

Zsuzsanna Czifra:

Ethics and Narrative:
An Analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*

In an ambition to show the connection between narrative fiction and human ethical life, critics have approached literature and the ethical from various points of view. Drawing on philosophy, fiction, literary theory etc. they not only contributed to ethical criticism but also to our knowledge about signification and representation in narratives. One of the first thinkers to read pieces of literature as moral philosophy has been Martha Nussbaum, pointing out literature's ability to integrate the universal and the particular while cultivating our ability to see and care for both. Narratives, in her analysis, are transparent windows to reality where representation boils down to mere mimesis or a mirror of outside reality. Although Nussbaum makes apt observations about novels' ability to make readers *feel* and *see* the ups and downs, the good and evil, i.e., the particularities of human life, her views as narrative and literary theory are untenable. They have also been criticised by, typically, critics of deconstruction who point out Nussbaum's failure to recognize literature's nature as textual and mediated. Deconstructionists emphasise the fact that literature is *in* language, i.e., literature is *not* a transparent medium to reality but calls attention to itself *as* suspended from, as Derrida would have it, "referential naivety" or "transcendental reading". More recently and, similarly to Nussbaum, with an ambition to show literature's ethical import in excess of moral philosophy, Michael Eskin attributes literature's ethical force to its internal makeup as being in "semiotic homology with language as such" ("On Literature and Ethics" 587). As he explains, it is an "exemplary performative function" of literature that "*does* something ethically in excess of moral philosophy" (584). This means, in turn, that the literary encounter "happens", the literary text has the attributes of "an event" in which understanding is as much performative and cognitive as epistemic.

Interestingly, Eskin's view on the performative function of literature corresponds to Remigius Bunia's (2010) re-definition of diegesis and representation that highlights the borderline nature of fictional narratives (*as* diegesis, among other diegeses like films, newspapers etc.) that verge on the meaning of what is "explicitly asserted and what is merely implied" ("Diegesis and Representation" 716). Bunia defines diegesis as "the immediate meaning of the representational mode" in a narrative; that is, instead of being a technical term

designating “narrated world” or “spatiotemporal universe” of the story, diegesis is a *phenomenon* that “operates below the process involved in watching films and in reading novels or newspaper reports” (716). What Eskin’s and Bunia’s arguments have in common, although approaching literature from different ends, is that they both find literature’s or narrative representation’s special force in its ability to *do* something ethically and *operate* as a phenomenon. Both in Eskin’s and Bunia’s analysis, narrative is dynamic; it is like an event. As Derek Attridge writes, “literature... is a moment or structural possibility” (qtd. in Eskin 588). If literature is indeed a structural possibility, an immediate meaning of representational mode, then the ethics of literature is also inevitable to be looked for in the narrative immediacy of a literary work. By narrative immediacy, I mean the narrative form and operations that the reader is exposed to in the process of reading. Hence, while the phenomenon of diegesis is cognitive and epistemic, ethical signification in diegesis is, in turn, *narrative*.

Doris Lessing’s first novel *The Grass Is Singing*, written in 1949 in South Africa, presents narrative structure’s ethical significance very elaborately. The novel is overwhelming in its ethical concern, the black and white tension in South Rhodesia, as a consequence of which readers easily overlook the narrative features. However, the “facts” the story reveals (i.e. the represented world) are meaningless without recognizing the narrative modes through which they are told, precisely, with regard to the ethics the novel communicates. Lessing refuses to teach a moral lesson through an explicitly formulated “said” that would reduce the narrative – which is an event, an encounter, an offering – to a mere “story”, a paraphrasable message. She refuses some common techniques that aid the affective identification of readers with characters, thus, short-circuits feelings of false empathy in the reader or the false conception that one knows ‘what the other feels’ by empathizing with him or her. Just as importantly, Lessing withholds or limits factual knowledge at certain key points about the fictional world. The author defies both empathetic and certain epistemic approaches to narrative representation, which, in turn, is greatly telling of her ethical stance. This is a position that seems, at its heart, to refuse the kind of western ethical thought where the epistemic cognition of a singular self precedes ethical action.

