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Lawrence Harvey

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## Aesthetic Negation and Citation: Levinas, Agnon and the Paradox of Literature

Lawrence Harvey

University of Winchester, UK

### ABSTRACT



*Prima facie*, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas would seem to be inherently averse to literature as an ethical mode. Indeed, in his early work, up to and including *Totality and Infinity* (1961), literary art is often censured with what amounts to Platonic zeal. However, as I will demonstrate, this criticism stands alongside what is seemingly an incongruous use of literary art as a means of ethical exemplification. By exploring this tension, I will show how the contra-epistemic aesthetic of S. Y. Agnon (1888–1970) can be read within ethical terms consistent with Levinas’s philosophical position.

### KEYWORDS

Levinas; Agnon; Plato; ethics; aesthetics

The ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas does not engage traditional normative ethical discourse in any direct manner. Instead, Levinas argues that such discourse presupposes a precognitive ethical encounter with an Other that shapes the subjective human condition itself. On the face of it, this often-nuanced brand of transcendental ethics seems to counter any appeal to aesthetic modality. In the body of work up to and including *Totality and Infinity* (1961), the “work of art” is often condemned by Levinas as a counter-ethical mode of figuration; this is the case despite Levinas’s own early literary aspirations (Critchley 2015, 10). However, this quasi-Platonic censure proceeds in tandem with a seemingly paradoxical use of literature as a means to exemplify “the ethical.” In this essay, I will explore this equivocation, with the aim of showing how the contra-epistemic aesthetic of authors such as S. Y. Agnon can be understood within ethical terms that are not at odds with Levinas’s radical reconfiguration of ethical thought.

Much of Levinas’s early thought was set down in two preparatory works, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other* (1947). A year later, he published a seminal article on aesthetics entitled “Reality and Its Shadow,” which appeared in *Les Temps Modernes*, a journal founded by Sartre. As some critics have plausibly argued, Levinas’s article can be interpreted in terms of a reaction against Sartre’s notion of *littérature engagé* (Robbins 1999, 83). However, Levinas’s text can also be understood as a polemic leveled against Heidegger’s theory of art. Yet Levinas does not directly challenge essays

**CONTACT** Lawrence Harvey  Lawrence.Harvey@winchester.ac.uk  University of Winchester, UK

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such as “On the Origin of the Work of Art” (1935); the only direct references to Heidegger relate to *Being and Time* (1927), a text almost entirely devoid of overt aesthetic commentary. For example, Levinas suggests that an “image does not engender a *conception*, as do scientific cognition and truth; it does not involve Heidegger’s ‘letting be,’ *Sein-lassen*, in which objectivity is transmuted into power” (1998, 3). This direct reference to Heidegger is taken from a section of *Being and Time* entitled, “The Temporality of Circumpective Concern,” in which it is maintained that “Letting things be involved is something which we can understand existentially as a-letting-them-‘be’ (ein ‘Sein-lassen’)” (Heidegger 1996, 405). Nevertheless, despite this and other references to *Being and Time*, “Reality and Its Shadow” is directed at the work Heidegger produced after his reading of Nietzsche in the 1930s.

According to Heidegger, the work of art is not to be construed as the reproduction of a particular entity that happened to be present. On the contrary, for Heidegger art reproduces or lays bare the subject’s general essence. This essence is seen in terms relative to the *Being of beings* or the ontological comportment of existents: “The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e. this deconcealing, i.e. the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work” (Heidegger 1975, 39). Within the terms of this rationale, Heidegger followed Hegel’s mark, giving priority to poetry as an artistic form. In “On the Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger maintains that poetic saying can reveal the very modality of dwelling—the modality of *being there*.

It would thus appear that Heidegger’s aesthetic thought is part of a tradition that holds art to be revelatory; a tradition issuing from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, wherein poetry is construed as mode more worthy of philosophical attention, given that it is concerned with universal truths as opposed to the particular facts of history (Aristotle 1965, 43–4). At the start of his article, Levinas concurs that tradition or dogma has generally held art to be revelatory or cognitive in this specific sense:

An artist—even a painter, even a musician—tells. He tells of the ineffable. An artwork prolongs, and goes beyond, common perception. What common perception trivializes and misses, an artwork apprehends in its irreducible essence. ... Where common language abdicates, a poem or a painting speaks. Thus an artwork is more real than reality and attests to the dignity of the artistic imagination, which sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute. (Levinas 1998a, 1)

This allusion to Heidegger’s aesthetic is set up as an antithetic foil, thereby representing the antithesis of Levinas’s own conception of the work of art.

