion*. 1935. Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.
- , *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. 1974. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne UP, 1999. Print.
- , *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. 1961. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne UP, 1999. Print.
- , 'The Trace of the Other'. 1963. *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*. Ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986. 345-359. Print.
- , 'Transcendence and Height.' 1962. *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophic Writings*. Ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1996. 11-32. Print.
- Levine, George. *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.
- Newton, K. M. *Modernizing George Eliot: The Writer as Artist, Proto-Modernist, Cultural Critic*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011. Print.