**Someone to Run With: David Grossman’s Ethical Turn in Modern Hebrew Literature in Light of Levinas’s Ethical Language**

**Description of the work**

The core theme of the book:

The core theme of the proposed book is that, in his literary fiction, David Grossman has created a language that operates on two levels—the ethical and the poetic. This multiplicity of levels contains an inherent tension between that which is expressible on a poetic level, whose boundaries are limitless, and the ethical, which is not definable. The book examines, for the first time, the ethical aspect of Grossman’s literary fiction as inspired by the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’s thought also contains a tension between the ethical claim in everyday reality and the impossibility of defining ethics in language due to its transcendental origins. The comparison between Levinas and Grossman is based on the fact that, despite significant differences between them in terms of identity, both placed the ethical claim at the center of their work, and both grappled with the difficulty of defining this through indirect, albeit intentional, linguistic mechanisms. The main argument I make in the book is that Grossman’s work reflects the existence and development of a rich, ethical language across diverse life circumstances and at different life stages—and that consequently, Grossman is responsible for the creation of an ethical turn in modern Hebrew literature.

**Topics of the work**

1. David Grossman’s ethical turn in modern Hebrew literature: The role of fiction in ethical constitution, and Grossman’s unique contribution to this.
2. Levinas’s ethics and the place of ethical language.
3. Ethical dilemmas regarding the topic of the Holocaust in Grossman’s literary fiction—obligations toward Holocaust victims and survivors, the responsibility of second- and third-generation survivors toward their family members and the memory of the Holocaust, and ambivalence toward perpetrators.
4. Stages of ethical development in Grossman’s literary fiction.
5. Dialogue with the Other and responsibility towards the Other in Grossman’s literary fiction.
6. The range of masculinity and femininity in Grossman’s literary fiction.

**Arguments**

The proposed book incorporates six main arguments:

**First argument:** David Grossman’s body of work is rich in ethical turns that have yet to be uncovered. By shedding light on these, I will make a significant contribution to understanding the significance of Grossman’s literary corpus.

**Second argument:** As an articulator of the ethical turn, Levinas developed an ethical language that incorporates concepts that may be used as interpretive tools to help identify ethical aspects within language in general, and within literary language in particular.

**Third argument:** While Levinas used the term “ethical language” on only a handful of occasions in his later writings, the characteristics of ethical language (such as responsibility and dialogism) appear in many other contexts within his writings. A retrospective examination of these characteristics reveals a rich and unique semantic-philosophical field. The proposed book will also include a comparison with other twentieth-century thinkers who have explored the connection between literature and ethics, such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Martha Nussbaum, in order to illustrate the unique nature of the ethical language devised by Levinas.

**Fourth argument:** Levinas’s conception of ethics is suited to an interpretation of Grossman’s work in two ways. The first concerns the primacy of ethics—the ethical act occurs first, and is not performed as the conclusion of a philosophical process (as Bakhtin, for example, claimed). It is also important in and of itself*,* and may only indirectly act for the development of tolerance and pluralism. Unlike, for example, Nussbaum, ethics according to Levinas is an expression of transcendental desire—the desire *to be*. Individual ethical desire is a central (even if a hidden) ethical aspect that typifies many of the protagonists in Grossman’s literary fiction, and Levinas’s thought helps shed light on this phenomenon.

**Fifth argument:** Levinas’s concept of ethical language is the basis for an interpretative method that allows processes of ethical self-constitution in Grossman’s work to be revealed in several contexts (as detailed below, under *Issues*). This method stands on its own, but may also be used to interpret additional literary corpora.

**Sixth argument:** The interpretative process is twofold—Levinas’s ethical concepts allow us to reveal ethical aspects within Grossman’s poetic language, and Grossman’s poetic language also allows us to shed light on the connections between the characteristics of the linguistic system and ethics, which is not discussed in Levinas’s writings.

**Issues**

The proposed book explores, and sheds light on, four issues that characterize Grossman’s work, with the help of Levinas’s ethical thought:

1. Ethical desire as a motive for the protagonists’ actions. In each of Grossman’s literary works, this desire collides with other motives, such as responsibilities toward other characters (e.g., parents or children), the protagonist’s own safety and wellbeing, and social values (e.g., nationalism and other social connections).

2.The second issue concerns the various stages in the development of an ethical stance, from preschool age (as reflected in Grossman’s children’s books), through adolescence (teenagers), through adulthood. The existence of ethical desire is a potential that occasionally requires external assistance from other people and external circumstances in order to develop.

3.The third issue concerns the language of fiction and everyday language as two complementary systems in which an ethical position is expressed. The language of fiction creates the circumstances and conditions, and everyday language constitutes the performative space of the ethical position.

