

# An Ethical Reading of Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child and Ben, in the World*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reads Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child and Ben, in the World* by drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's ethics theory to explicate how the Lovatts in *The Fifth Child* embody the Heideggerian homeliness of ontology and to show how their rejection and exclusion of Ben represents the secluded interiority of the self. When the face of the other (Ben) shows itself, the ethical dimension that Levinas expects to initiate does not unfold accordingly. Instead, the Lovatts remain silent or even walk away. However, while Ben is away from home and is wandering around in the world in the sequel, he receives warm and hospitable welcomes from Mrs. Briggs and from Teresa who do not even bother to know who he really is. They become the substitution *for* and hostage *of* Ben, respectively, as they not only take responsibility *for* him, but also responsibility of him. In accordance with Levinas's ethics, which reverses Heidegger's ontology by emphasizing the dislocation from "here" to "there" and of de-subjectification from "mine" to "the other," Lessing pursues such Levinasian ethics in terms of textual politics in her two books on Ben.

**KEYWORDS:** Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child, Ben, in the World*, Emmanuel Levinas, ethics

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# 多麗絲·萊辛的《第五個孩子》與《浮世畸零人》：一個倫理的閱讀

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## 摘 要

本篇以列維納斯的倫理學來閱讀多麗絲·萊辛的《第五個孩子》與其續集《浮世畸零人》並討論在《第五個孩子》中，駱維特家族如何具現了海德格的「本體論式的居家感」，以及他們拒斥班的行徑如何再現了自我的封閉內向性。當他者（班）向自我（駱維特家族）展現其臉龐及其他異性時，在列維納斯思考中所期待的倫理向度並未開展，駱維特家族反而保持沉默或視而不見。但是在續集《浮世畸零人》中，當班離開家、在世界遊蕩時，他卻得到了一位貧窮老婦人（畢格斯太太）與一位妓女（德蕾莎）的熱忱款待。她們不在乎班到底是誰或是什麼，但卻對他提供了無私的幫忙與照顧。換句話說，她們成為了班的替代與俘虜，不僅對班負起所有的責任，連帶地也把班該負的責任都挪到自己的肩上，成為了「為了他者」的倫理主體。如果列維納斯修正海德格本體論的方式在於將重點從「自我」移向「他者」、從「此處」移往「彼方」，那麼萊辛這兩部關於班的作品，透過其文本政治性，則實踐了列維納斯的倫理哲學。

**關鍵字：**多麗絲·萊辛、《第五個孩子》、《浮世畸零人》、列維納斯、倫理

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## I. Introduction

Doris Lessing, one of the most salient women writers, published many novels regarding a wide variety of issues. From her post-colonial articulation in *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) to her feminist stance in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Lessing was a controversial writer. Among her works, *The Fifth Child* was published in 1988. In several interviews, Lessing mentioned that her inspiration for writing *The Fifth Child* comes from numerous sources. The first one emanates from her longstanding interest in little people, goblins and changelings (*Conversations* 197); the second one from her reading of an archeologist who was astonished to encounter a Neanderthal girl in Maine (176); and the last one from a letter to the newspaper editor that she read someday in which a woman anxiously declared that her fourth child has totally ruined the happiness of the family (176). In other words, writing *The Fifth Child* dwelled in Lessing's mind for quite some time and it was influenced by diverse sources.

However, Lessing did not totally concur with some critics' readings which tend to narrow down the scope of *The Fifth Child* by addressing only one issue. Just as grey areas always exist, she also feels ambivalent about whether or not what Ben causes all around him is evil (177). Its sequel *Ben, in the World* (2000) was written to satisfy some readers' curiosity about what happens to Ben later and it received some negative comments from book reviewers.<sup>1</sup> These common readers were unanimous in arguing that the differences in Lessing's writing style between *The Fifth Child* and its sequel serve to confuse the reader and that the flat characterization not only hinders the reader from identifying and even sympathizing with the character, but also from addressing some cardinal issues, such as the otherness in our society and the controversial question of the co-existent humanity and animality in human beings. As for literary critics' responses, some of them focus on the sub-genres that Lessing utilizes (such as urban gothic, picaresque, science fiction) and on the conflicts that the use of these genres create to disturb the reader's responses (Watkins 150; Robbins 95; Rubenstein 71), while others

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the recent book reviews are Michiko Kakutani's "His Weirdness Attracts Types Even More Weird" (8 August, 2000), Michael Pye in "The Creature Walks among Us" in *The New York Times* (6 August, 2000) and Alex Clark "Growing Pain" in *The Guardian* (17 June, 2000), to name but a few.

see Ben as the embodiment of the dark side in every human being (Cederstrom 212) and the liminality between human and animal (Watkins 150).

By taking Susan Watkins's arguments which focus on the liminality of Ben as the starting point, this paper wants to probe into the character, Ben, who seems to embody the threshold between human and animal, and who disrupts this very boundary by unsettling our definitions of human and animal. A series of questions to be asked and scrutinized are: is Ben a human with an (almost) uncontainable and insatiable animality, or is he an animal just covered by (or trapped in) the body of a human being? When Rita, a prostitute in *Ben, in the World* taunts herself by saying "Well, aren't we all [human animals]?" (42), can we transform this sarcasm into a philosophical question, which focuses on not (just) the intricate relation between human and animal, but (also) on how and where can the self place itself in the face of this other? What I mean here is when critics lay their focus on how Ben embodies the "marginal matters of the self as object" (Robbins 94), assumptions as such focus on the clean and competent entity of the self and how the self thus feels perturbed by the very existence of Ben who seems unclassifiable to them. Then, can we shift our focus to Ben, to this creature who is *outside* of the self's cognition and self-consciousness but whose exteriority still calls for the ethical attention from the self?