Levinas begins his critique by suggesting that some forms of criticism advocate an aesthetic dogma similar to that set forth by Heidegger and others, and that, as such, they appear parasitic in relation to their professed subject. Yet according to Levinas, it is the existence of criticism itself that puts the Heideggerian aesthetic in doubt. As Levinas argues, the critic is someone who still has something valid to contribute, even when it appears that everything has been said; the critic can “say about the work something else than the work” (Levinas 1998a, 2). This form of critical or superlative “saying” seems to indicate that the cognitive function of art is somewhat deficient. Or to put it another way, the very existence of criticism appears to attest to the fact that art is *outside* of what Heidegger termed “being-in-the-world”—a term that is itself

“coextensive with truth” (2). Given this thread of reasoning, Levinas concludes that far from imparting knowledge, art is oriented towards a process of obscurity: “Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow” (3). Given such factors, it is clear that Levinas’s argument diametrically opposes that set down by Heidegger. As Levinas concludes, art does not belong to any order of revelation; it is not “unconcealing” and as such cannot be seen in terms pertaining to *aletheia* (Levinas 1998a, 2–3).

Arguably, this counter-Heideggerian argument can also be interpreted in terms relative to Plato’s theory of art. Indeed, I would suggest that, in “Reality and Its Shadow,” Levinas’s critique of Heidegger rides in tandem with a somewhat paradoxical endorsement of Plato’s thought on aesthetics. As is well known, according to Plato, the artist’s re-presentation stands at a third remove from reality itself. First, there exists the Form of the object represented; then there is the particular physical object, and finally, at third remove from reality, there is the re-presentation of the second level particular (*eikasia*). Given this trisection, Plato concludes that *mimesis* is far removed from the truth, given the fact that it has the capacity to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything; that “little” being mere phenomenal appearance. Plato sets the poet beside the painter, concluding that all mimetic art is “an inferior child born of inferior parents” (Plato 1987, 433–5). Unlike Aristotle, Plato thus dismisses imaginative fiction as a form of foolish gratification which is damaging to both the soul and society.

Given the aforesaid, it seems clear that for Plato all mimetic modes of representation attempt to render mere shadows that are, in epistemic terms, far removed from reality and the truth. Straight away, this evaluation brings to mind the title of Levinas’s counter-aesthetic article, “Reality and Its Shadow.” Although he does not directly appeal to Plato’s negative aesthetic as set out in the *Republic*, Levinas nonetheless alludes to dialogues such as *Phaedo* and *Parmenides*. Within a discussion couched in the terms of these key Platonic dialogues, the notion of resemblance or appearance is related to what is termed “non-truth” (Levinas 1998b, 7). Levinas likens this negation to the shadows that are distinct from the Ideals. As we have seen, within the Platonic schema, art substitutes the real, the Ideal, with an image—a mere shadow at third remove from reality. Similarly, for Levinas, although a concept is an object that is *grasped* and made intelligible by way of a “living” relationship, the image “neutralizes this relationship, this primary conceiving through action” (Levinas 1998a, 3). It is important to appreciate that Levinas is not appealing to the Platonic Ideals in any immediate or uncritical sense here. Rather, instead of simply appropriating the Platonic critique, Levinas is utilizing what might be termed its modal orientation. To be clear, whereas Plato denounces art because it obscures the absolutes, Levinas censures art on the grounds that it is oriented away from “real” inter-relationships. In this way, Levinas appropriates the Platonic *ethos* but substitutes the Ideal for an encounter that he later develops into the ethical “face-to-face.” His logic dictates that any such encounter transcends the play of figuration or the aesthetic presentation of absence.

