Introduction

To see a face is already to hear: “Thou shalt not kill.”
--- Emmanuel Levinas

The present reality is a reality of untranslatable otherness.
--- D. H. Lawrence

How can there be the play of the same if alterity itself was not already in the same?
--- Jacque Derrida

I. The Ethical Turn of Deconstruction

At the end of the nineteen century, Nietzsche made his famous pronouncement—“God is dead”—a disturbing force in European culture. And in the middle of the twentieth century, news of another death—“the death of Man”—was pronounced by Michel Foucault. By their critique of the foundational subject and rejection of any absolute value, both thinkers posed the “question” of ethics. Along these lines, during the last few decades in Anglo-American literary studies, an untheoretical and impressionist mode called “criticism” has been challenged by a more rigorous theoretical and self-reflexive mode called “theory”—a shift from the idea of the individual as a locus of interiority and creativity to the conviction that subjects are constituted by systems and discursive constraints. It is thus assumed that texts have a multiplicity of meanings that defy or defeat the author’s intention and exceed or elude both the author’s and the reader’s grasp. The shift from human autonomy to literary autonomy derives its strength from the emerging importance of language as the interpretive category of
modern thought. The predicament of contemporary morality is that, following Nietzsche, there is only incommensurability and undecidability among a plurality of interpretations that are contestable.

In reaction to the virtual suppression of ethical and evaluative discourse, many critics argue for a return to ethics. And the 1990s have seen a significant turn to ethics in contemporary literary studies. Though acknowledging the force of theory, many critics (e.g. Wayne Booth, David Parker, Siebers, and Freadman), noting the marked decline of confidence and fervor in ethical mode of reading fiction in recent decades, argue that the advent of theory and “neo-Nietzschean” challenge has made reading narrative merely a straying in moral wilderness. They claim that literary theory is relativistic and unable to promote stable values and standards. A revitalization of the field of ethics and literature has thus recently gained the attention of scholars in philosophy and literary studies. What is more, the recent turn toward the ethical within literary studies is closely connected to a turn to the literary within ethics. In other words, unlike previous resurgence of ethical criticism associated with literary figures such as Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis, this movement is mainly stoked by things going on within philosophy. Many philosophers have sought to re-enfranchise literature by arguing for its special value as a mode of moral inquiry. Moral Philosophers like MacIntyre, Rorty, and Nussbaum have been increasingly concerned with the ethical power of fiction; they have allotted major ethical significance to narrative because they all regard literature (and especially the novel) as the primary vehicle for ethics.¹

Yet, for some critics (e.g., Geoffrey Harpham, Andrew Gibson, and Robert Eaglestone), the Aristoteleanism inherent in these philosophers’ insistence reveals their philosophical indifference to structuralist and post-structuralist theory of the novel.² They argue that the recent upsurge of interest in ethical question is to be
welcomed only if it is not a naïve retreat to a critical environment undisturbed by post-structuralism. What they propose is that ethical questions resist settlement and that the novel does not offer a resolution to the “crisis of rationality” but produces such a crisis itself—i.e., the novel should be read creatively as a way of keeping conceptual schemes loose, porous, and responsive to singularity. On that account, deconstruction and its attempt to undermine the certainties of Western metaphysics are defended as an ethical and political practice, one which may question the validity of man and humanism. As such, the recent turn to ethics in the 1990s has been getting aired not only by humanists and moral philosophers but also by postmodern theorists and deconstructionists. Very recently deconstruction has also begun to present its way of reading texts—i.e., “rigorous resistance to closure”—as an ethical imperative. Hence the deconstruction of humanist Ethics has now been regarded as the Ethics of Deconstruction. The crossing of the projects of ethics and deconstruction follows the premise that the deconstruction of the self by the other has an ethical significance—the decentering of the subject has brought about a displacement and a recentering of the ethical. Ethics in this sense does not provide a path to knowledge of right and wrong, good or evil; it is a process of formulation and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves and others.

One of the primary ethical currents within the deconstructive movement was the dialogue between Derrida and Levinas that ended in Derrida’s affirmation that “the thought of Emmanuel Levinas has awakened us to a conception of an unlimited responsibility that exceeds and precedes my freedom” (Derrida 1999: 3). Simon Critchley asserts that their dialogue has brought forth an ethics of deconstruction, which is not a moment of carnival or liberation, but a moment of the deepest concern with limits, with possibility and impossibility:

For both Levinasian ethics and Derridian deconstruction, this
‘infrastructural’ matrix of alterity would try to show the conditions under which something like logocentrism or ontology is possible, whilst at the same time showing how the philosophical pretension or ontological totality is continually rendered impossible by an alterity that can neither be reduced nor excluded. Derrida and Levinas seek the conditions for the possibility and impossibility of philosophical conceptuality. (1989: 103-4)

Deconstruction conceived as such opens an ethical space of alterity and the deconstructive task accordingly has been regarded as an attempt to find ways of describing a non-normative or non-prescriptive ethics, an ethics that maintains an openness to the other as truly other, not merely an other who is the “same,” following the analogy of universal humanism.

This formulation of the other as “truly other” is the deepest concern of Levinas, who has opened in the past few decades a notable way for an ethical reading of deconstruction. His account of alterity has become an almost mandatory point of reference in recent work confronting ethical issues, with ethics understood as the questioning of the self as it encounters the irreducible Other. In his reading of the history of Western thought, the Other has generally been regarded as something provisionally separate from the Same (or the self), but ultimately reconcilable with it; otherness appears as a temporary interruption to be eliminated as it is incorporated into or reduced to sameness. For Levinas, on the contrary, the Other lies absolutely beyond my comprehension and should be preserved in all its irreducible strangeness. In order to protect the Other from the aggressions of the Same, Levinas thinks of difference not in the mode of formal logic, but as asymmetry and excess. He introduces his notion of the asymmetry of human relationships in terms of the face-to-face relation. Levinas defines the face as a surplus, or as “the way in which
the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me” (TI 50). The face is a signification without context, and thus it merely “expresses itself” (TI 51). As an irreducible other, the face is a trace of alterity left in the phenomenal face:

The face, it is inviolable; these eyes absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, offer, nevertheless, an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation of murder is inscribed: the temptation of an absolute negation. The Other is the sole being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation of murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear: “Thou shalt not kill.” (Levinas1990: 8)

In Levinas’s descriptions, the face wears a double aspect—it is at once absolutely defenseless and also that which opposes my power over it. As an other, it is described as the destitute one and also as overlord. On the one hand, its nakedness, its wretchedness, indeed, its strangeness are a mark of its absence and exile from the world. But on the other hand, the infinite alterity of the speaking face is incommensurate with a power exercised. It is in this sense that while murder is a real possibility, it is what Levinas calls an “ethical impossibility.” The interruptive force of the face enables the encounter with the other to call into question and transform the self’s habitual economy. The face-to-face encounter has nothing symmetrical about it.6