This paper endeavors to set out an ethical reading of *The Fifth Child* and its sequel *Ben, in the World* by drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's theory of ethics. I argue that the Lovatts in *The Fifth Child* embody the Heideggerian homeliness of ontology, whose rejection and exclusion of Ben represents the secluded interiority of the self. Yet while Ben is away from home and is wandering around in the world in the sequel, he encounters two characters (Mrs. Briggs and Teresa) who become his substitutions and who not only take responsibility *for* him, but also responsibility *of* him. Thus, the first half of this paper will take a short detour to discuss Levinas's ethics theory, and the second half of it is the examination of how Levinas's theory can provide a different perspective to read Lessing's two books on Ben. Even though Levinas does not see the animal as other, can Ben, who seems to be a human being *and* an animal (or neither of them), arouse the ethical response from the self? Despite the fact that ethics is not the same as politics, Levinas still aims for a just society practiced in political terms, in which "ethics [is] for the sake

of politics, that is, for the sake of a more just society” (Critchley 25). Then, can we undertake a reading of Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, in the World* by incorporating a political dimension to the extent that the ethical is political, or, to put another way, can we read Lessing’s two books on Ben as the *very practice of ethics* in terms of textual politics?

## II. Levinas’s Face and Language of the Other

Broadly construed, Levinas’s philosophy has an intricate relation with Martin Heidegger’s, and his theory of ethics is often regarded as conversation with, or even a dispute against Heidegger’s ontology. Before 1933, Levinas was an important interpreter of Heidegger’s early philosophy and he even regarded Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as “one of the finest books in the history of philosophy” (*Ethics and Infinity* 37). Yet as a Jewish who suffered tremendously at the concentration camp, and who was bereft of most of his relatives during the Second World War, Levinas turned to see *Being and Time* as “diabolical,” because the thought that Heidegger developed in this book might fuel his political allegiance to Nazism at that time (qtd. in Moyn 28). So in “As If Consenting to Horror” published in 1988, Levinas admitted that the first time he learned about Heidegger’s association with, or even his endorsement of Nazism in the 1930s, he “could not doubt the news, but took it with stupor and disappointment” (qtd. in Moyn 28).

Apart from their opposite political stances, the other discrepancy lies in their philosophical thinking. Heidegger’s ontology, especially his conception of *Dasein*, focuses on human being who contemplates its own being in the world by questioning the meaning of Being, and of what it means to be as a being. For Heidegger, *Dasein* is the combination of *da* (there) and *sein* (to be), meaning “to be there,” or as John Llewelyn says, “*Dasein* is a being that interprets itself and its place (*Da*) in its world” (“Levinas and Language” 121). Since this concept emphasizes “mineness” (the attributes of self’s existence) and dwelling (the place it occupies in the world) as Being-in-the-world, *Dasein* is an enactment of a “homeliness of ontology” (Ahmed 138). And if the gesture of carving out a boundary which separates the self from the outside world is the first step to construct the self’s subjectivity, it can be expected that in this dwelling that the I can call it “home,” the self can feel at home with itself when everything is at its own command. As Levinas

interprets *Dasein* in the following sentences:

In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means. . . . Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is com-prehended. (*Totality and Infinity* 37-38)

However, in contrast to Heidegger's ontological focus on the individuated self-consciousness of *Dasein*, Levinas shifts his critical attention to the metaphysics which is conjoined with the other who is outside of self. For him, this metaphysical moment of encountering the other is not only the moment when the self starts to have a clear self-consciousness by separating itself from the outside, but also the moment when the ethical dimension between self and other can be initiated. So instead of relegating the unclean and unwelcome other to the unknown exteriority, Levinas regards this encounter with the other as indispensable, so that "everyday life is already a way of being free from the initial materiality through which a [self] accomplishes itself" (*Time and the Other* 63). And instead of emphasizing the "mineness" of *Dasein* as Heidegger did, the implication of "to be there" for Levinas rather suggests an act of robbery or deportation: the very place that the self inhabits is actually procured by means of deporting its previous owner. So it becomes obligatory for Levinas to discuss how we can, or should respond to the other ethically.

Further on in *Totality and Infinity (TI)*, Levinas clearly states that being *face to face* with the other is the prominent way for the self to encounter the other, and how it determines the self's ethical response to the other. However, we should not understand the face in terms of visuality; i.e., it is not something we can see or touch. Rather, the other's face and its expressivity is the sheer manifestation of its alterity. As Levinas says, "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (194). In other words, in contrast to the finitude of the self whose interiority is constituted by humans' empirical epistemology (as

“in visual or tactile sensation”), and which intends to grasp the object through thematization (by seeing the other as content), the other of/as infinity is rather outside of and transcendent to the self’s knowledge. As such, the other’s face maintains an absolute relation with the self: not being absolved or thematized by the self, but rather overflows/overthrows its comprehension (102-05). In this light, although the self comes into existence by this encounter, it is also the moment when the self is rendered passive, thereby distinguishing itself from the Cartesian *cogito* and Heideggerean *Dasein* who stresses “here and mine.” Since the other’s face defies any pre-established comprehension, the self has no other choice but to face up directly with the other’s alterity expressed in terms of the face, and the obligation it has is to respond humbly and responsibly to the requirement ensuing from the other. This ethical move to the other is groundless, asymmetrical and non-reciprocal, in that “the face is not something seen, observed, registered, deciphered or understood, but rather somebody responded to” (Waldenfels 69).