It would thus appear that for both Plato and Levinas the art object inscribes the presence of an absence, be that absence the Ideal or the Other. For his part, Levinas relates this absence to death, degradation, and dis-incarnation:

The consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there. The perceived elements are not the object but are like its “old garments,” spots of colour, chunks of marble or bronze. These elements do not serve as symbols, and in the absence of the object they do not force its presence, but their presence insists on its absence. They occupy its place fully to mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection. (Levinas 1998a, 7)

The art object is thus devoid of the “life” it imitates. Such an object is little more than a simulacrum or effigy; it is an inanimate fake hewn in unmoving marble or bronze. Later in his article, Levinas picks up this thread in relation to Pygmalion. He proposes that the artwork is generally considered to be of little worth when it does not aspire to “life”—the aesthetic of the Cypriot sculptor-king epitomizing this aspiration. Nevertheless, for Levinas, such an aspiration remains essentially unfulfilled; for the artist gives the statue a derisory “lifeless-life” (Levinas 1998a, 9). The gift, in this sense, is a mere caricature of life itself. According to Levinas, such a caricature is both comic and tragic. The tragedy lies in the fact that the comic caricature, as a form of re-presentation, misses or in some way bypasses the “face” of an Other. Couched within the terms of texts such as *Totality and Infinity*, such a caricature or re-presentation thus counters any recourse to ethical passivity.

In *Totality and Infinity*, this link between the caricature or re-presentation and the will to dominate or annihilate is made explicit. Levinas suggests that the inscribed face (or caricature) is wholly devoid of the presence that makes ethical transcendence possible. As he puts it, the contours of the re-presented visage imprison ethical “openness.” Given this fact, the *face* marks the limit of the lifeless caricature. As Levinas makes plain, the so-called straightforwardness or “nudity” of the ethical “face-to-face” encounter transcends the imposition of any intermediary image: “To manifest oneself as a face is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form ... without the intermediary of any image, in one’s nudity” (Levinas 1996b, 200). Again, what Levinas seems to be proposing here is that the artwork or image opposes or obscures the ethical interface. In other words, artistic re-presentation leads one away from what is deemed to be “true representation”—a presentation of presence that occurs within the primordial ethical encounter.

Given the above, it is evident that in later texts such as *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas still adheres to the fundamental tenets of the quasi-Platonic critique outlined in “Reality and Its Shadow” (1948). Yet there seems to be a paradox here. Texts such as *Totality and Infinity* are premised upon a radical rejection of absolutism—a rejection of the self-same fixity that underpins Plato’s negative aesthetic. However, as we saw in the discussion above, Levinas does not appeal to the word, but rather to the methodological spirit of Plato’s assessment. Given this somewhat tangential approach, Levinas is thus able to both utilize and criticize the Platonic aesthetic. His critical voice can be heard in a section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled “Discourse and Ethics,” in which he maintains that (art) objects “have no light of their own; they receive a borrowed light”—a “light” that is likened to the Platonic Forms (Levinas 1996a, 74). For Plato, Beauty was just such a Form; it was an aesthetic criterion allied to the notion of love, as outlined in the *Symposium*. In the terms of this ontological frame, the object of aesthetic deliberation (as the “object” of love) is given signification or form via its relation to that which lies beyond. In other words, to “clothe” such objects with signification, one must go beyond

perception. In a sense, one might thus conclude that disclosure is relative to the clarity of form. Yet Levinas rejects the primordiality of any such “beyond” in the name of the generative “face-to-face” encounter which, of and by itself, shapes the subjective human condition. Likewise, he rejects the classical aesthetic, which gives rise to a process of formal closure—a process complicit, as he sees it, with the workings of contra-pacific thought; as he asks, does not “lucidity, the mind’s openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?” (Levinas 1996a, 21).

I have now established that Levinas’s aesthetic argument is double-edged. That is, he attacks art as both a representative and an “unconcealing” medium. One would thus perhaps expect to find Levinas’s work devoid of literary allusions, but this is not the case. Levinas’s first *magnum opus* begins in earnest with a tacit citation of the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud: “The true life is absent” (Levinas 1996a, 33). But more than this, *Totality and Infinity* also concludes with a sentence that incorporates the words of yet another poet, Baudelaire: “tedium, fruit of mournful incuriosity that takes on the proportions of immortality” (Levinas 1996a, 307).