What Levinas calls the face, alterity, or exteriority, which cannot be reduced to the Same, plays an important role in Derrida’s understanding of the ethical. This Levinasian influence accounts for Derrida’s characterization of deconstruction in ethical terms. Yet in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida not only reveals this influence, but provides a critical reading of Levinas’s conception of ethics. Like Levinas, Derrida rejects the Husserlian interpretation of the Other as an alter ego, but
contrary to Levinas, he insists that the Other cannot be wholly other and must be thought of as “another I” (with more emphasis on “another”) and respected on that basis. At the heart of Derrida’s essay is the question of how the rupture of a totality or a system of thought, based on the transcendence of the face beyond language, can possibly be represented, or have any meaning, in language? As Derrida sees it, the thought of Levinas “can make us tremble” (VM, 82) as it tries to liberate itself from Greek philosophy and attempts to re-establish ethics and metaphysics in the transcendence of “a non-violent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other” (VM 83). Derrida argues that it is impossible to found an ethics upon the notion of a purely non-violent opening of the ego to the other: “How can we think of the other, if the other can be spoken only as exteriority and through exteriority” (VM 116)? Any inquiry, even the most patient and attentive deconstructive reading, which aims at a self-articulating resistance to intersubjective violence, is inevitably violent. The denial of all violence would be the denial of all relationship, which is itself violent. Derrida’s approach to the ethical dimension of deconstruction can be found in the concept of the closure of metaphysics which he defines as “the problem of relation between belonging and the breakthrough” (VM 110). In other words, pure self-identity and pure difference can never be thought separately and in strict opposition—they are always already embedded in the alteration between purity and contamination, unity and multiplicity, war and peace. Hence Derrida raises the question: “How can there be the play of the same if alterity itself was not already in the same” (VM 126-7)?

Derrida’s essay deconstructs Levinas’s trust in the unmediated relation of the face-to-face encounter. And as a result of a complex engagement with Derrida, Levinas reworked his understanding of the fundamental moment of ethical responsibility. The difficulty language has in speaking of the excess derived from
face-to-face relation is the central problem in Levinas’s second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, wherein Levinas elaborates a new terminology for expressing the priority of ethics over ontology. Words such as “the Same,” “metaphysics,” “transcendence,” “exteriority,” “totality” and “separation” have either disappeared or occur relatively rarely. This later text bristles with terms like “proximity,” “approach,” “obsession,” “hostage,” “persecution” and “substitution.”

Even *l’Autre* and *l’Autrui* play a less important role, being largely replaced by *le prochain* (the neighbor). Here Levinas proposes that language is amphibology because it is made up of the transcendent saying and the immanent said. It is the interweaving of the two which allows the ethical to signify within ontological language. The saying is the impossibility of denying the other; the site of our responsibility for the other. It is an “exposedness to the other where no slipping away is possible” (OB 50). The said is the logos, the horizon of meaning because it creates the identity of an entity by “thematizing” it. The saying and the said exist in continual tension. The saying is unsayable because at the moment of saying it becomes the said. In other words, any manifestation of the saying demands “a subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology” (OB 6). While incarnated in language at a cost, the saying nonetheless must

- enter into a proposition and a book . . . . It must spread out and assemble itself into essence, posit itself, be hypostatized, become an eon in consciousness and knowledge, let itself be seen, undergo the ascendancy of being.
- Ethics itself, in its saying which is a responsibility, requires this hold. (OB 43-4)

The saying, which is unthematizable, impossible to delimit, becomes limited, THEMATISED, said. Yet, conversely, the saying can never be totally engulfed in the said. Through its manifestation the saying appears as a disruption of the said. That is,
the saying both stimulates the said and ruptures it: “an affirmation and a retraction of the said” (OB 44). The significance of “the saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted” (OB 47). Rather, it “imprints its trace on the thematization itself” (OB 46-7). With the distinction between the saying and the said, Levinas emphasizes the excess of meaning that overflows any statement, and the impossibility of ever completely reducing the saying to the said. It is Levinas’s distinction between the saying and the said that brings his thought closer to Derrida’s. The said is Levinas’s admission that, as Derrida argues, language is always already violent and that this violence is necessary for the beginning of any system.

Levinas’s conception of ethics as an asymmetrical relation between the same and the other opens many possibilities in literary studies. For Maurice Blanchot, the effect of Levinas’s writing was to keep the question of ethics open when for most it has become a closed issue. Blanchot proposes a tacit rewriting of ethics as a poetics of the Outside—when the other speaks to me, my world is not guaranteed, but drains away with my power to grasp it. For Blanchot, the experience of writing and the demand of ethics are inseparable. What we get from literature in relation to ethics is what Blanchot, following Levinas, names the “Saying”—“that ‘inspiring’ insomnia when all having been said, ‘Saying’ is heard.” On that ground, in *The Writing of Disaster*, Blanchot describes three different ways of reading:

There is an active, productive way of reading which produces text and reader and thus transports us. There is a passive kind of reading which betrays the text while appearing to submit to it, by giving the illusion that the text exists objectively, fully, sovereignly: as one whole. Finally, there is the reading that is no longer passive, but is passivity’s reading. It is without pleasure, without joy; it escapes both comprehension and desire. It is like the nocturnal vigil, that ‘inspiring’ insomnia when, all having
been said, ‘Saying’ is heard, and the testimony of the last witness is pronounced. (101)

The “Saying” in literature is precisely that uncanny moment of saving a text from being lost in the “Said” of a book. These moments are a testimony to the irreducible otherness of the other and to our ethical responsibility in reading a literary text wherein the excess of meaning makes it a question “to” philosophy, rather than merely a question “of” philosophy, as what the moral philosophers have thought literature to be.