In addition, just as Heidegger argues that self-questioning the meaning of its own being in language is the first and foremost question that every *Dasein* puts to itself, Levinas also holds that the primordial relation between self and other takes place in language. According to him, before the self can put forward any question concerning the meaning of its own being, it has been possessed by the other person who speaks to it. In other words, prior to its self-questioning of its own being as a clean and competent entity, the self has already been arrested by the other in language. Although the self has numerous choices in the face of the other—to remain silent or to walk away, for example—it can also respond to the other by speaking to it. Despite the fact that the self may brush off the other by casual words or abuse it by offensive language, the other in the circumstance is still maintained and recognized as such by the self in language. So for Levinas, every ethical relation is first and foremost a linguistic one. As he says, “The other is maintained and confirmed in his heterogeneity as soon as one calls upon him, be it only to say to him that one cannot speak to him, to classify him as sick, to announce to him his death; at the same time as grasped, wounded, outraged, he is ‘respected’” (*TI* 69).

However, as many critics have pointed out, Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* is very controversial, and his points in this book are somehow contradictory to each other. The first and oft-disputed concern is: although

Levinas argues that his philosophy is set against the Heideggerean ontology by “contrast[ing] the homeliness of ontology with ethics and metaphysics, which start from here, but go elsewhere” (Ahmed 138), his conception of “categorizing” the other is still an ontological approach. Just as Jacques Derrida in his famous “Violence and Metaphysics” claims that Levinas’s conception of ethics is still based on an ontological approach, or as Sara Ahmed argues that “To name other as ‘the other’ and as being characterized by otherness is, in a contradictory or paradoxical way, to contain the other within ontology” (142), then how can the ethical relation between the self and other be expanded, when Levinas’s ethics is still based on the same epistemological structure as Heidegger’s? The second concern put forward by many critics is: how can the self who is “independent, autochthonous, solitary” (Bernasconi 246) become the hostage of the other, especially when the other is mostly a stranger in Levinas? For instance, Maurice Blanchot contends that

If the Other is not my enemy . . . then how can he become the one who wrests me from my identity and whose proximity (for he is my neighbor) wounds, exhausts, and hounds me, tormenting me so that I am bereft of my selfhood and so that this torment, this lassitude which leaves me destitute becomes my responsibility? (22)

In other words, critics like Blanchot are dubious about how is the stronger and more powerful self is willing to put the other’s responsibility onto its own shoulder, and even to regard this task as the obligation that it cannot evade.

The third one is regarding Levinas’s seemingly contradictory position. While he argues that the self cannot come into existence until it meets the other face to face, we still cannot dispel the impression that the self, despite Levinas’s sophisticated elaboration, have always already been waiting *out there* for the moment of encountering, and then welcoming the other. In other words, such a paradox suggests an internal flaw inherent in Levinas’s argument, which implies that the encountering could never thale palce and thus the self could be purged of ethical responsibilities (Bernasconi 246). In this light, regarding the above controversies and especially the severe charge by Derrida, Levinas further complicates his theory in *Otherwise than Being (OB)* to argue to what extent the self can be constituted as an ethical subject at

the very moment when it encounters the other.

Thirteen years later saw the publication of *Otherwise than Being*, in which Levinas turns to explicate how the proximity between self and other goads the former to *converse with* the latter so as to initiate an ethical relation. As stated earlier, every ethical subject is always-already a linguistic one, and regarding various linguistic approaches to the other, Levinas further discerns “the said” and “the saying” of language. According to him, the said refers to the inflexible noun in which truth and morality as the guide for conduct are implicated, while the saying is an act of speaking to the other, no matter how unfathomable the other is. The said roughly refers to the ontological need of identifying the other by giving it a name, while the saying refers to the ethical desire for being face-to-face with the other as beyond. For Levinas,

If man were only a saying correlative with the logos, subjectivity could as well be understood as a function or as an argument of being. But the signification of saying goes beyond the said. It is not ontology that raises up the speaking subject; it is the signifyingness of saying going beyond essence that can justify the exposedness of being, ontology. (*OTB* 37-38)

In other words, the said cannot surpass the saying which has always already marked its existence as some inexpressible but persistent traces in the said, while the saying can be regarded as an action, carrying with it the momentum of opening the self to the other through language.<sup>2</sup> So, if saying is persistently yet intangibly inherent in the said, we know there is always something otherwise than being, than knowledge, because “Saying is not exhausted in the said but imprints its trace in the said” (Wyschogrod 201).

To this extent, Levinas suggests that we should not ask “what is it?” because to question the being of the other only brings one back to the fold of ontology (*OTB* 23). Instead, he points out that the self who chooses not to ask ontological questions turns out to be an ethical subject. For him, by not asking

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<sup>2</sup> This separation in language further corresponds to the separation between need and desire in Levinas: need designates a want to fulfill the gap or lack in the subject (as in psychoanalysis), while desire refers to the subject’s metaphysical desire for the other, and this desire, which cannot satisfy or complete the self, does not conform to any pre-established order, nor can it be incorporated into the subject’s self-consciousness (*TI* 34).

what the other is but simply speaking to it, the self admits its responsibility for the other. It is not only willing to be responsible *for* the other, but also for the responsibility *of* the other. For Levinas, the most powerful sentence that the self can ever articulate to the other is “Here I am.” In his thinking, “Here I am” is not just a linguistic response to other *human beings*, but also a humble response to God’s call, or to the task assigned by God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the phrase for “Here I am” is *heneni*. So Abraham says *heneni* when told to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1); Moses says *heneni* when standing in front of the burning bush (Exodus 3:4); Isaiah says *heneni* when God asks who he shall send (Isaiah 6:8); Samuel says *heneni* when God calls him four times (Samuel 3:4); Ananias at Damascus says *heneni* when seeing God in a vision (Acts 9:10). So in this way of thinking, the other is elevated to the supreme position as God, and it always faces from the height (and destitution) of what is for the self a biblical obligation toward the other, and spurs its responsibility to the other as the first exigency. Thus the self has no other choice but to passively answer the call from the other by saying *heneni*, because I myself is always for-the-other before being for-oneself in this asymmetrical relation. As Levinas says,