Thus it is that *Totality and Infinity* is a text (paradoxically) bracketed with tacit literary citations. Yet such citations are not anomalous within Levinas’s work. For example, in *Time and the Other*, Macbeth’s ruin is read with specific reference to the notion of unremitting existence. For Levinas, Macbeth’s last words serve to defy death or tragic negation via the imposition of a final dependent clause: “Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane, and thou oppos’d, being of no woman born, yet I will try the last” (quoted in Levinas 1989, 42). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas refers to *Macbeth* twice in the context of a discussion that focuses on the impossible nature of total negation. First, he argues: “Suicide is tragic, for death does not bring a resolution to all the problems to which birth gave rise, and is powerless to humiliate the values of the earth—whence Macbeth’s final cry in confronting death, defeated because the universe is not destroyed at the same time as his life” (Levinas 1996a, 146). Levinas also maintains that Macbeth “wishes for the destruction of the world in his defeat and his death”—he wishes “th’estate o’th’world were now undone” (Levinas 1996a, 231). Elsewhere in *Totality and Infinity*, there is an allusion to the banter of the witches; such banter is said to be permeated with playful innuendoes and ambiguities that undercut the seriousness of speech (Levinas 1996a, 263).

However, Shakespeare is not the only canonical literary figure situated within the drama of *Totality and Infinity*. As Eaglestone (1997a, 120) points out, Proust and Dostoyevsky also figure in Levinas’s exposition. There are two references to Dostoyevsky’s polemic against positivism, and Levinas concludes his discussion of art with the following allusion to Proust: “Yet Proust admired the reverse of the sleeves of a lady’s gown, like those dark corners of cathedrals, nonetheless worked with the same art as the façade” (Levinas 1996a, 192). The French comic dramatist Molière (Jean Baptiste Poquelin) also features in a discussion of the corporeality of the “for itself.” It is suggested that one can mistreat the “for itself” of a person in much the same manner as Dorimène vanquishes Sganarelle in *The Forced Marriage* (1664) (229). Levinas also talks of the tender epiphany of the Beloved in terms pertaining to the opening lines of a poem by the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé; such tenderness is said to manifest itself within “the limit of being and non-being, as a soft warmth where being dissipates into radiance, like the ‘pale blush’ of the nymphs in the *Afternoon of a Faun*” (256). Pushkin’s literature is

also discussed within the context of an argument centered upon egoistic possession (133). Likewise, Levinas alludes to Pushkin's declaration that impassive nature is "resplendent in its eternal beauty" (220). By way of a final example, Levinas also invokes Edgar Allen Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* when arguing that the comprehension of death breaches claustrophobic solitude (Levinas 1996a, 235; Eaglestone 1997, 128 n35).

Given the above analysis, we can conclude that Levinas's standpoint on art, specifically literature, is somewhat equivocal. In one breath he seems to criticize artistic modes in the strongest terms. Yet in another, he exemplifies his thought by way of both direct literary references and tacit allusions. In actual fact, although art is said to disrupt the ethical interface, this self-same interface is itself set forth in explicit terms pertaining to classical literature. Indeed, Levinas describes the overall trajectory of his thought through a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*. What Kafka termed "another Abraham" is structurally tendered in opposition to a reconciliatory return to the Same—a process of return epitomized by the Homeric revenant (Kafka quoted in Robbins 1991, 93–94).

What is to be made of this aesthetic equivocation? Should we accept it as a lack of critical integrity? Perhaps as Tim Woods puts it, "for all his fervent arguments, Levinas' philosophy itself appears indecisive" (Woods 1996, 57). Or is there a degree of creative irony governing the use of such allusions? To my mind, the truth lies elsewhere. Indeed, Levinas's censure of literature is limited; for we can discern a positive thread running from his seemingly ambiguous reading of Proust through to a positive ethico-aesthetic interpretation of the Hebrew writer, S. Y. Agnon.