II. Lawrence and the Ethical Criticism

Lawrence has been widely regarded as belonging to Leavis’s tradition. When differentiating the literary practice of Lawrence and Joyce, Daleski identifies these two novelists respectively to the two rival critical schools and approaches today. According to Daleski, Lawrence’s work, in its insistence on meaning of literature, on its relation and force to life, “links up with a traditional critical stance, one that we may associate with the work of F. R. Leavis”; Joycean practice, on the other hand, in its manifestation in verbal play that destabilizes meaning and detaches the text from the world, is associated with “the work of Derrida and the Deconstructionists” (1989: 92). However, such a common attitude that Lawrence and Joyce represent antithetical poles of modernism becomes less tenable with an increasing awareness of Lawrence’s conscious problematising of language. Undeniably, the Leavisite vision of Lawrence as an intensely moral novelist was important in shaping the view of Lawrence’s works throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. For many of the critics who had been brought up with Leavis’s brand of critical practice, Lawrence’s novels became important for their statement of moral resistance to the forces of industrial
modernity and capitalism. Leavis conceives of Lawrence’s vision of the world as a stable, normative, and incomparably “diagnostic” guide to the crisis of modern civilization. Lawrence’s work is “an immense body of living creation in which a supreme vital intelligence is the creative spirit—a spirit informed by an almost infallible sense for health and sanity” (Leavis 1964: 81). It was Leavis’s reading of Lawrence which most significantly shaped him as proto-proponent of “Life” against the mechanization and dehumanization endemic to the technological civilization of modern industrial society.

Nonetheless, the major weakness of Leavis’s account is that it can find no way of dealing with the contradictions in Lawrence’s work other than denying their very existence. Gainsaying Eliot’s claims that Lawrence was “sick,” Leavis declares flatly that there is “no profound emotional disorder in Lawrence, no obdurate major disharmony; intelligence . . . is not thwarted or disabled by inner contradictions in him, whether we have him as artist, critic, or expositor” (1964: 29). The influential account of Lawrence by Leavis has seemed unsatisfactory to some of Lawrence’s later admirers because it seemed to argue the profundity of Lawrence’s vision in an apparently literalistic and moralistic spirit. Some critics later correct Leavis’s unitary conception of Lawrence’s celebration of positive life-forces by bringing out another, demonic Lawrence, ambiguously fascinated by corruption, disintegration and dissolution. For instance, Clarke insisted that what appear to be differentiated as positive and negative terms in Lawrence are often interchangeable, and that disintegration, dissolution and corruption are welcomed as necessary phases of growth.12 Leavis’s conception of the novel evokes a simple structure based on a pattern of moral antitheses, and yet Lawrence’s novels are too complex to support any single position. On the contrary, Lawrence is able to raise special questions precisely because he is not afraid to contradict himself.
While in the middle years of last century, Lawrence was praised as a highly moral writer, in the 1970s, mainly due to Kate Millet’s attack, Lawrence has been assumed to be politically incorrect. Feminists see clearly defined patterns of male dominance and female submission in his texts and find these offensive. Lawrence has thus been regarded as a sexist writer. What these feminist critics had in common with earlier critics was that there was still very little attention being paid to the linguistic complexities of Lawrence’s work. Critics have most often treated his writing as if it were principally a tissue of ideas or of represented experiences, not a linguistic sign. For instance, Kate Millet’s interpretation of *Women in Love* is crude in simply equating Birkin with Lawrence and in overlooking Ursula’s skeptical resistance to the masculine doctrines asserted by Birkin. In his attempt to call for more developed attention to contradiction and excess inherent in Lawrence’s work, Jonathan Dollimore claims that “there is more to be said about Lawrence; much more than was usually said in the days when he was celebrated as a prophet of straight liberation, and more than is often said when he is castigated from the vantage point of contemporary sexual politics” (269). Stereotypes about Lawrence are alive both in academia and in the wider culture—Lawrence as a racist, a fascist, and a sexist. Indeed, his use of oxymoron and his play with opposites and extremes often (mis)lead the readers who react quickly and antagonistically to one side of the opposition. Attention to the ideological content alone, whether it is conveyed by characters or by the narrator, will easily gravitate an one-sided (mis)understanding. Accordingly, reading Lawrence’s fiction is challenging, and his verbal idiosyncrasies do demand critical scrutiny.

In fact, Lawrence himself attacks the “referential” conception of language and of the human subject somewhat ahead of his time. He says that “out of a pattern of lies art weaves the truth” (SCAL 8), suggesting that truth is not out “there” to be
“represented” by art, and that the words conveying truth are technically the same words forming “a pattern of lies”; therefore, the meaning of words is far from self-evident and uniform. His famous contention—“Never trust the artist; trust the tale” (SCAL 8) — prefigures the insights and methods of deconstructive criticism. Lawrence also dissolves the “old stable ego” of character to recognize the impersonal dimension within the personal. Instead of an autonomous ethical entity, the self becomes a dynamic and evolutionary matrix of competing forces. As a novelist, Lawrence is more a man consciously (or unconsciously) problematizing his vision than a man struggling to communicate a single truth through language. Both he and his characters reflect repeatedly on the nature of language and autonomy of the human subject. Some literary critics have begun to focus on the formal complexity of Lawrence’s work by investigating the way he calls into question the “referential” or “substantial” conception of language and of the human subject. On account of this, Doherty argues that Lawrence reveals himself as “an ardent deconstructor of logocentric models of completion and closure” (477). Working through his novel leaves the reader sometimes with the sense that its “messages” are snares and delusions.

For all that, Lawrence was certainly not a deconstructionist. Quite the opposite, he often clings to the traditional view that one can avoid the snares and deception of metaphor insofar as language is used carefully and properly. Also he would probably have opposed de Man’s contention that there is no “privileged observer” and hence no essence of truth in a world based on the figurative structure (de Man 1971: 10). Yet Lawrence sometimes does reveal in his work the idea central in Nietzschean thought that language is a network of arbitrary signs and conventions that have no inevitable connection with “presence” or “truth.” Lawrence’s attitude to language has always been double: while using it consummately,
he is at the same time wary of its tendency to substitute words for experience and to ossify our understanding. In other words, while language has the capacity to illuminate the nature of things, to enrich their relation to the world, it also has the capacity to substitute its own forms for things. Moreover, considered as instrument of the ego or ideal self, language is ironically more than often the betrayer of truth and sincerity since all language is metaphorical and thus words do not always mean what they say or say what is meant. Lawrence remains acutely aware of the double nature of language and so language as it is used in his fiction is necessarily distinct from its object, which it reflects only obliquely. In this respect, Lawrence’s insights anticipate those of deconstruction and so the way to the heart of his imagination is through confrontation with the dense idiom of his verbal art. However that may be, on the other hand, in his novel a utopian site is located. Diane Bonds thus argues that Lawrence oscillates between two antithetical models of language, “differential” and “symbolic,” which correspond to those of self, “relational” and “organic” (21). Accordingly, it is more likely that Lawrence’s novel both anticipates and is veritably “other” to the paradigm of deconstructive criticism.