When in the presence of the Other, I say “Here I am!,” this “Here I am!” is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving it to be seen. . . . I will say that the subject who says “Here I am!” testifies to the Infinite. It is through this testimony . . . that the revelation of the Infinite occurs. It is through this testimony that the very glory of the Infinite glorifies *itself*. (*Ethics and Infinity* 106-07)

So far, we have discussed the basic conceptions of Levinas, but the controversy concerning Levinas’s theory of ethics does not lie only in how applicable his conception to real life is, but also in how overarching the scope of such application can be, especially when it comes to the issue of the animal. Even though Levinas shows his sympathy for the poor, the widow, and the orphan, he only bestows his sympathy for *human beings*. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas clearly states that establishing and explicating the ethical relation “of man to man” is “one of the objectives of the present work” (79). When being asked “does animal have a face?” by three English postgraduate

students, Levinas was very scrupulous to answer that the question needed further elaboration (Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality” 171-72). So critics like Llewelyn would argue that in Levinas, the self is only responsible for the living being who is able to speak (“Am I Obsessed,” 241) while Liang Sun-chieh also claims that “when it comes to the ontology of animal, Levinas can only retreat to the moral rules based on the centrality of humans” (144). Although critics like Simon Critchley defend Levinas by arguing that animals are among the creatures to be reckoned with in Levinas’s ethics (16), Bernhard Waldenfels still wonders “why animals and plants should be omitted” by Levinas (68). To this extent, no matter how meticulous yet evasive Levinas is in the face of the animal issue, it cannot be denied that animals are not bestowed with the possibility to possess a face, and their proximity to humans is not taken into any ethical consideration.

Then, if Levinas expresses his humanitarian concern for the poor and the weak but neglects the animal, what about the being as a go-between, like Ben that we will soon set out to discuss? For Levinas, does Ben have a face? Can his proximity to other characters cause them to be at once his hostages, and, at the same time, also substitute themselves to become the ethical subjects for him?

### III. The House of Lovatt, the House of Love<sup>3</sup>

*The Fifth Child* is set in a suburb of London in the 1980s. According to Watkins, under Margaret Thatcher, the 1980s was a very conservative period during which the family and its values were highly elevated (153). Regarding *The Fifth Child* with its setting in this period of time, Lessing herself also claimed that she intended to represent the aura of the middle class in that period and that, for her, this class of people inherited the Victorian spirit by highly underscoring the family value and their love for and of it (*Conversations* 197). However, Lessing has a bigger scope in her mind: she wants to probe into the issue of difference and how we treat them. As she says,

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<sup>3</sup> Christine De Vinne in “The Uncanny Unnamable in Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, in the World*” argues that numerous names in these two books indicate Ben’s search for belonging and identification, especially his surname, Lovatt, means “to love it” (18).

we busy ourselves and consider ourselves well turned out by affirming for ourselves, as I said, the marking out of the territory. We live in essentially the same manner; we encounter pretty much the same questions, the same difficulties. And I believe that it is important to me as a writer to attempt to find what it is that divides us. (175)

For Lessing, the different, the stranger and the other simply do not exist in the eyes of the middle class people, for “We don’t notice things that we can’t cope with: we decide not to see them, or we smooth them over” (176). Her response here not only lay bare the innermost core of the two Ben books but also provides insight into her ethical attitude toward those who have difficulties fitting into the mainstream culture. In this light, to use Lessing’s perspective as the starting point, my reading will not only incorporate the Levinasian ethical conceptions, but also demonstrate to what extent Lessing’s texts complicate and supplement Levinas’s theory of ethics.

In the very beginning of *The Fifth Child*, we have a perfect model of an ideal middle class family: a diligent couple who want nothing but a perfect home. For Harriet, her intention to be a full-time mother and a housewife has never altered, so “She had done well enough at school, and went to an arts college where she became a graphic designer, which seemed an agreeable way of spending her time until she married” (*The Fifth Child* 7). David, Harriet’s husband, shares the same vision: “His wife must be like him in this: that she knew where happiness lay and how to keep it. He was thirty when he met Harriet, and he had been working in the dogged disciplined manner of an ambitious man: but what he was working for was a home” (8). To this extent, building their family in the crowded and dangerous London may not be the best choice, so they choose a three-story Victorian house with a fertile garden in the suburb of London, for it is a perfect place “full of space for children” (8).

However, this happy couple and their seemingly harmless dream of building a home of their own actually embody the very concept of *Dasein* in Heidegger: the self’s dwelling and feeling at home with itself constitute the basis of his ontology. So, with four children in rapid succession and plenty of guests coming for merry holidays, the lovely home that David and Harriet build corresponds to their surname: this is the house of the Lovatts; this is a

house of love. In this big house, the Lovatts allow themselves to be perfectly *at home with themselves*. As the narrator says, “Listening to the laughter, the voices, the talk, the sounds of children playing, Harriet and David in their bedroom, or perhaps descending from the landing, would reach for each other’s hand, and smile, and breathe happiness” (18).