Lessing’s ethics in *The Grass Is Singing* that refuses, through the performative of narrative form, to put the epistemological before the ethical evokes the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who contends a similar view. Levinas revises the logocentric paradigm

of western thinking in his ethics, and locates the meaning of ethics on a level that comes *before* epistemology, i.e., the self-perceiving function of the ego and where the face-to-face relationship with the Other is the first human particularity. Levinas argues that ethics comes rather in the *mode* of being and language than in a particularly formulated message, i.e. in moral philosophy. Levinas's thought does not only reinforce the observations one is able to make after Bunia and Eskin, but it also adds to them in that he describes exactly how the ethical operates and signifies in language. His contention of ethics as a mode of signification within language, juxtaposed to the ethical challenges *The Grass Is Singing* as a *narrative* poses to its readers, points in the direction of an ethical theory that is, particularly, narrative at the heart. In the light of the theoretical frame outline above, and especially of Levinas's philosophy of ethics, I propose a multi-layered understating of Lessing's widely discussed ethical theme in *The Grass Is Singing*, while also hope to elucidate some of the important ways in which narratives and human (ethical) life interact. My insights about the role and functioning of narrative form are deeply rooted in Levinasian ethical thought while I also draw on classical narratology.

I. The ethical theme

The plot of *The Grass Is Singing* is relatively simple: there is a murder case reported about a white woman murdered by her black servant. The white woman is Mary Turner, who lived on a farm with her husband, Dick for nearly nine years in great poverty and emotional misery. Moses, the houseboy for the last two years helped out around the house and in the end also in other, more personal, things. As it is clear from the narrator's comments and from characters' behaviour in the post-murder scene in the first chapter, the central issue at hand is the relationship between Mary, a white woman and Moses, a black man "whether for good or for evil" (26). For colonial people like the Sergeant and Charlie Slatter, this relationship is outrageous and fearful, something that cannot be talked about. For Tony Marston, a twenty-year old fresh immigrant from England who came to learn on the farm only in the last few weeks of the Turners' life, it is confusing and shocking, something about which the truth is difficult to utter. After the first chapter, illustrating the confusion and mystery around the murder, the narrator describes the background and personality of Mary Turner, beginning from her childhood through her marriage and life on the farm, which culminated in her murder by Moses. The novel ends with the murder scene and events that in the story's

temporal frame directly precede the predicament of the starting chapter. The plot is thus a simple chronological one, except that the last part is placed first in the narrative.

The structural frame of the novel, thus, resembles that of a detective novel which also has the investigation (usually factual and psychological) of a crime as the central issue that primarily motivates the development of the plot. In the first chapter the narrative seems to follow in the footsteps of that tradition. It presents the reader with the most compelling dilemmas that will run throughout the narrative. However, from the second chapter, the narration takes a very different direction, mostly by presenting a different narrative viewpoint, therefore, by creating a different effect in understanding, than usual conventions of the genre would provide. Lessing's refusal to surrender to certain generic pressures and ethical conventions of the novel of investigation points precisely to the weaknesses and irresolvable conflicts this kind of thinking results in. In western logocentric thought (which is the underlying paradigm of the detective genre), the cognisant and feeling ego is the first particularity of existence. If one follows an argumentation that has this as its basic tenet, the serious limitations of this paradigm soon come to the surface. In fact, the conflicts these limitations evoke are irresolvable with regards to intersubjectivity and human ethical life – as Lessing's novel equally shows.