On that ground, those critics with simplistic or rarefied ethical assumptions (either of language or of subjectivity) would have had, in some ways, their empty and futile say in their reading of Lawrence’s fiction. In proposing a rethinking of the relation between ethics and fiction by appealing to Levinasian thought, Andrew Gibson indicates that traditional ethical criticism was “reluctant to problematize the mimetic premise” (54). The assumption of the mimetic premise is that, in fiction, ethics and representation are inseparable. Such an assumption makes it impossible for a novel to have an ethical dimension outside its mimetic project. While Leavis assumes that a novel’s ethical power is inseparable from a kind of mimetic adequacy, for Levinas, the ethical relation begins precisely as the other in its infinity exceeds
any presentation of it, in the failing or ruin of representation (Gibson 56-7).

Alluding to Levinas’s critique on the mimetic premise, Zygmunt Bauman also indicates how modern ethics emphasized the similarity between one and an other. In the modern conception, particularity is removed, as we all participate in a commonality, and it is the responsibility of the other to help the self move toward that similar perfection that is posited in each of us. By contrast, according to Bauman, postmodern ethics emphasized difference, especially through the influence of the work of Levinas, who “accords the Other that priority which was once unquestionably assigned to the self” (Bauman 85). In this postmodern conception of the other, in Levinas’s terms, “there is no fusion: the relation to the other is envisaged as alterity” (Levians 1999: 103). Such otherness is a kind of irreconcilable difference of singularities.

In certain respect, Lawrence startlingly anticipates such postmodern conception of the other based on Levinas’s ethical philosophy of alterity. As a novelist, Lawrence’s remarkable ability is to respond both to the otherness of language and to the moment by moment strangeness of other beings and the state of his own existence. A major problem and theme with which Lawrence is chiefly concerned is to see others not as threats to his individual being, but as independent beings with whom he can be in a satisfying relation. We think of Tom Brangwen’s first sight of the “foreign” Lydia Lensky in The Rainbow, of the initial encounter between Birkin and Ursula in the “Classroom” chapter in Women in Love, or of the unexpected confrontation with a reptile in Lawrence’s well-known poem “Snake.” His writing is saturated with a profoundly intimate philosophy of the unsubsumable Other. In fact, contemporary critical thinking based on Levinas’s concept of “absolute alterity” can put the reader at ease with Lawrence’s repeated emphasis on “radical untranslatability”—a notion made more popular by poststructuralist theory. In “Democracy,” Lawrence declares:
“The fact that an actual man presents before us is an inscrutable and incarnate Mystery, *untranslatable*, this is the fact upon which any great scheme of social life must be based. It is the fact of otherness” (RD 78). With a hint of Levinas’s notion of asymmetry, Lawrence insists on the “incomparability” of beings:

When I stand with another man, who is himself, and when I am truly myself, then I am only aware of a Presence, and of the strange reality of Otherness. There is me, and there is another being. That is the first part of the reality. *There is no comparing or estimating.* There is only this strange recognition of present otherness. (RD 80. Emphasis added.)

Thus one man is neither equal nor unequal to another; he is different and unique.

In fact, much of Lawrence’s work, fiction or non-fiction, is devoted to teaching us to think in terms of difference and otherness. In his study of American literature, Lawrence proposes that the English should not assume they already know what American literature has to offer them; rather, they should read American literature in the defamiliarizing ways:

> We have thought and spoken till now in terms of likeness and oneness. Now we must learn to think in terms of difference and otherness. There is a stranger on the face of the earth, and it is no use our trying any further to gull ourselves that he is one of us, and just as we are. There is an unthinkable gulf between us and America, and across the space we see, not our own folk signaling to us, but strangers, incomprehensible beings, simulacra perhaps of ourselves, but other, creatures of an other-world . . . . The present reality is a reality of untranslatable otherness . . . . The oneness is historic only. (SM 17)

In *Women in Love*, Birkin, in an argument with Hermione, explicitly denies the humanist notion of transcendent equality. “One man isn’t any better than another,
not because they are equal, but because they are intrinsically other, so that there is no term of comparison” (WL 104). Not only will Birkin continue to stress the utter difference of each individual, he will also emphasize that otherness can be neither defined nor restricted, but only acknowledged and respected.

It is in this sense that Lawrence’s work exceeds the frame of traditional ethical criticism, for which ethics is only thinkable in terms of certain uniform characteristics or consistent features. The limitation of the older moral criticism is the assumption that ethics is a totality or involves totalities, whether of value or perception. This is an ethics that cannot allow for radical difference, heterogeneity, and the thought of the incommensurable. Critics or writers with the same assumption will return repeatedly to metaphysics and slip into paradoxical positions, where the paradoxes are neither managed, nor worked with. On the contrary, Lawrence’s texts, with all the paradoxical positions as a preoccupation, are saturated with both metaphysics and otherness. However powerful the influence of a particular doctrine or “metaphysics” in his novels might be, there is in them also a sense of the intrinsic otherness of a reality independent of the author’s intention, the character’s perception, or the narrator’s understanding—a sense that something is included more than, or different from, the way the author’s or the hero’s theory seeks to define it. Through the work of such textual otherness, Lawrence also presents a vision of selfhood in which we encounter with what exceeds human consciousness and eludes the grasp of a knowing subject. Lawrence wants to encourage the kind of “caring” consciousness that will let things shine forth as what they are. In certain way paralleling Levinas’s assertion that the self’s ethical responsibility is manifest as attentive responsiveness to irreducible otherness of the other, Lawrence believes that new worlds can be created every day, in a quotidian miracle, provided we open ourselves up to the world in an act of attention—“An act of pure attention, if you are capable of it, will bring its own
answer” (SEP 55).

III. Encountering Otherness in Lawrence’s Text

As has been indicated above, the ethical turn of deconstruction has posed significant challenges to traditional ethical thinking, suggesting the need for an ethics more sensitive to otherness and difference. In the past few decades, many thinkers have attempted to offer a bridge between literary interpretation and ethical thought by focusing on our relation to an unsubsumable Other. In the light of these thinkers’ theoretical tenets—with more emphasis on Levinas, and also with reference to the work of Derrida, Nietzsche, Blanchot, and some French feminists—I aim to explore three dimensions of such an ethics of alterity as they are elaborated in Lawrence’s fiction: how to describe otherness, how to relate responsibly to an other, and how to compare an idea of otherness to the experience of reading a text. And since ethics is not and cannot usually be examined in isolation, I aim to explore it as it is connected to related issues—language, love and sexual difference. Lawrence’s rejection of reducing the Other to the Same has enormous ramifications for his understanding and treatment of these issues. Both sides of the following polarized approaches concerning the above issues are simultaneously addressed in his fiction: other as similar or other as different; others for self or self for others; reading for ethics or ethics of reading.