The house of love particularly expresses its firm merits at a time when the society, an exteriority outside of the home, is undergoing an upheaval in the 1980s:<sup>4</sup>

*Outside* this fortunate place, their family, beat and battered the storms of the world. The easy good time had utterly gone. . . . Brutal incidents and crimes, once shocking everyone, were now commonplace. Gangs of young hung around certain cafés and street-ends and owed respect to no one. . . . At least they [David and Harriet] ought to know what went on *outside* their fortress, their kingdom, in where three precious children were nurtured, and where so many people came to immerse themselves in safety, comfort, kindness. (21-22; emphases added)

Their sweet home is compared to a strong and solid fortress and kingdom, sheltering them from the tumult of the outside. The home of the Lovatts is established on the basis of a self-satisfaction which embodies the “homeliness of ontology” in Heidegger.

However, as stated in her interview, the arrogance and egoistical attitude of the middle class people that Lessing attempts to reveal are insinuating into the house that David and Harriet build together. As “the enemy within” (Yelin 104) and the stranger who is not knocking *outside* the door but *inside* of the house/family, Ben poses a threat to the integrity of the self’s interiority by overflowing/overthrowing the Lovatt’s comprehension, rationality and knowledge. During Harriet’s pregnancy, she has to take excessive sedatives to calm Ben because this pregnancy is not like the others, although for the doctors, Ben is just a super-active fetus in her womb (*The Fifth Child* 42). When Ben is born, the ethical encounter between the self and the other does

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<sup>4</sup> This is the historical background of racist ideology which was prevalent in England in the 1980s. It was supported by several conservative politicians whose catchy slogan was the “enemy within” (Yelin 104).

not occur. Harriet does not just see Ben's face, but the rest of his body as well:

He was not a pretty baby. He did not like a baby at all. He had a heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay. . . . His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms. He opened his eyes and looked straight up into his mother's face. They were focused green-yellow eyes, like lumps of soapstone. (48-49)

While the alterity of Ben fully expresses itself,<sup>5</sup> Harriet has no intention to open up an ethical relation with Ben, and a sense of animosity soon arises in her mind: "her heart contracted with pity for him: poor little beast, his mother disliking him so much" (49). It is not because "Ben refuses to meet his mother's gaze" as Ruth Robbins argues (96), but because even though the alterity of this creature is presented to the self, the self does not *see* it. Therefore when Harriet is breast-feeding Ben, "The nurse, the doctor, her mother, and her husband stood watching, with the smiles that this moment imposed. But there was none of the atmosphere of festival, of achievement, no champagne; on the contrary, there was a strain in everyone, apprehension" (*The Fifth Child* 49).

Just as Levinas argues that only by coming face to face with the other, can the self come into existence, then with Ben's goblin, green eyes, his wild howling, vigorous struggling, and his abnormal behaviors, the Lovatts start to realize that this creature who/which hinders them from *feeling at home with themselves* does not belong to this home. If Ben's look for Harriet is "malevolent" (52), other characters even refuse to look at Ben, failing in the first encounter with the other and in the ethical responsibility later. So the most frequently asked question is "What *was* he?" (67), as if by finding out what Ben is, they can place him in a category they knew, and Ben would no longer be a threat to the order they have established. Furthermore, although the alterity of the other is confirmed through language which makes a

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<sup>5</sup> Waldenfels reminds us that the encounter between the self and other is not restricted to seeing the *face* only; the whole body can express the other's alterity as well. As he says, "The otherness does not lie behind the surface of somebody we see, hear, touch and violate. It is just his or her that is condensed in the face. So the whole body expresses, our hands and shoulders do it as well as our face taken in its narrow sense" (65).

linguistic subject of every ethical subject to the extent that the self's listening to and conversing with the other elevate the other's speech as "teaching," yet the worst situation might still occur: that of the self's total indifference to the other. On the one hand, Ben's alterity is recognized by the Lovatts in speech, as when Luke yells at Ben to shut up (55), or when Harriet can only quiet Ben by intimidating him (89). On the other hand, when the Lovatts find out that their education does not prevail, they just walk away, stop talking to Ben and pretend that he doesn't exist at all. For example, "It was extraordinary how people, asking—cautiously—'How is Ben?' and hearing, 'Oh, he's all right,' did not ask again. Sometimes a yell from Ben loud enough to reach downstairs silenced a conversation" (60).

If Ben's abnormality and alterity hinders the possibility of being assimilated into the same (the Lovatts), the only step to take is to exclude him so as not to disturb the Lovatts who used to *feel at home with themselves* and their guests who can *make themselves at home*. Harriet starts to lock Ben in his room (57), and eventually the Lovatts secretly send Ben away to an institute to prevent Ben from destroying the family who share *the same* values and ideas. Once Ben is sent away, the old merry times in the house are restored: "Four pairs of suspicious, apprehensive eyes [of their children] became suddenly full of relief. Hysterical relief. The children danced about, unable to help themselves, and then pretended it was a game they had thought up then and there" (76), and they even start to look forward to the coming of Easter (76). In other words, with the banishment of Ben, the Lovatts can once again feel at home with themselves, literally and metaphorically.

However, it is only a deception if the self believes that it has absorbed the alterity of the other, because in that case, "it can only meet with dissolution and destruction" (Huang 139). Thus, when Harriet rescues Ben out of the institute, the Lovatt family completely falls apart: the children turn to lock themselves in their bedrooms (*The Fifth Child* 95); the oldest children, Luke and Helen, choose to attend boarding schools and stay with their grandparents during holidays (96); David comes home later and later (98); and Paul becomes hysterical and demanding for lack of maternal love (99). Nevertheless, it is not that Ben does not ever try to be "like" them. He imitates them (68-69), but his endeavor horrifies them: "What was natural to him, it seemed, in the way of amusement was his hostile-looking teeth-bared grin, that looked hostile" (69). The Lovatts acknowledge Ben's alterity, but they

choose to walk away and remain silent. Silence among them replaces the ethical dimension of language that Levinas expects to have.