On the level of the plot, the novel points precisely to a central ethical problem: who is responsible for the murder, and why? There are two arguments running simultaneously but to quite opposite effects. One of them is the narrator's portrait of Mary and Dick and their fatefully tragic life. A vast part of the narrative is devoted to the description of Mary's unfortunate childhood, her youth as a single woman and the financial and mental deterioration of her marriage. Mary grew up in a small rural area in great poverty and with an unfortunate sexual and emotional heritage from her parents. She was abused by her father, as can be inferred from one of her dreams: in a dirty game, her father forces her head onto his lap and holds it down so that she feels being suffocated by "the unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him" (163). Mary's neurotic, man-hater mother follows her throughout her life as an uncanny double, making her unable to escape a similar fate herself: "Mary, with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing

made *inevitable*” (90, emphasis added)¹. As the narrator’s comment shows here (among other places, p. 98, 102 etc.), her character is made to follow very regular psychological patterns and rather resembles a prototype or a clinical case, which subverts any liberal humanist idea of a human being, endowed with free will and agency. The “inevitable” consequences of her “nature” and upbringing are mostly suggested to show in her relationship with Dick, Moses and black people in general. Towards Dick she cannot help but feel contempt and disgust; the most she can do is turn to him with brotherly appeal but then again she despises him for this – just like her mother despised her father. Towards Moses, her relationship is a lot more complicated but is similarly driven by instinct and internalised patterns of (sexual) repression, anxiety, rejection, and hatred rather than by wilful action. Before her marriage, Mary led a peacefully dull and unreflecting social life; this, by the change of circumstances, turned into a life of fear. While living in town, Mary had no contact with natives – “they were outside her orbit” (36), but as soon as she is forced into daily contact with them she becomes harsh and shockingly racist towards her houseboys. She does not only call them ‘swine’ and ‘beast’ on a regular basis but grows to feel a deep hatred and repulsion for each of them: “she hated them all, every one of them, from the headboy whose subservience irritated her, to the smallest child” (115). She is also particularly repulsed by the women: by “their fleshiness,” their insolent faces and uncaring pose but above all she hated “the way they suckled their babies” (95). It is also a sight that she probably finds repulsive because of her complete repression of everything that belongs to the body. Neither in her personal nor in her social life had she “the faintest idea of the kind of world she lived in,” as the narrator also comments (141). The same case is made about Dick, although less elaborately, than about Mary. They are people who seem to be pulled around in life by two forces: fate and other people. Their incompetency at life is made even more striking by the contrast of the narrator’s knowledgeable comments, constant psychological analysis, and judgement of their situation. As stated at the beginning: “the Turners were bound to come to grief” (13). All this suggests that everything that happened in the Turners’ lives was, in fact, inevitable, and that the novel makes a strong case for social and psychological determinism.

¹ Mary’s character follows a form of neurosis the author seems to intuitively understand. A neurosis which Kristeva explains as “a phobia of non-differentiation, of uncertain and unstable identity (Powers of Horror 58):” when Mary has a phobia of becoming the same as or double of her mother (Roberts, 133). Roberts accounts for Mary’s dream about being forced to play a dirty game with her father and being forced to his lap is also a sign of this neurosis, in which case Mary experiences a moment of Oedipal trauma where Mary is plunged into incest dread (to use Freud’s phrase)” (133).

Contrary to that runs another argument voiced by Tony Marston. He believes that even if Mary Turner has seemingly no agency but a very unfortunate upbringing, personality, etc., someone has to be responsible for the murder and its circumstances. The few insights one gets into Mary and Moses' relationship only make things obscure. First, we do not know much about the nature of their relationship, and do not have any access to their inner thoughts about it. What we know is that Mary was disgusted by and afraid of Moses, but was also sexually attracted to him. As for Moses, the reader is even more in the dark: he offered help to Mary and seemingly forgave her brutal treatment (both physically and emotionally), and yet, he committed the murder. As the narrator comments in the end, his exact motives, and his exact feeling towards Mary and this relationship remain unknown. The character who short circuits the reader's search for psychological explanations (or "motives") by raising the question of the ethical is Tony Martson, who witnessed Mary's and Moses's intimate relationship:

If you must blame somebody, then blame Mrs Turner. You can't have it both ways... It takes two to make a murder – a murder of this kind. Though, one can't really blame her either. She can't help being what she is. I've lived here, I tell you, which neither of you has done, and the whole thing is so difficult it is impossible to say who is to blame. (27)

Tony articulates the ethical dilemma that materializes at the crossroads of social and psychological determinism and liberal humanism: on the one hand, Mary is a miserable, helpless, woman, entrapped in a racist, colonial society, but on the other hand, her racism, fear, i.e., everything that her helplessness creates, does actively contribute to the murder. At the same time, and even more importantly, it is first and foremost Tony, who experiences the burden of responsibility. Tony's ethical momentum, as the narrator explains, is in his ability to see that "a monstrous injustice was being done" (26), which colonial society tries to ignore: "it can be said that Tony was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day" (26). However, he faces irresolvable conflicts:

He clung obstinately to the belief, in spite of Slatter and the Sergeant, that the causes of the murder must be looked for a long way back, and that it was they which were important. What sort of a woman had Mary Turner been, before she came to this farm... And Dick Turner himself – what had he been? And the native – but here his thoughts were stopped by the lack of knowledge. *He could not even begin to imagine the mind of a native.*" (28, emphasis added)

Tony, due to lack of knowledge, cannot make an argument against Charlie or the Sergeant and is paralysed in his actions too. How, indeed, one may ask, could Tony act on his responsibility if he does not know Moses, nor can he imagine what Moses can possibly think or feel? And does the reader know more? The narrator ends the narrative on a pondering note: “what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his [Moses’s] completed revenge, it is impossible to say” (206). While Tony is stopped by *the lack of knowledge in the fictive world*, the reader’s understanding is suspended by a lack of information *about the fictive world*. These limitations already point towards the question also raised by Levinas, namely, whether ethical responsibility is necessarily bound to the knowledge of or knowledge about the Other.

Indeed, the narratorial tool that foregrounds Lessing’s ethical position the most effectively is her use of narrative empathy:² the narrator does not leave us any insight into “the mind of the native”, nor does it offer us any easy access to other characters’ minds. Although characters often turn up as focalisers, i.e., their perspective “shines through” the third person narration; the reader does not get emotionally close to any of the characters. The narrator’s ironic comments and constant changing of focalisers keep the reader at a sharp affective distance from the story. In fact, the narrator, that represents the research-quester/story-teller perspective in the story, stays similarly detached from all of the characters. Instead of seeking community with the Other of a suppressed group, it presents each character with the same detachment. As Suzanne Keen elaborately discusses in her book, *Empathy and the Novel*, authors often use narrative empathy as a strategic means to represent subgroups and connect readers to that community. However, there are also authors who contest such views and denounce the possibility of empathy and therefore, the reliability of its role in narratives.³ The narration does not take Moses’s perspective, not even through focalisation; his feelings can never be felt or known either by the reader or the narrator. It shows that Lessing refuses to use narrative empathy firstly, as a narrative tool to involve the reader and convey an ethical message through the reader’s affective involvement, and also, as a valid tool of the research-quester to get to the truth. Lessing’s ethics is different from the ones that have empathy as their central force: in *The Grass is Singing*, responsibility is

² As defined by Suzanne Keen, “empathy invoked by novels” (*Empathy and the Novel* 3).

³ One of Keen’s examples is Michael Ondaatje who, in his novel, *Anil’s Ghost*, “resists the generic pressure to provide a researcher hero or to reveal a heroic victim, a silenced life brought to voice by recovery” (*Empathy and the Novel* 156). It is exactly this authorial gesture: bringing a silenced life to voice that Lessing resists, and which, in turn, makes the central momentum of her ethical stand-taking.

independent of whether one can or does identify, empathize or is in any affective relationship with the other's situation or emotions. The lack of such emotions is also a lack of knowledge, i.e. an epistemological block: one does not and cannot imagine, let alone know, what is in the mind of the Other. These cause a block of ethical action in the story world (for Tony) as well as a (temporary) block in moral interpretation for the western reader.