Both Lawrence and Levinas provoke the possibility of thinking radical difference. They are both concerned with the problem of intersubjective violence and they both insist on an irreducible element in human contact, an element in face-to-face encounters that cannot simply be sublimated at a higher level. The specificity of the
surplus in the encounter remains crucial to both Lawrence and Levinas because it keeps the otherwise monadic subject open to the outside; such an excess necessitates that the self is never merely an appropriation machine, but always open to the other. Yet the location of the surplus engendered in the encounter with the Other firstly differentiates their ethics of alterity. For Levinas, this excess (which he calls “infinity”) is the irreducible specificity of the other that traces and calls for the responsibility of the self. In Lawrence, on the other hand, the production of excess and surplus is attributed mainly to “I”—the self. Put differently, while Lawrence’s conception of untranslatability between subjects glorifies the self for its infinite potentiality, the Levinasian ethics exalts the other to the almighty power.

Beyond that, if the insistence on an encountering with radical otherness is what brings Lawrence and Levinas closest, the aim of such an encountering is where they depart the farthest from each other. While Lawrence is more interested in the responsibility of flourishing the Self through recognition of intrinsic otherness, Levinas is obsessively concerned with how the Self is infinitely “obligated” to respond to the call of the Other. In other words, Lawrence’s primary concern is the problem of how to connect with the other while not sacrificing the self; for Levinas, it’s the problem of how to maintain the alterity of the other without subsuming it in the realm of the Same. Although Lawrence never ceases to pay attention to otherness throughout his writings, he usually returns to focus on the self and tends to neglect the precise role and state of the Other. For Lawrence, our responsibility is, first and foremost, to ourselves and for ourselves. While proposing to let things shine forth as what they are by not violating their inalienable otherness, this “letting be” risks the danger of ignoring or leaving alone the Other. In this sense, Levinas’s ethical philosophy, which is radically centered on the Other, offers the missing characterization of the role and function of the Other within his writings and provides
a more thorough understanding of the “for-the-other” within the self-Other relation.
On the other hand, Levinas’s excessive mode of insistence that “I” am endlessly
obligated to the Other is indeed enough to make anyone tremble. While Lawrence is
as critical of the possessive mode of being, unlike Levinas, who seems to be guilty of
enjoyment in the self, Lawrence is not against enjoyment and even sees it as a life
responsibility. In this sense, Lawrence’s appreciation of joyfulness and
gratification of the self offers us moments of release from Levina’s serious
solemnities which have indeed burdened us too much with unlimited obligation
toward the Other.

Strikingly different though they are, they both endeavour to seek a satisfying
relation with the absolute Other. Yet how can one be in a relation to the other,
without negating the other’s alterity, without reducing it to oneself, without the use of
some mediating category, based on mutuality, or commonality, or some supposed
standard of truth? When the idea of difference is radicalized to the point of radical
untranslatability, it threatens to turn into a form of relativism that may in fact hide a
more fundamental indifference or even an altered form of fascism. With this
concern in mind, I aim to examine in this study, through a reading of Lawrence’s
fiction and an engagement with some of the thinkers of ethical alterity, the latent
dangers as well as the ethical force in treating the other as absolutely different,
unknowable, and beyond any kind of common understanding or experience. This
involves the dilemma of whether it is best to emphasize radical difference or to seek
some sort of equivalence or commensurability between moral agents. Derrida is
here put forward as the one who insightfully raises the question and also seeks to
think beyond absolute alterity to a sort of other as a version of the self, an alter-ego
(though with more emphasis on “alter”). This means acknowledging that when we
affirm our differences, we need to preserve a necessary sense of what we have in
common. In other words, we have to take care to see that our respect for otherness and heterogeneity is not bought at the price of a denigration of sameness and homogeneity. In fact, by refusing to acknowledge the indispensability of recognition, any celebration of difference deprives itself of a nuanced appreciation of the other’s difference from me. As Bakhtin argues in his later work, “Both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary or impossible” (1984: 69). Genuine encounter and dialogue entail that something, but not everything, can be known and understood between intrinsically different beings.

In Part One, my attempt is to investigate the vital contribution Lawrence can make to our rethinking of ethical questions in terms of language. It is frequently argued that Modernism and Postmodernism display their anti-ethical and therefore anti-humanistic prejudices most precisely in their substitution of the category of language for the category of man. But this charge does not survive a review of the dominant thinkers of the last century—e.g. Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault, Levinas, and Blanchot—for whom, language is not just an autonomous formal system but rather a medium saturated with otherness, and thus with ethics. As Harpham indicates, in view of Nietzschean argument, “the Modernist emphasis on language, often discussed as an avoidance of the question of ethics, might be seen instead as one particular approach to ethics” (1992: 64). Put another way, the real ethical function of language is confirmed rather than dissimulated by the undecidability of reference. Most recent literary theory can actually be read as an ethically-motivated attack on reference. The law of language is that things must be given their proper names—and yet that no name is truly proper. In other words, although language ought to refer, it does not always do so. As a matter of fact, language intervenes on the world, acting on and altering what it represents, most significantly through its nonreferentiality,
through which it builds its own insubstantiality back into the world, modifying the world’s reactionary heaviness.

By the same token, Lawrence, being suspicious of the referential conception of language, attempts to overcome the inertia of the word by writing in a style of self-interrogation and the slightly-modified repetition. On that ground, I propose to read his fiction by focusing on both the medium and the message, in the way I believe language was for Lawrence himself a way of seeing, knowing, and being. The thought of the above thinkers encourages one to be aware of the twofold relationship between heeding and excluding, which is essential to our understanding of the recurrent themes of “not seeing,” “not knowing,” and “not to be” in Lawrence’s fiction. To see something is constantly to oversee something else, and to know something is inevitably to “kill” something in the appropriative manner. Transparency, the medium which grants us limitless vision, has itself become the limit of vision. That is why alterity is to be reckoned with as a matter of principle. Accordingly I contend that there inheres an impetus of ethics in Lawrence’s fiction, which works far less on the established than on the overseen and the unknown, and which seeks to assist these into language, expression and recognition.

The two strong motives inherent in Lawrence’s work—a refraining from reductive explanation along with a radical drive to understand and to interpret—imply the problem that one confronts in the critique of language: i.e., one must necessarily work within the system of language in order to act as a critic of system. Lawrence’s language enforces a constant, if implicit, recognition of the limited purview of language, with respect to the totality of human being in the world. Yet for him, the endless inadequacy of words is no excuse for silence. “Silence is almost always preferable but cannot be preferred” (Woods 7). So in his text, there is neither tragic or nihilistic abnegation of language nor any sentimental celebration of the ineffable.
Inherent in Lawrence’s fiction is the interplay of the absolute (unknown) and the relative (understanding): “Even the relative is only relative. Relative to the absolute” (K 286). Lawrence’s absolutes are always relative and his relatives are never simply relative. He sees language, particularly the language of the novel, as constantly negotiating between a wide spectrum of these planes. This points to the dual nature of language use—i.e., despite its essential character which defines, specializes, and thus finitizes us, language also serves as a system of empowerment and a necessary medium of agency. Accordingly, Lawrence’s novels not only expose the fictional nature of ethics but seek to offer an ethics of fiction, with the referential and self-referential power of literary text existing in a dynamic and creative relationship.