Even though Harriet is the only one willing to take care of Ben, her behavior is based not so much on a wholeheartedly welcome and nurturing of the other, as on fulfillment of her moral obligation as *his* mother. Several times, Harriet even wishes Ben to fall off from a window (60), or to be run over by a car (63). After countless and unendurable hardships, Harriet finally gives up on socializing Ben. She, David and her mother, Dorothy conclude that Ben belongs to a non-human species whom they have no interest to know, and whose voice belongs to “an alienated, *non-comprehensible*, hostile tribe” (129; emphasis added). At the end of the story, Ben is relegated by the Lovatts to an alien race whose ancestors “rape the females of humanity’s forebears” (130). As Ben starts to grow up, Harriet has no intention to take care of him anymore, but expects to see Ben “searching the faces in the crowd for another of his own kind” (133). In other words, the Lovatt family represents how the self will not disrupt its interiority by opening it up to the other. In the face of this other, the self sees it but does not *see* it. The Levinasian ethics is not developed at all.

However, it cannot be denied that such an open and unlimited welcome to the other in Levinas seldom happens in real life. Most of the time, we express not so much hospitality as caution against any stranger who is approaching us. In this way of thinking, the Lovatt’s (normal) responses to Ben who is entirely incongruent to them are understandable. Nevertheless, as argued earlier, in response to Derrida who criticizes *Totality and Infinity* for using the same ontological concept as Heidegger, Levinas shifts his focus from the one on the alterity of the other to the sensibility of the self, from “ethical alterity” to “ethical subjectivity” (Cohen xii), from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. So, if the major theme of *The Fifth Child* concerns Ben and his otherness, the focus in *Ben, in the World* rather shifts to the characters who become the substitution *for* Ben.

#### **IV. Particular Encounters with Ben**

In *Ben, in the World*, since Ben is eighteen and has left home, we see Ben is confronted with numerous occasions on which he has to encounter other people face to face. While many of them recognize Ben’s alterity, they only

manipulate him, and do not respond to him ethically. It is because for them, Ben is unclassifiable: he is at once human and an animal, or neither of the two. For some, Ben's otherness—his appetite for raw meat, his animal-like strength, and his insatiable instinct for sex—is a threat but also an advantage to them, while, for scientists and artists, Ben is a rare subject of worth to be analyzed. For example, the farm owners, the Grindlys, use Ben's astonishing strength to take care of their farm yet without paying him any money (*Ben* 16-17). Rita, a prostitute who is willing to have sex with Ben for free because "it hadn't been like being with a man, more like an animal" (39), and when she first sees him naked, she exclaims, "*Wow! That's not human. . . . And then there were the barking or grunting roars as he came, the whimpers in his sleep—yet if he wasn't human, what was he?*" (42). And there is a character, Johnston, the procurer of Rita, who deceives Ben to smuggle drugs to France because he knows Ben's unusual look and body will draw all the customs staff's attention without ever noticing the drugs he carries with him. An American director, Alex Beyle, befriends Ben when he is abandoned in Nice. Since he thinks "Ben was not human, even if most of the time he behaved like one. And he was not animal. He was a throwback of some kind" (82), he decides to make a film about Ben, the fictional leader of the Neanderthals inhabiting the mountains by taking him to Brazil (79). Finally, Luiz Machado, the headmaster in a laboratory, and Stephen Gaumlach, an American professor, happen to meet Ben and would like very much to have some experiments on him because "He could change what we know of the human story" (153). So neither do they treat him as "a person of Britain," (137) nor as a human being since they lock him with other experimental animals in cages.

Yet, just as Ahmed in *Strange Encounters* indicates that the way to avoid ontologizing the other is not to underscore the particularity of the other (which will be in "ethical asymmetry yet phenomenological symmetry"), but the particular modes of encountering others (145), Levinas's ethics of welcoming the other without any reservation still happens when Ben encounters an old lady, Mrs. Briggs and an ex-prostitute, Teresa. Although they have no idea who or what Ben is, they are still willing to take care of Ben and even sacrifice their bread and their lives for him.

### A. Mrs. Briggs: to give her bread, to give her soul

When Ben leaves the Lovatts and is deceived several times, he is taken care of by Mrs. Briggs, an old lady who lives on her pension. When she first sees Ben in a supermarket so desperately hungry as to steal loaves of bread, she takes him home and shares her food with him. Even though deep in her mind, “She knew he was not human: ‘not one of us’” (*Ben* 11), and even though she grumbles “*It’s not my business—what he really is*, sums up what she felt. *Deep waters! Trouble! Keep out!*” (7), she still prepares more supplies to feed Ben’s insatiable appetite for meat (12). When Ben fails to get unemployment benefit and “when he had finished [the stew], she scraped out from the saucepan everything that was left of the stew, and put it on his plate” (6). Mrs. Briggs gives all the food she has to Ben: “Ben finished the stew, and then the bread. There was nothing else to eat except some cake, which she pushed towards him, but he ignored it” (6).

During Mrs. Briggs’s face-to-face encounter with Ben, she demonstrates a Levinasian ethical response to him. According to Levinas, when the self expresses its hospitality to the other, there is no way to appear empty-handed: “For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands (*TI* 50). In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas even clearly contends that when you give the bread you are eating to the other, you are “elected” to become the hostage of the other. As he says, “It is the passivity of being-for-another, which is possible only in the form of giving the very bread I eat. But for this one has to first enjoy one’s bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one’s heart, to give oneself in giving it” (72). As an old lady, Mrs. Briggs’s main nourishment comes from some light food, “eating a little bit of this here, a snack there—an apple, cheese, cake, a sandwich” (*Ben* 12), but she is willing to give all she has to Ben, including the stew which she seldom makes, and asks for nothing in return (12). This particular mode of encounter between Ben and Mrs. Briggs demonstrates the proper relation between self and other: “to eat *with* the other, not to eat the other” (Ahmed 139).