In the year prior to the first publication of "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas published an essay entitled "The Other in Proust" (1947). As critic Andrew Gibson puts it, this essay is "remarkably ambiguous, multi-faceted and even contradictory" (Gibson 1999, 112). At the outset, Levinas seems to criticize art in much the same manner as in "Reality and Its Shadow." However, for Levinas, Proust's fiction also serves to challenge any move towards a definitive sense of closure:

Despite the precision of line and depth of character type, the contours of events, persons and things remain absolutely indeterminate. We never know right until the end what exactly has happened in this world ... It is a world that is never definitive and where one course of action does not preclude other possibilities. These press at the gates of being, and, like Banquo's ghost, rise and sit in the royal place. (Levinas 1989, 162)

The Proustian world is in this sense unpredictable or indefinite; within Levinas's own turn of phrase, such a world has reverted to Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus, it is that "moral laws" fall by the wayside in a fictional world in which determinacy yields to the wildest of freedoms and the supremacy of "glittering extravaganzas." In accord with his reference to *Macbeth*, Levinas concludes that within such a witches' Sabbath, "everything is giddily possible" (162). In this passage, Levinas's rhetoric appears to echo Sartre's endorsement of Dostoyevsky's declaration that everything would be permitted in the absence of God (Sartre 1993, 33). In turn, this declaration resonates with Zarathustra's assertion that, if nothing is true, everything is permitted (Nietzsche 1969, 285). In partial accord with Nietzsche, Levinas thus seems to be suggesting that, given the death of the *deitās* or (Platonic) truth (*aletheia*), moral or ethical precepts become nothing more than "spells and incantations," illusions that give rise to a "nullification



of every choice” (Levinas 1989, 161–62). And yet as Jill Robbins points out in a short but nonetheless perceptive reading:

The essay’s references to choice and amorality imply a subject who would choose or initiate a particular ethical action. In other words, they belong to a traditional conception of ethics that is derivative upon the way in which the ethical is thought in Levinas’s mature work. They belong to *an* ethics rather than to the ethic of ethics, to reinscribed ethics. (Robbins 1999, 81)

Somewhat paradoxically, Proust thus appears to be denigrated for opening up a vertiginous plane of ambiguity or indeterminacy which is inimical to the workings of a conception of ethics, something which, in other texts, Levinas rejects in no uncertain terms. In this specific sense, Levinas’s critique appears to be self-effacing.

Yet having said this, in the second half of his essay, Levinas’s censure gives way to what amounts to a positive evaluation of Proust’s aesthetic. With reference to Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Levinas suggests that Albertine’s story can be read as an account of the way in which the “inner life looms forth from an insatiable curiosity about the alterity of the Other” (Levinas 1989, 163). As Robbins suggests, by way of this and other such comments that imply an ethical dimension, Levinas builds up to the conclusion that Proust’s aesthetic harbors a “direct relation with that which gives itself in refusing itself, with the other as other..., with the mystery” (Levinas quoted in Robbins 1999, 82).

Although not without a degree of provisional ambivalence, Levinas’s essay on Proust thus gestures toward a positive evaluation of art. As stated, however, this evaluation is offset in “Reality and Its Shadow”—a text published in the following year (1948). Yet in subsequent essays such as “Poetry and Resurrection” there is a re-emergence of this underlying assurance. Essentially, this essay interrogates the work of S. Y. Agnon, a Hebrew writer whose work is shaped by a deep-seated passivity. In “Poetry and Resurrection,” Levinas interprets Agnon’s literature in terms that gesture towards an inherent ethical-aesthetic dimension.

In a notation, Levinas alludes to Agnon’s narrative account of Balak the dog. Unlike Jack London’s kinetic Bâtard, Balak is a bestial figure of futility that embodies an existential sense of absurdity. According to Levinas’s notation, one seeks refuge from such a lack of meaning by way of an ontological desire for a substratum such as Heideggerian Being. For Levinas, Agnon narrates this desire in the form of a parable in which wild animals “prefer the destiny of stuffed animals, assured of an eternity in the museums, to the hazards of a life threatened with pure and simple nothingness” (Levinas 1996a, 171–172 n4). However, in Levinas’s reading, Agnon’s fiction frustrates this refuge in ontological stasis; as he argues, the Agnonesque aesthetic “de-nucleates” the ultimate solidity or essence that subsists beneath the plasticity of forms (10). Towards this end, Levinas suggests that Agnon’s aesthetic mirrors the enigmatic modality of rabbinical interpretation that serves to shroud the immobile or static movement of the sign within an intricate tissue of fluid commentaries. According to Levinas, just such a fluid breach of totality can be isolated in Agnon’s use of tacit Biblical quotations. At one level, such pseudo-quotations echo what are termed master formulations (9). And yet at another level, such quotations signify in the isolated context of the passage in which they (re)occur. In this manner, such tacit echoes become fissures that open up the closed structure of binary