II. Narrative ethics: thinking after Levinas

It seems that Lessing touches on the sensitive spot of the ethics of western cultures, where an ethical problem is always already an epistemological one. This dead end in western philosophical (and also practical) thinking is what Emmanuel Levinas, similarly to Lessing, rethinks in his philosophy. The Cartesian dictum "cogito ergo sum", which had been the paradigm for philosophical thought for many centuries, presents this problem in its essentials. Firstly, if "cogito ergo sum" is the bedrock of human existence it means that it is only conceivable of as first-person modality: my cognition is the prerequisite of my being but even to be able to state 'cogito' presupposes that I exist. It is exactly this "self-resounding" quality that Levinas finds to be the most problematic in logocentric language. As he says, "the ego is concerned only with itself" (*Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence* 117). The second implication that directly follows from the "cogito ergo sum" principle is that it posits thinking ("cogito") as the prerequisite of existence ("sum"). This statement implies that thinking, and, ultimately, knowledge; precedes any other activity of the mind. For Levinas, this is deeply problematic, because for him ethics has to come *before* thinking or epistemology. The third essential of logocentric thought that is presented, albeit only indirectly or performatively, in the Cartesian credo is that thinking and existence, as the statement itself shows, can only be conceived of *in* language. This confinement of philosophy in language was recognized by many thinkers of what we call the linguistic turn of the 20th century, and, it was also what Levinas, in his later philosophy, found to be the centre around which to build ethical thought.

Levinas's mature ethical philosophy locates the ethical realm in language and finds the signification of the prehistoric relation to the Other in the thematizing operations of language. The ethical realm appears in the "saying" of language – the term in Levinas's philosophy that designates the part and operation of language that signifies spoken meaning to the other. The "saying" represents a place *before* ontology where our relatedness and responsibility to the other is born. It is also the birthplace of the self, an entity always already in relation to an Other. The saying is that quasi-transcendental place that inscribes the ethical moment in

language through signifying meaning to the Other. Meaning and the language that is paraphrasable, and therefore, thematized is called the “said” in Levinas’s terminology. The said is the “only conceptual language available” to us that incorporates in itself all the conceptual doctrines of western ontology. It is a double dimensionality by which meaning is delimited in ontological language, i.e., in the said: it is carved out as fixed identity (“noun”) trapped in the consecutive slots of time (“verb”). Whereas the noun and the verb confine meaning as predicated nominalised entities always resounding their existence – like a snake biting its tale, the saying is able to go beyond itself and signify meaning to the Other. The saying thematizes the said by disrupting it, that is through *interruption*. Interruption is the key momentum by which the saying and the said interact and the ethical becomes apparent in language. About ethical signification Levinas writes:

saying signifies differently than an apparitor presenting essence and entities... Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbour, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity. Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self. (OBBE 47)

The ethical momentum in language is thus twofold: (1) the saying states and thematizes the said, and (2) signifies it to the Other. The (2) second layer of ethics in language is easily recognized as the ethical responsibility inherent in every communicative act between a sender and a receiver – which includes the act of communication that we call literature. The first layer, though inseparable from the second, merits more critical attention for it might tell about the way the ethical appears in narratives. As summerized by Robert Eaglestone:

[t]he ‘saying’ in literature is precisely that uncanny moment when we are made to feel not at home with the text or in ourselves. We are neither transported to a nether world of virtual life, nor do we simply mouth misinterpretation of the text. It is in these moments when our sense of our selves and our relation to the logos is interrupted and put into question that the ethics of literature are at their clearest. (*Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas*, 175)