Part Two aims to trace Lawrence’s attempt to seek for new ways to speak about love by comparing his conception of love with that of Levinas, given that both oppose the fusional concept of love. After Kant’s exclusion of the affective realm from rational ethics, philosophy has found it difficult to use human love as a paradigm for ethical relations. Moreover, love as a topic seems to have vanished as a theme following the discovery of sex initiated mainly by Freud. But recent revisioning of the self in relation to otherness has led to a dubious rediscovery of love as a topic for scholarly inquiry. Under the influence of the French poststructuralists, the late 1970s saw a conversation of the “lover’s discourse” take place in academic criticism. They have maintained that, though each in their unique way, a fear of otherness has led to the production of a subject of consciousness characterized firstly by a presumed understanding and consequent appropriation of objects. Thus “a philosophy of love” should be, in their view, an articulation of the ethical relation to alterity—one which avoids the fusion of the Other with the Same. The greater the capacity for love, the less the other becomes a threat and the more it becomes a stimulus to change and
adaptation in an amorous state.

It is in this context that Levinas’s insistence on “eros as absolute alterity” might open a possibility for an ethics of eros. In saying that it is in eros that the possibility of a radical thinking of transcendence arises, Levinas says that it is in eros that the other is revealed as other. Yet this possibility is never fully realized in Levinas’s own work since his own conception of eros to certain extent remains entangled within metaphysical traditions. As Irigaray sees it, Levinas’s avowed philosophical affinity with aspects of Plato’s philosophy of love operates according to the same sublimation of the sensuous or the physical in a philosophical-spiritual realm, the subordination of eros proper to love. Like Levinas, Lawrence considered erotic love as a way of encountering the otherness that lies beyond the boundaries of man’s consciousness. Nonetheless, the depiction of erotic love in Lawrence’s fiction does not reject enjoyment, and Lawrence dose not make a sublimation of physical love. In his concern to create a language of feeling in embodied love, Lawrence elaborates an ethics of eros without excluding sexuality from the domain of ethics. Beyond that, while bringing sexuality into discourse, Lawrence has made the erotic discourse in his fiction evasive and double-edged to prevent sexuality from being trapped by the language meant to liberate it.

Although Levinas has been widely attacked (especially by feminists) for sublimating erotic love, a further thought in relation to sublimation in Levinas could be located on the whole question of philosophy understood as “the wisdom of love” (OB 161), manifest as “proximity” and “non-indifference,” which he adopts to designate an articulation of the ethical relation to absolute alterity. Levinas’s notion of “proximity” and “non-indifference” bears striking similarity (and otherness) to Lawrence’s idea of “star-equilibrium” which he employed in dealing with the loving relationship between Birkin and Ursula in Women in Love. In Lawrence’s fiction
love is seldom something nice, pretty, or idealistic; love is neither a goal nor an ideal but a force of disruption and creation. What love creates is the “separate clarity of being, unthinkable otherness and separateness’ (P154). It is the “transcendent and abiding rapport” between two personal centers, each respecting and fulfilling the integrity or “free proud singleness” of the other. In other words, the lovers in an ideal love proposed in Lawrence’s novels, to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy’s neologism, “compear.” Birkin insists that he wants something different from conventional love—something much more impersonal and harder. He expresses Lawrence’s heretical position that the word “love” masks a form of psychological imperialism—a desire to master or to be mastered. Birkin’s principle of “star-equilibrium” is also relevant to Lawrence’s conception of friendship and neighbor-love based on distance rather than closeness, separation rather than intimacy, antagonism rather than harmony. But Lawrence encounters the same problem as Levinas does: if all people are irrevocably separate from each other, is there any achievable harmony in the universe? If not, how can it be desirable? Widely recognized as an ideal structure, “star-equilibrium” as a kind of love relationship is at the same presented in Lawrence’s text as a highly problematic possibility. What Lawrence really provides is, I think, not so much “the Lawrentian ideal” as “the Lawrentian problem.”

Part Three invokes Lawrence’s work in a reflection on the problems produced by the designation of the feminine as the other by drawing upon the dialogue concerning an ethics of sexual difference between Levinas and some feminist critics. One of the most attractive dimensions of Levinas’s work for feminists was its usefulness for a feminist ethics. Not only did Levinas suggest the condition of maternity as the ideal model of selfless submission to the needs of the other, but he also explicitly privileged the feminine as that which was outside the specular economy of the male gaze. By raising the question of whether it is possible to take
account of the radically other without reducing that otherness to categories of the same, Levinas gives new impetus to Irigaray’s interrogation of what it means for women to somehow occupy the position of the other while at the same time challenging that designation. In the 1970’s, French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Helene Cixous, sought, with differing methods and ends, to unveil and correct the refusal of the feminine at the heart of those visions of a thoroughly masculine version of humanity. What comes to light as a result of these theoretical engagements is the notion that sexual difference, rather than sexual equality, provides the conceptual key to overcoming the patriarchal oppression of women.

While Levinas’s notion of the feminine functions to disrupt the primacy of totality and sameness, he is nonetheless often accused of expressing the traditional denigration and reification of the feminine. For Irigaray, he fails to conceive radically enough an ethics that would take into account sexual difference but not reinscribe the same secondary role generally attributed to women in the history of Western philosophy. Derrida also identified in Levinas’s work an undisclosed intentionality to appoint the primacy of ethics over sexual difference. In a commentary on the Genesis story, Levinas writes: “The idea of humanity is not thinkable from two entirely different principles. There must be sameness common to others: woman was taken from man, but came after him.”21 Humanity is the necessary first principle in Levinas’s ethics. Being conceived only as the feminine specificity rather than a difference between the masculine and the feminine, sexual difference for Levinas marks only the feminine subject and thus can be overcome in the sameness of humanity. The problem which confronts Levinas here is that in the name of ethics he risks reinstituting sexual neutrality in all its masculinity as the human paradigm.