Unlike her neighbor who is horrified by Ben’s strangeness, Mrs. Briggs becomes the substitute for the other, the one-for-the-other. At the very moment when she takes Ben in, she has not only become responsible *for* Ben,

but also put the responsibility *of* Ben onto her shoulder: she feeds him, teaches him table manners, cleans him, including his genitals (*Ben* 9), and finds some old charity clothes for him (10). She is an ethical subject who does not reject the expressivity of the face of the other nor its proximity. So Mrs. Briggs worries about Ben when he goes to find Harriet: “Where’s Ben? What is he doing, was he being cheated again?” (13). When she returns from the hospital and finds out that Ben was so hungry as to have eaten a bird, Mrs. Briggs does not complain, but lies down beside Ben and dozes off (32). If proximity between the self and other becomes the prerequisite of developing an ethical relation, Mrs. Briggs does not eschew this contiguous distance between her and Ben, because “it is this proximity that allows me to turn my passive acceptance of the idea of God to an active giving over of self to other” (Fryer 169).

Furthermore, for Levinas, if the self becomes the one-for-the-other, it means that it is not only a linguistic subject who talks to the other, but also a sensible subject who senses the suffering of the other, thus having “a suffering for the suffering of the other” (Cohen xiv). Then, when Mrs. Briggs allows Ben to sleep in her bed, all the pain and anguish that Ben has been suffering are unleashed without any restraint and sensed by Mrs. Briggs without any mediation: “Ben had crept up and laid himself down, his head near her feet, his legs bent. . . . It was how a dog lays itself down, close, for company, and her heart ached, knowing his loneliness” (*Ben* 12). Thus, if Ben leaves for his family but returns to her nonetheless, Mrs. Briggs does not mind “but would go with him to the Public Records Office and find out about his age” (13). She is willing to take Ben in once again. Vulnerability, passivity and sensibility make the core of Mrs. Briggs as an ethical subject.

**B. Teresa, who says “Here I am, Ben”<sup>6</sup>**

The other example comes from an ex-prostitute, Teresa Alves, who is the girlfriend of Alex Beyle in Brazil. When other people keep a distance from Ben due to his otherness or only watch him at a distance, Teresa is the only person who does not mind touching Ben nor does she avoid Ben’s proximity. As the narrator describes their encounter: “Only Teresa came inside the distance all the others set between them and him. Only Teresa would take his hand, swing it, drop it; squeeze his big shoulders and say, ‘Oh, your shoulders, what shoulders, Ben,’ or put her arm around him as she stood talking to someone” (95). When Alex decides to take Ben along with him to visit some aboriginal tribes in the secluded mountains, and Ben expresses his desperation by banging his head against the wall, other people feel distressed and ill-at-ease about the sound of the thuds, just as the guests at the Lovatts felt extremely uncomfortable about the sounds that Ben made. Only Teresa goes into Ben’s room and calms him through caresses so that

[h]e gave a big shout of pain and anger and turned to her, and she felt that hairy face on her bare upper chest, and knew that this was a child she was holding, or at least a child’s misery. “Ben, it’s all right. You don’t have to go anywhere. I promise you.” She stayed there beside him, on the floor, holding him, while he whimpered himself into stillness. (99)

As stated earlier, ethical dimension between self and other can be developed, only when the self’s ethical saying is directed toward the other and the most powerful ethical sentence that the self can articulate is “Here I am.” Thus, while holding Ben, Teresa says to him: “Ben, dear Ben, poor Ben, it’s all

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<sup>6</sup> It is not a coincidence that Lessing highlights the importance of communication and the ethical dimension of the saying that Teresa expresses to Ben by placing him both in France and in Brazil where Ben fails to understand either French or Portuguese. Ironically, Ben is “faceless” in the British bureaucratic system (the said) where he has no birth certificate and therefore no unemployment benefit. Yet, Brazil is where he receives hospitality despite of his failure to understand Portuguese. In other words, as Ahmed suggests, it is not the particularity/alterity of Ben but the particular modes of encountering Ben that should be stressed. In the former mode, Ben is treated as a weirdo and people anxiously evade his presence, while, in the latter, Mrs. Briggs and Teresa do not bother to ask or find out who and what Ben is. Their approaches to Ben situate them in the place of him and make them become the ones for him.

right. I'm here'" (99). This is the starting point from which Teresa becomes utterly responsible for Ben. This is not only a saying, a confirmation of the other's alterity in language, but also a strong declaration of Teresa's position as the substitution for Ben.

As the scenario continues, Teresa takes full responsibility for Ben because now Alex leaves to find a place to shoot his film and leaves her in full charge even though leaving her without adequate money. In other words, Teresa is now totally responsible for Ben: not just to take care of his daily life (to cook, to clean) but of his life. When Levinas says, "Substitution is not the psychological event of compassion or intropathy in general, but makes possible the paradoxical psychological possibilities of putting oneself in the place of another" (*OTB* 146), we should remember that the innermost core of Levinas's ethics lies in revising the Heideggerian *Dasein*—"taking up of the other's place," because now the self has substituted itself for the other and allowed the other to take up its own place. So when Teresa agrees Inez, a biologist who becomes her acquaintance in the previous investigation to have some basic tests on Ben in order to find out the genetic secret that Ben might help to explain, and when they return to Rio after the examination at the institute where Inez works, Teresa falls into deep agony for fear that something bad might happen to Ben. Her fear and trepidation notwithstanding, she clearly demonstrates that she is *the one* that is expected to confront what is ahead:

It felt to her that even the thought of these powerful people made her want to faint, or to run away; she was being expected to confront what she had held in awe all her life: the educated, clever all-knowing world of modern knowledge. Who expected her to? She, herself. Alfredo. And poor Ben. (*Ben* 135)

Through this narration, we know she identifies herself as the *first* one that should be responsible for Ben. Thus, when confronting Luiz and Professor Gaumlach, those clever people who she fears the most, and who "would do anything at all and never think of what it cost the animals" (154), and who look at Ben, thinking how "[t]hey can find out from him what those old people were like" (144), Teresa still bravely yells: "I am in charge of Ben. Alex Beyle left Ben Lovatt in my charge'" (137).