thought. Otherwise stated, Agnon's dissonant double-coding displaces a binary structure that cannot abide the presence—or absent presence—of what Levinas terms an “excluded middle” (10).

Although Levinas does not offer a concrete example of this trope, I would argue that Agnon's “Fable of the Goat” exemplifies the aforesaid process as it challenges ontological stasis on two counts. Within the fable, a she-goat disappears only to reappear with her udders full of a curative milk, “the taste of which was as the taste of Eden” (Agnon 1995, 188). In order to solve the mystery of the milk, the son of the goat's owner devises a plan: “I am tying a cord to the goat's tail, so that when I feel a pull on it I will know that she has decided to leave, and I can catch the end of the cord and follow her on her way” (188–9). The youth follows the goat into a cave and after “an hour or two, or maybe even a day or two” they emerge from the cave in the “Land of Israel” (189). As Adina Abadi puts it, “the laws of time and place are [therefore] suspended by a miraculous shortcut from Europe to Israel via a cave” (Abadi 1995, 132). Having kissed the soil and settled himself under a tree, the youth proclaims: “Until the day breathe and the shadows flee away, I shall sit on the hill under this tree” (189). Herein, the minor clause constitutes a tacit quotation from Song of Songs (2:17). Moreover, when the son fails to return, his father fears the worst: “An evil beast has devoured him, my son is assuredly rent to pieces! ... I will go down to my grave in mourning for my son” (190). The father's lament resides within the words spoken by Jacob upon learning of Joseph's fate in Genesis (37: 33–35). Within Levinas's terms, these biblical citations “signify both in the context of the passage in which [they] occur and, in counterpoint, in the scriptural context” (Levinas 1996a, 9). This “both ... and” logic constitutes what Levinas terms an “enigmatic modality” which initiates a “breaking-away from a certain ontology” (9). But more than this, Agnon's tale also opens up another “excluded middle” with the youth's miraculous passage from Europe to Israel; herein, any reductive sense of a mono-ontological spatiotemporal frame is shattered.

Moreover, for Levinas it is within the enigmatic structure of such an excluded middle that the “limits between life and non-life disappear” (10). In the second section of his essay, he interrogates another of Agnon's stories which delineates this enigmatic fusion of “life and non-life.” The story in question is “The Sign,” a quasi-biographical narrative in which, on the eve of Shavuot, the narrator hears that the Jews in his native Polish town have been exterminated by the Nazis. Thus, a festival commemorating the giving of the Law (the Torah) to Moses is situated at the heart of a deep sorrow beyond words. The giving of the Word is thus situated within a story or linguistic passage in which words fail. This displacement of oppositions, this emergence of an excluded middle or “non-place,” is further played out in a passage that Levinas quotes at length:

And as for me, I found myself in the middle of my town as if the time of the resurrection of the dead had come. Great is the day of the resurrection of the dead! I had a bit of the taste of that day when I suddenly found myself among my fellow townfolk, my dead brothers (who have “gone back to their world”) before me, as they were during their lives in all the houses of prayer in my town. ... Standing there, feeling worried, I gazed at the inhabitants of my town and there was no hint of reproach in their eyes for the fact that *I was like this* and that *they were like that*. (Agnon quoted in Levinas 1996a, 13)

As Levinas states, there is a certain equality here: an equality that serves to counter-act any set binary. With the proviso that some are *like this* and others are *like that*, the dead and the living come to exist in a state of parity. In Levinas's own terms, the townsfolk inhabit a locus or place that is already a "non-place." Within such an excluded space, the people of the town are "beyond their own being, no longer speaking in the first person yet speaking to us" (14). Accordingly, Levinas regards Agnon's aesthetic as a breach or fissure in the static structure of oppositional thought: it "de-nucleates" the totalizing solidity of the underlying Platonic forms.