Levinas’s eventual elevation of ethics over sexual difference is thus seen by
some feminists as shading into sexual blindness and hence sexual indifference. In this respect, Lawrence’s urgent insistence on the irreducibility of male and female principles is more akin to Irigaray’s notion of radical sexual difference (though in obviously different cultural and sexual background). Throughout Lawrence’s work, the reader encounters what at times seems a conservative view of gender—for instance, what is natural in the male is the volition, action, utterance; it is polarized from the female’s sympathetic center of feeling and emotion. On the other hand, in spite of his insistence on essential sexual difference, Lawrence from time to time resists, challenges, and contradicts the conventions and structure of the binary sex/gender system. We may see how dynamic and multilayered his engagement was with the cultures he inhabited. His demythologization of motherhood can especially help readers think about the issues raised by the feminist ethics of care—issues such as psychological imperialism in care-relationship or self-sacrifice as a feminine ideal. By his attempt to dissociate women from their prescribed roles as child-bearer and care-giver, Lawrence seeks to speak for women against socially constructed femininity. Lawrence’s treatment of the question of sexual difference is deeply related to his concern with the inequality between the sexes and hence contributes a lot to our reflection on women’s predicament in the double demand of difference and equality.

However, the so-called “political correctness” has made Lawrence’s work confined to the scene of whether he fits into the straitjackets of feminist ideology. Carol Dix’s words imply the way politics tyrannizes through ideology without the mediation of ethics: “The trouble with feminist critics is that anything that passes for celebration of the male can be read as denigration of the female” (18). While brilliantly elaborating on the complexities, contradictions, and tensions that traverse the “sites of woman,” feminist analyses have perhaps too often rendered the term
“man” as fixed, static and unproblematic. Accordingly, some of the critics, with their pre-formulated indictment of sexism, ignore Lawrence’s frequent questioning of gender roles and his criticism of the exercise of male power and mastery. In effect, as a male writer dealing with femininity, Lawrence has re-imagined men and women by making his text a site of ideological struggles rather than a mere expression of (gender) ideology. Therefore, while the appeal to sexual difference is necessary for feminists, it is dangerous to simplify “men” by creating allegorical figures to embody them. In other words, “we should look as skeptically at feminist descriptions of Lawrence that reduced him to a symbolic Other as we do at patriarchal reductions of women writers” (Siegel 6). And that is the reason why ethical articulateness is especially needed in a cultural situation in which political criticism has gained such currency.

By juxtaposing Lawrence and the poststructuralist thinkers, I am certainly not arguing that Lawrence is a deconstructionist, nor do I intend to provide a deconstructive reading of Lawrence’s fiction. While my approach for this study is inspired and informed mainly by the ethical turn of deconstructive theories, it more importantly exposes the theories to scrutiny and inquiry. If some of the better-known theorists of ethical alterity can sometimes deepen our understanding of his work, Lawrence, in turn, can sometimes manage to illuminate, challenge and supplement theirs too. Accordingly, what follows is an enactment of the dynamic process of reading texts rather than an application of a set of (deconstructive or poststructuralist) rules to Lawrence’s fiction or an occasional use of literature to prove a theory.22 To certain extent, the experience of reading texts is comparable to an encounter with otherness, which cannot be engulfed by any pre-established theory. The Levinasian effect mirrors the strength of the Other in the reading of texts: the text is always available for appropriation by its reader, but the residual sense that the text
has not been fully grasped ensures the survival of alterity. By examining the relation between ethics and fiction, self and other, male and female, I hope to show in the following discussion how Lawrence’s texts may give access to our thinking and rethinking of ethical alterity.
These moral philosophers have revitalized the field of ethics and literature by investigating how the study of narrative can uniquely enrich our understanding and teaching of ethical concepts. Richard Rorty has called for “a general turn against theory and toward narrative” (xvi). MacIntyre proceeds with the assumptions that narrative “provided a moral background to contemporary debates” (121). Nussbaum has gone so far as to claim that literature is a form of moral philosophy. She argues that “certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative” (5). She values novels as texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, and the sheer difficulty of moral choices. For them all, narratives, through their structure, style, and dialogue, as well as their emphasis on character and choice, enact a unique form of ethical enquiry for readers attentive to their particularity.

In spite of their contribution to a revival of value-oriented approach to literary studies, Nussbaum and the other literary-turned moral philosophers have been criticized for being too little concerned with literature as a separate and independent practice defined by its own logic, constraints, and conventions. For instance, Harpham points out how far Nussbaum and MacIntyre’s Aristoteleanism has led them to see narrative unity as providing the key to self-knowledge and the good (1992: 158). For a critique of the appropriation of literature by moral philosophers, see also Richard Lansdown (2001): 78-94; Andrew Gibson (1999): 8-15; Robert Eaglestone (1997): 35-59.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, post-structuralist and deconstructive thinkers turned increasingly to a direct confrontation with political and ethical issues. For instance, in his later work, Derrida has become more emphatic in his statements regarding the irreducibility of value and ethics: “the value of truth is never contested or destroyed in my writing, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts” (Derrida 1988a: 146). Undeniably, the ethical re-evaluation of deconstruction is connected with the exposure of the collaborationist war-time writings of Paul de Man which leads to the negative applications of ethics to literature and philosophy. De Man’s wartime Journalism indeed unleashed a flood of controversy within and outside the academy over whether deconstruction was morally evasive or iniquitous.

The alliance of deconstruction with ethics is paradoxical—if deconstruction aims to move in a Nietzschean trajectory beyond good and evil, promising liberation, release, and subversion, then ethics has often been associated with legislation, restriction, and codification—everything that deconstruction is held to range itself against. To gain a deeper understanding of the “ethics of deconstruction,” one needs to notice one of the preoccupations of recent literary-ethical inquiry—i.e. the distinction between ethics and morality. In this vein, while morality is seen as rules or codes, ethics is understood as ethical sensibility or orientation. The term “ethics” is thus an old name strategically retrieved in order to launch a new inquiry. Foucault defines morality as the laws of conduct and ethics as the practices of the self (1986: 10). According to Harpham, ethics is disinterested and precedes our political and moral interestedness. It is born free, but also bound everywhere by morality “to particular communities, institutions, codes, and conventions” (1992: 58). Cornell also associates ethics with the undetermined, and morality with the determination of the undetermined as duties, obligations, systems, rules, norms, “a right way to behave” (Cornell 1992: 13). That being the case, it should be noted that, in this study, the word “ethics” may be retained, whilst its limitations are at the
same time strongly implied. In other words, the word “ethics” is adopted as a writing under erasure whereby a cross is superimposed over its problematic reference.

Altery, as a poststructuralist concept of difference, refers to that which cannot be reduced to the Same and that which escapes the cognitive powers of the knowing subject. By disrupting the economy of the Same, it challenges the fundamental principle presumed by humanist ethics. For a discussion of the introduction of “alterity” into English (from French), see Spivak (1993: 212) who traces it to Levinas.

Following Levinas, Blanchot also comments: “I never face the one who faces me. My manner of facing the one who faces me is not an equal confrontation of presences. The inequality is irreducible” (1993: 62).