The ethical moment in literature in Eagleston’s wording as the “uncanny moment when we are made to feel not at home with the text or in ourselves” is very similar to what Remigius Bunia claims about (narrative) diegesis, as a phenomenon that verges on the meaning of what

is “explicitly asserted and what is merely implied” (716). Thus, Bunia locates the interruptive quality of narratives in the phenomenon of diegesis, i.e., in a text’s narrative interface. Citing yet another definition from narratology, Suzanne Keen defines narrative situation as “the nature of the mediation” between a sender and a receiver (*Narrative Form* 30–31) that, in turn, is coincidental to Levinas’s description of the ethical momentum in language that is intersubjective and “thematized”. From the juxtaposition of these arguments, it is indeed justified to say that while the ethics of literature is realized in the reader’s singular encounter with the text it is also, importantly, immanent in the narrative tissue of the work. It means that the reader is made to adopt certain cognitive practices that are compelled by the text inherently, and it is in *this* that the ethics of that text are at their clearest rather than in the fact of the reader’s singular encounter with it. Of course, this permanent, narrative “ethical” quality of a text can never be realized outside or without the singular encounter, precisely because of its nature as performative; the same way as Levinas’s saying can only be made manifest in the said, this immanent ethics can only become meaningful in the reader’s singular encounter. Nevertheless, it is important to conceive of this distinction theoretically.

III. Problems: revisited

It is, thus, important to emphasize that ethical signification is inscribed in the text on every level of the narrative: the ethics of a text often becomes apparent in the interaction between the narrative levels. As I discussed above, the story itself is centred around an ethical relationship: the human contact between Mary and Moses. This problem or situation – still on the story level – is approached in many ways by Tony, by the Seargent, and, on another level, by the narrator and, finally, by the reader. Tony is indecisive in a situation in which he is claimed to be responsible by the narrator, and the tension this situation creates is, importantly, a tension *across* narrative levels. For there is a tension between the views and thought processes of a character who feels his situation is irresolvable and those of the narrator who claims that Marston “had the greatest responsibility that day” (26). Tony is a relative late-comer to the Turners’ tragedy; he is neither part of colonial society nor is an integral part of the Turner household. So why is it him, exactly, who is “most responsible” that day after the murder? The reader, being more informed than Tony is (thanks to the knowledgeable comments of the narrator), gains an insight not so much into how he should act, but into the very reasons why he is incapable of doing so:

Most of these young men were brought up with vague ideas about equality. They were shocked, for the first week or so, by the way natives were treated... But they could not stand out against the society they were joining. It did not take them long to change. It was hard, of course, becoming as bad oneself. But it was not very long that they thought of it as 'bad'. And anyway, what had one's ideas amounted to? Abstract ideas about decency and goodwill, that was all: merely abstract ideas. When it came to the point, one never had contact with natives, except in the master-servant relationship. One never knew them in their own lives, as human beings. (18)

It seems that what Tony and the young men lack is not knowledge, but *an ethical relationship* with natives. They have ideas about equality but they cannot withstand a stronger and more oppressive ideology – because these ideas have nothing to do with the lives or the real experience of either the young men or the natives. Their ideas are abstract, void of content, void of the momentum that makes ethics meaningful: the human, or what Levinas calls the “face-to-face” encounter with the Other. Abstract ideas are always part of an ideology, a system, a law i.e., part of a “said”. This is the reason why it is so important for colonial society to keep the natives in the frame, in the “said” of the master-servant relationship where the individual human being cannot gain momentum. Tony does not understand this first law of white society yet – the narrator explains – but when he will have spent more time in the country, he will understand and “then he would do his best to forget the knowledge, for to live with the colour bar in all its nuances and implications means closing one's mind to many things, if one intends to remain an accepted member of society” (26). However, in the moment of *interruption*, between his ignorance and his deliberate forgetfulness,

there would be a few brief moments when he [Tony] would see the thing clearly, and understand that it was ‘white civilization’ fighting to defend itself that had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant, ‘white civilization’ which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a *human relationship*, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turners' failure. (26, emphasis added)

The brief history that is given in the narrative of the relationship between Mary and Moses allows readers to explain its dynamic and psychology in various ways but what is undeniable and most important about it is that it is human and personal. However, what leads to the

tragedy is the fact that Mary cannot take the burden of responsibility that all human, and, therefore, ethical, relationship entails. She is a woman without agency, which prevents her from taking responsibility for both the other and herself. Hence, whereas Tony has a sense of responsibility, but lacks human contact, Mary, having human contact, avoids responsibility. Both options are presented as dead ends in the novel.