4. The fourth issue concerns how to grapple with the trauma of the Holocaust, from various multigenerational perspectives—the children and grandchildren of survivors, a Jewish writer murdered in cold blood, a Jewish perpetrator, a Jew incarcerated in a concentration camp, as well as the manifestations of the failed ability of Israeli society to deal with Holocaust survivors. All of these perspectives help shape the memory of the Holocaust in a unique way.

5. The fifth issue concerns the range of masculinity and femininity in Grossman’s fiction. Since Grossman creates characters that transcend the binary categories of male and female, it is more appropriate to discuss the feminine and masculine features that are expressed in the relationships between men and women in his fiction. These relationships are explored both in terms of the differences in the ethical aspect of the self, and within the context of the relationships between various protagonists.

**Goals**

The book has a number of goals. The **first and main goal** is to shed light, for the first time, on the corpus of Grossman’s literary fiction from an ethical perspective.

**The second goal** is to explore key themes embodied in Grossman’s poetic language that have yet to be examined from a holistic perspective within his adult and children’s fiction. These include the connections between the language of fiction, ethics, and gender fluidity.

**The third goal** is to apply a methodology, based on Levinas’s thought, to shed light on key questions in modern Hebrew literature, such as: parent-child relationships, relationships between men and women, and the duty to remember the Holocaust, as they are represented in Grossman’s literary fiction. This interpretation will enable us to clarify the universal characteristics in Grossman’s work, and his contribution to Hebrew literature.

**The fourth goal** is to demonstrate Grossman’s unique contribution to enriching the methodology of the ethical criticism of literature. Exploring what characterizes poetic language in each of the genres, and how this contributes to shaping the developmental process of MD as well as intertextual relations between the genres.

**Questions the book seeks to answer:**

There are four key questions at the heart of this book. The **first question** concerns the characteristics of ethical criticism in Grossman’s work, in light of the possibilities of ethical criticism that will be presented in the Introduction.

The **second question** focuses on the connections between the content of Grossman’s works, ways of designing this content, and the processes of ethical judgement in Grossman’s fiction. The **third question** concerns the relationships between the characteristics of language in general and the poetic design of ethical processes. The **fourth question** concerns how ethical content is shaped in the different genres of Grossman’s work. The **fourth question** concerns the differences between ethical processes with respect to protagonists of different ages (children, teenagers, and adults).

The **fifth question** concerns the differences between ethical positions in various contexts (e.g., the Holocaust, parent-child relationships, and marital relationships).

**An analysis of competing or similar books, indicating distinctive and original elements of your project that set it apart:**

**Books addressing the work of David Grossman**

There are three books that discuss Grossman’s work, all of which have been published in Hebrew. The proposed book is the first volume to discuss Grossman’s literary corpus that will be published in English.

Although Grossman is considered a leading Israeli writer, the first monograph on his work was only published in 2024. In addition, there are two other published books that focus on a particular aspect of Grossman’s work. These books are:

1. **Gabriel Zoran: *The Thin Cust of Earth: A Reading in David Grossman’s Fiction* (Tel-Aviv: Siman Kri'a, 2024).**

This is the first, and only, monograph on Grossman’s literary fiction. In it, Zoran undertakes a chronological examination of three aspects of Grossman’s fiction—the creative development of Grossman’s work, the psycho-physical problem, and the question of loss and ways of contending with it. Zoran does not address ethical development or the language of discussion as ethical language. Further, Zoran does not touch on the consequences of ethics for the perception of Holocaust memory, parent-child relationships, or relationships between men and women. Zoran’s book is an important and necessary foundation for scholarship on Grossman’s work through literary research using historiographical and literary tools. The proposed book, while based on this foundation, provides a novel perspective by proposing an interdisciplinary, philosophical interpretation of Grossman’s fiction in an attempt to understand how Grossman has come to be a moral compass for Israeli society. To understand this, an in-depth analysis of the ethical aspects of Grossman’s fiction is required. Such an analysis will help shed light on how Grossman has come to be the most respected writer of Hebrew literature in the twenty-first century, surpassing more senior writers like Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua. In contrast to Zoran’s book, the main argument of the proposed book is that it is not enough to monographically trace Grossman’s work. Instead, Grossman’s ethical stance must be used as a key to understanding his poetic decisions, such as his choice to write in different genres.

**2. Marit Ben-Israel, *When David Grossman Met Vito Acconci* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2010) (Hebrew)**

Ben-Israel’s book compares just one of Grossman’s novels, *The Book of Intimate Grammar* (1991), with the work of the artist Vito Acconci. There is no thematic overlap between it and the proposed book.