In a later text, Derrida also points to the double bind of the relation between alteration and alterity: “To be sure, in order to respect the totally other of alterity, it would be necessary that alteration itself—which always presupposes contact, an intervention, a socio-political or psychological transformation—is not possible . . . There is a moment, however, when in my view one must reengage negotiation; it is a political or, let us say, historical concern. It is that if one holds alterity without alteration in pure respect, one always risks lending a hand to immobilism, conservatism, etc., that is, to the very effacement of alterity itself”. (Derrida and Pierre-Jean Labarriere. *Alterites*. Paris: Editions Osiris, 1986. 31. Quoted from Robbin, *Altered Reading*: 131.)

Paperzak explains this change of vocabulary in part by a shift in Levinas’s perspective: whereas *Totality and Infinity* dealt with the Other, *Otherwise than Being* is concerned more with the position and meaning of the subject. See Paperzak (1993): 212.

In his various writings, Levinas uses two terms for alterity—*l’Autrui* and *l’Autre*. In his translation of *Time and the Other*, Richard Cohen explains that “*l’Autrui* refers to the personal other, the other person; *l’Autre* refers to otherness in a general, to alterity” (TO 30). In some English-language editions and studies of Levinas’s work, a convention has also been adopted according to which *l’Autrui*, often translated as “the Other,” refers to one’s fellow human beings, the indefinite neighbors, strangers, widows, and orphans, and the term *l’Autre*, often translated as “the other,” refers to what lies beyond the totality that is one’s own being, beyond what constitutes one’s essence, a realm to which the Other belongs. The former is the personalized form of the latter. But Levinas himself is not consistent in this terminology. The distinction between *l’Autrui* and *l’Autre* is related to the double aspects of the face mentioned above. On the one hand, the face does not refer to any specific individual, but rather to the anonymous call of the other. Our ethical responsibility is thus not bound to a cultural context—the face signified beyond any social meaning that might be implied by race, gender, ethnicity, etc. On the other hand, that the face is “signification without context” all too easily makes our ethical responsibility as merely hypothetical or abstract. Thus Levinas at the same time asserts that our engagements with the other are always concrete—embodied and emplaced—but in a relationship that is prior to any significance that might be attached to it by philosophy, culture, politics, or place.

Levinas’s recurring metaphor for this paradox is a piece of thread with knots along its length. The thread—the said—is interrupted with knots. These knots represent the interruption of the saying: a knot is made of the thread, dependent on
the thread and yet not the thread (OB 165-71). For Levinas, the task of philosophy is not to simply follow the thread, but rather to foreground those moments where the knots interrupt the thread, where the beyond being interrupts being.

Blanchot comments on the “strange structure” which Levinas captures sight of in the idea of a transcendent immanence. He says, “In his own unique way, Jean Wahl used to say that the greatest transcendence, the transcendence of transcendence, is ultimately the immanence, or the perpetual referral, of the one to the other. Transcendence within immanence: Levinas is the first to devote himself to this strange structure and not to let himself be satisfied by the shock value of such contraries” (1986a: 48).

Michael Bell indicates that Clarke, responding to the emotional urgency rather than the speculative premises of Birkin’s speech, misreads the “river of dissolution” as Lawrence’s positive proposal in Women in Love. See Bell (1992): 130.

In her reading of Sons and Lovers, Millet also assumes absolute equality between author and character—“Paul Morel is of course Lawrence himself,” an image of the “male ego rampant”—and then censures Lawrence for treating Paul with “adulation” (Millet 246-7). But if Lawrence is Paul, he is also Paul’s mother and his girlfriends.


Here certainly I do not mean to equate Lawrence’s emphasis on “incomparability” with Levinas’s notion of “asymmetry”, though both lay stress on non-reciprocal relationship between beings. As I’ll elaborate their striking differences in more detail later, Lawrence surely does not belong to the vein of postmodern ethics because he never accords the other the priority as Levinas does.

What Lawrence Buell calls “the new ethical criticism” focuses on these three related problems. See Buell (1999): 7-19.

I am greatly indebted to Professor Eva Chen for offering me the valuable insight that, paralleling Levinas’s distinction between l’Autrui and l’Autrue, there are two kinds of other in Lawrence—the impersonal force and the concrete human other. Indeed, Lawrence’s insistence on “radical untranslatability” between beings has led to his emphasis on the nonhuman other and indifference towards the human other. His aspiration for impersonal transcendence has sometimes prevented him from encountering the other as a situated and concrete individual. For instance, as I’ll show in more detail in Part Two, both Miriam and Clara are for Paul a means to transcendental experience. What Paul wants is not Clara the concrete woman, but “It”—the impersonal force engendered by an erotic encounter with Clara. Besides, while Ursula enjoys analyzing people, Birkin is not interested at all in any people. Insofar as Lawrence treats the individual’s experience as something unshared and untranslatable, his attitude toward the non-human world is in stark contrast with that toward the world of real individuals. Yet, as I’ll manifest in my reading of his fiction, Lawrence’s attitude toward these two kinds of other is not coherent but is relativized and dramatized through the textual play in his fiction.

Levinas claims that “nourishment . . . is the transmutation of the other into the same” and that this is “in the essence of enjoyment” (TI 111).

For instance, Lawrence cautions against “pronouncing about” others’ experience, “lest I, in attributing qualities to them, transgress against the pure individuality which is theirs, beyond me” (FU 161). By extension, Lawrence insists that “It is
not our business to live anybody’s life, or to die anybody’s death, except our own. Nor to save anybody’s soul, not to put anybody in the right” (FU 148). While Levinas shows much more concern than Lawrence with the “for-the-other,” he has been criticized for being unable to appreciate the other’s nuanced difference from one another. In other words, his indifference to the differences between faces seemingly results in a tendency not to do justice to faces that are specifically other.

Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the singular being does not appear without another singular being, because its appearance is no other than that of the “between” as such, which reveals their finitude. In this sense, community “compears”—it is the revelation of the finitude of beings rather than their fusion. I adopt this term to suggest that the ideal lovers in Lawrence’s fiction exist together but not merge identities.


In response to the question that whether deconstruction can serve as a method of literary criticism, Derrida declares: “I am not sure that deconstruction can function as a literary method as such. I am wary of the idea of methods of reading. The laws of reading are determined by the particular text that is being read . . . . Deconstruction asks why we read a literary text in this particular manner rather than another . . . . Deconstruction teaches us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as language” (1984: 124-5). Concerning Levinas’s impact on ethical criticism, Eaglestone also points out, “A Levinasian understanding of the ethics of criticism does not provide a methodology or type of literary theory, but rather a justification of a variety of approaches to literature” (7).