The last question that is left unanswered was raised by having made a parallel between the reader's tentative interpretation and Tony's ethical responsibility "to act as judge and jury" in the case of the murder. Lessing's ethics, as it relates to the reader is, again, reflected in narrative elements. Tony raises the question whether one can imagine the mind of a native (in Levinasian terms, the mind of "an absolute other"). When reading Tony's thoughts in the first chapter the reader has great expectations about getting to know the whole truth about Moses in the rest of the book, from the (so far seemingly) omniscient narrator. However, as I already noted above, the reader is disappointed in his expectations because he will not know more in this respect than Tony does; the novel ends on the dubious comment of the narrator:

And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent... Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say. (206)

The narrator cannot give a final resolution or interpretation of Moses's motives or emotions. It can only state the obvious: Moses committed murder out of revenge. But about his feelings – exactly the part that would provide an interpretation of the deeper psychology of the murder – the text remains silent. The narrator's outright admission of this lack of information is only the last sign of what shows in the narrative in many other ways. Even if the narrator admits that Moses was the only one to lose in this tragedy, the one "who was neither dead nor mad" (26), the reader is kept empathetically distinct from him throughout. In general, the narrator presents the story world through character-reflectors ("focalizers" or "filters") in a considerable part of the narrative (like Mary, Dick, Charlie Slatter, Tony Marston, or "white society", "people in the district", "white South Africa" etc.). The character that is obviously missing from that list is Moses. The lack of one character as reflector, that is, the essential

lack of his perspective in the text, is reflective of the ethics that the text also invokes by limiting information about Moses's feelings. It points to the readers' own responsibilities, which are as much dependent on their singular encounter with the literary text as Tony's responsibility would have been upon his encounter with Moses. Via Levinas, one could say that both Tony and the reader should respond to the singularity of the Other/the text without fully "knowing" or "understanding" it.

In summary, Lessing's ethics is meaningful in the dynamics of the human relationship, in the light of which responsibility can be assumed. This responsibility is not only temporarily called for, in an actual interaction with the Other, but should always already be a grounding modality of one's life. Lessing's ethics adds to Levinas's insights by pointing to the importance of taking responsibility for oneself: *agency* (rather than passivity) is a necessary precondition of taking responsibility for the Other. Indeed, responsibility, will, and agency are closely related in the novel's vocabulary, and Mary's lack of will and agency in her individual life necessarily results in both her failure in a human relationship, and her inability to take the burden of responsibility.

At the same time, Lessing's ethics is, primarily, a narrative ethics: it only becomes visible in the narrative structure of the novel. Narrative facts that make up a narrative situation manipulate the attention, the affective relations, and the factual knowledge of readers; they can perform, or refusing to tell, a story in a certain way. As Adam Zachary Newton writes, "[a]ll allegorical translations of [a] poem's meaning to an order external to it... rest upon on a more basic allegory internal to the text: narrative structure and form as ethical relation" (*Narrative Ethics*, 7). As seen from the above analysis, Lessing defies the kind of ethics where epistemological issues bound ethical action, which is reflected in her choices of narration as limiting information, manipulating perspective or preventing affective identification etc. The text always already presents an ethical relation that is also an offering, as Newton would have it, a "narrative enchainment" of the reader (*Narrative Ethics*, 7). This performative, self-repeating quality of the narrative exposes itself to the reader in its immediate interface and triggers those cognitive and epistemic responses that result in the reader's understanding of and active participation in the ethics of the novel. The meaning that is shared and recognized in this way is, thus, both *ethical* and *narrative*.

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