**3. Amir Klugman, *Body and Language Encounter: A Psychoanalytic Reading of David Grossman's Stories* (Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2022) (Hebrew)**

Klugman’s book is an adaptation of a doctoral thesis that was written under my supervision. It focuses on body language in Grossman’s works from a psychoanalytic-Lacanian perspective. Another central theme concerns how private language is transformed into body language. The book does not address intersubjective engagement, and generally speaking, does not deal with the ethical aspect of Grossman’s work. Further, Klugman’s book is written from a psychoanalytical, rather than a literary-philosophical perspective.

In comparison with these three books, the proposed book incorporates a literary-philosophical discussion inspired by the ethical concepts of Emmanuel Levinas. In relation to these three books, the proposed book breaks new ground with its invitation to see Grossman’s literary fiction as an aesthetic system whose purpose is ethical. Further, the proposed book seeks to shed light on the ethical turn that Grossman’s literary fiction has brought about in modern Hebrew literature. This ethical turn focuses on the individual’s moral obligations toward the “significant Others” in his or her life, an obligation that is shaped by tensions with social and national values, and first and foremost by tensions with the individual’s own needs and desires.

**Books in which Levinas’s thought is used for literary analysis**

Michael Eskin’s book, *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandelstam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), examines the characteristics of ethics in the writings of Levinas and Bakhtin, and uses these to analyze the poetry of Mandelstam and Celan (Levinas had already referred to these two poets, and described the dialogic-ethical nature of their work). In contrast, the proposed book examines the literary fiction of David Grossman, which was written in a completely different cultural context—the Israeli context—and includes, for the most part, various types of prose suitable for different age groups. The proposed book is unique in its demonstration of how Levinas’s concepts are aimed at the ethical establishment of various developmental stages, from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. Further, this methodological innovation is explored with respect to Grossman’s literary corpus, which to date has never been studied as a whole. While Eskin recruits Bakhtin for the study of poetry, the proposed book explores Levinas’s critical position in relation to prose, as a key for examining monologues versus dialogues in Grossman’s literary fiction. Bakhtin’s ideas, aimed at the description and conceptualization of prose dialogues, will be explored through Grossman’s prose.

Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan’s volume, *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), both expands on and enriches Eskin’s book by proposing an interdisciplinary method that combines philosophy and literature. Erdinast-Vulcan describes Bakhtin’s philosophical development and its implications for an interdisciplinary method of interpretation, and devotes a chapter to Levinas in this context. However, the author’s discussion of Levinas’s thought and its contribution to literary scholarship is limited to several pages. In contrast, the proposed book takes Levinas’s thought as a central focus, enabling an investigation of how the linguistic characteristics of poetic language in Grossman’s literary fiction facilitate the embodiment of ethical concepts. The proposed book offers an innovative approach by allowing a systematic description of Levinas’s linguistic system to be presented retrospectively, even though Levinas did not organize his insights about language in this way.

Carrol Clarkson’s book, *Drawing the Line: Toward an Aesthetics of Transitional Justice*(Fordham University Press, 2014), devotes its fifth chapter to the study of literature according to Levinas, with the main argument being that ‟an encounter with a work of art can also be considered an ethical event of the Saying” (92). Clarkson further claims that “the philosophical grammar of ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and ‘he’ will be shown to shed unexpected light on Levinasian ethics” (92). In contrast, the proposed book argues that ethics—as Levinas claimed—precedes the action of language, both poetical and grammatical. In my proposed book, I demonstrate how the ethics that precede language also establish Grossman’s literary corpus. That is, contrary to Clarkson’s approach, ethics is embodied in the semiotics of the face, responsibility, and sensitivity, and not necessarily in the use of any particular grammatical person.

I am qualified to write the proposed book, as this is the third volume in which I develop an original philosophical methodology to reveal hidden philosophical aspects within literary fiction. In my two previous books, I developed an interpretive methodology of literary works based on the study of language. In the first book, I developed a Wittgensteinian methodology, while in the second I formulated a pragmatist methodology based on the writings of Peirce, James, and Dewey.

While I have raised the question of the ethical aspect in my two previous volumes, only in this book have I placed it at the center of the discussion, in light of its importance for understanding Grossman’s literary fiction. As part of my research, I have written numerous articles that demonstrate the use of linguistic research methods in the interpretation of works of poetry and prose, including those of Grossman. The proposed book breaks fresh ground in its central claim, which is inspired by Levinas and argues that ethics precede language. Although language is a tool of thought and enables reflection on ethical activity, the primordial desire of the protagonists of Grossman’s fiction is an ethical desire. The interpretative process in the proposed book clarifies the various linguistic techniques that are created in Grossman’s literary work as a result of this desire, including how speech-acts and language games reflect ethical moves.

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**Possible Reviewers:**

Prof. Naomi Sokoloff, email: naosok@uw.edu

Prof. Arthur Cools, email: arthur.cools@uantwerpen.be

Prof. Vivian Liska, email: vivian.liska@uantwerpen.be

Prof. Shira Wolosky, email: wolosky@mscc.huji.ac.il