As stated earlier, in the face of this undeniable and unavoidable ethical demand from the other, the self has turned itself into the one for the other, making choices otherwise than constituting its own being. So in the rest of the book, Teresa does all she can to assist Ben: she not only tries to stop the scientists from taking Ben away (151-55), and rescues him out of that “bad place” (the institute where Inez, Luis and Gaumlach cage Ben later), but also risks her life in going into the Andes. Despite suffering altitude syndrome (164), the jeopardy of climbing in mountains “over 16,000-feet” (170), and extremely low temperatures (172-73), Teresa still goes with Ben and Alfredo in order to find Ben’s tribesmen. And when Ben realizes that he has been deceived because the so-called “his tribesmen” that Teresa and Alfredo have promised him are simply the figures carved on the stones of the mountains, they can feel how disappointed and desperate he is: “Then he did turn himself about, with an effort: they could see it was hard for him. He seemed smaller than he had been, a poor beast. His eyes did not accuse them: he was not looking at them” (176). However, as compared to Alfredo who was previously hired by Luiz to take Ben away and who told Ben that he has seen “people like him” (126) so Ben would agree to have those tests on him; and José, who accompanies them on this trip and who knows nothing about Ben, Teresa is the only one who puts her arm around him, and tries to comfort him (176). She is also the one who wants to run after Ben when he leaves their hut in despair and intends to go back to see the sculptures once again (177). When both Alfredo and José agree that Ben’s death is “a good thing,” Teresa is the only character *in these two Ben books* who cries nonstop for him and who truly feels sorry for what has happened to him (178).

Through the above demonstration, we know how Lessing’s novels practice the Levinasian ethics: it is meaningless to identify the other by asking ontological questions (“What is it?”). It is because what matters right now is to see under what circumstances the self will be in the place of the other in which it is less of itself and more of the one for the other. So, when lots of people ask who or what Ben is, Teresa never has this doubt; she even asks Alfredo: “Is it important to know what Ben is?” (143). Mrs. Briggs has a similar attitude toward Ben: Ben is “Not like anything she had known. He was Ben, he was himself—whatever that was” (12). Nevertheless, when Levinas claims that we should welcome the other and bestow our unconditional hospitality on it, Lessing’s novels remind us that hesitation and even

unwillingness still exist in the self's mind. Along with Mrs. Briggs's inner cautions (7), when Teresa meets Alfredo and starts their journey to the Andes, she starts to worry about Ben's future which seems intertwined with hers now. As she thinks,

for the first time, What are we going to do with Ben? If we send him back to Alex, that Professor Gaumlach will get him. I can't ask José's wife to take in Ben, too. They had scarcely thought of Ben's future: it had been so urgent to get him out of Rio, out of danger. It rather looked as if she—and that meant Alfredo (but why should he say yes to it?)—was now responsible for Ben. (164-65)

Teresa's final comment about Ben's death—"I know we are pleased that he is dead and we don't have to think about him" (178) clearly expresses how sad she feels for Ben, *but at the same time*, she is also relieved that he is dead. In other words, the characterization of Mrs. Briggs and of Teresa is complex: they are ethical subjects for being linguistic and sensible to the other, but they are also the subjects who are close to real-life situations when they express how ambivalent they are in the face of the other.

### **Conclusion: Ethical Politics, Textual Politics**

As argued earlier, Levinas dedicates himself to a philosophy of ethics which is intended for a just society. For him, only when the self is sensible to the suffering of the other, can the world glimpse a hope of salvation. Even though the ethical is not identical or restricted to the political, for Levinas, the praxis of ethics can still be pursued in politics. In this light, if the encounter between ethics and politics may adumbrate some glimpses of hope for a just society, do not the encounters between Levinas and Lessing and between the texts and readers have the same effect as well? If we juxtapose the works of Levinas and Lessing, we can discover that, on the one hand, Levinas's ethics assists us to probe deeper into Lessing's characters and analyze their behaviors and motivations, while, on the other hand, Lessing's works complicate Levinas's theory of ethics by portraying real-life situations in

which the self does not welcome the other without any doubt or restraint.

We can further argue that Levinasian ethics is practiced in Lessing's textual politics. If Levinas's concept of ethics is set against Heidegger's ontology by moving from here to somewhere else and from mine to the other, Lessing's literary gesture of moving from *The Fifth Child* to *Ben, in the World* is exactly on the same track. As the fifth child of the Lovatts, Ben is a faceless creature, who is nevertheless able to receive some warm and hospitable welcomes when he wanders around in the world. In the first book, the main emphasis is put on the Lovatts' anxious responses to this incomprehensible creature and how the happy family is torn apart by Ben. However, in its sequel, the focus shifts to Ben and his sufferings and the emphasis is placed particularly on Mrs. Briggs's and Teresa's warm hospitality. In this way of thinking, the praxis of ethics can be pursued not just in terms of politics, but in terms of literary texts as well.

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