We can extend this assured evaluation by considering what the critic David Aberbach has referred to as the distortion of the body-image in Agnon's corpus. As Aberbach points out, throughout Agnon's fiction there are moments when the hero is literally *not himself*: "The parts of the self ... cease to be integrated, things fall apart, the body is split and unwhole like the mind, the hand comes apart from the arm, the head is detached from the shoulders, or the body expands or shrinks or even vanishes by being absorbed or eaten" (Aberbach 1984, 131). Agnon's "Yesteryear" exemplifies this process; therein Yitzhak Kummer enters a house constructed on two levels, both of which are connected by a ladder. He climbs the ladder but strikes his head upon a partitioning door. This door closes from within leaving his body outside. Likewise, in the unfamiliar surroundings of a well-to-do restaurant, Yitzhak's unease manifests itself in physical diminution and the dissipation of the body: "He began to shrink until there was nothing left of him but his hands." Later, Yitzhak moves his hand over a book of fables: "he and the moving hand were separate though there was no doubt that it belonged to his body" (Agnon quoted in Aberbach 1984, 133–135). In these instances, the opposition between the self and the non-self falls away to leave a state of being or *ontos* located somewhere in between—what might be termed a "a null-site [non-lieu]" to use a Levinasian turn of phrase (Levinas 1998a, 8). Yet the constituent elements of the self are not wholly separated as in Gogol's story of the Nose; on the contrary, they are *both* separate *and* conjoined. As elsewhere in Agnon's fiction, here the unambiguous "either ... or" is superseded by the double-coded play of the equivocal "both ... and." Crucially, as we saw in the foregoing, this process of double-coding breaches what Levinas refers to as contra-ethical lucidity (Levinas 1996a, 21). In accord with Levinas's findings, I would thus argue that Agnon's distortion of the body-image harbors an ethical dimension that gestures beyond the counter-ethical ontological closure that situates art "on the hither side (*en deça*), on the opposite ridge of the ethical"—the attempt to "mold, conquer, and control reality" in any mono-ontological sense is denied (Benso 2008, 163).

As Henry McDonald points out, critical consensus would seem to hold that Levinas "believed that art and ethics are incompatible"—this being somewhat puzzling given "the role literature played in the genesis and development of his ethical philosophy" (McDonald 2008, 15). Yet in the final analysis, if Levinas is at times vocal with regard to censuring literary art while at the same time using such art as a means of exposition, he finds in the work of Agnon a *synthesis* devoid of Hegelian pretensions. In short, he locates within Agnon's shifting ontological and counter-epistemic representations a means of literary expression in accord with his own understanding of "the ethical." But more than this, as I have illustrated, we can broaden this positivity to encompass facets of Agnon's corpus left unexplored within Levinas's own writing. Indeed, as we have seen, arguably texts such as "Fable of the Goat" and "Yesteryear" harbor an

ethical-aesthetic dimension which sits in accord with Levinas's pacifistic critique of mono-ontological stasis and epistemic lucidity. To my mind, it is within this accord that a Levinasian aesthetic resides. Moreover, given that "art and literature are not obedient to the language of philosophy" (36), Levinas's citations can themselves be construed as self-effacing negations that gesture, as it were, towards just such an aesthetic. Within the terms of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas is illuminating that which he says with an aesthetic Said, which is *always already* set under erasure; or as Levinas puts it in his positive evaluation of Sacha Sosno aesthetic, "perhaps the metaphor of obliteration is better than that of erasure" (Levinas 2019, 31). In this manner, Levinas's reading of art is indeed paradoxical in its totality, but in what is arguably an intentional manner that (re)echoes the very modality of Agnon's dissonant double-coding, displacing, as it does, the binaries of lucidity: "Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?" (Levinas 1996a, 21).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

*Lawrence Harvey* is a Liberal Arts lecturer at the University of Winchester, UK and teaches Philosophy at Peter Symonds College, Winchester, UK. In addition, he is an AQA Philosophy and Religious Studies examiner. His research interests include the ethical modality of postmodern literature and the philosophy of Levinas, Camus and T. E. Hulme.

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