# **‟Here I Am”: Ethical Speech Acts in David Grossman’s *More than I Love My Life***

## Abstract

The purpose of this discussion is to show how ethical speech acts function in David Grossman’s 2019 novel *More than I Love My Life* (2021). Its main thesis is that these speech acts establish and activate ethical choices on behalf of the characters, contrary to what might be implied by the novel’s Hebrew title, which can be literally translated as “With me, life plays a lot of games.” The term “ethical speech acts” is an interdisciplinary concept combining the notion of speech acts, as established by Austin and Searle, with elements of Levinas’s ethics, particularly those expressed in his final book, *Otherwise than Being* (1974). At the center of this book are two ethical concepts, which, in fact, constitute two types of ethical speech acts: the Saying (*le dire*) and the Said (*le dit*). The novel *More than I Love My Life* shows how ethical speech acts reflect a shift in consciousness and, subsequently, a practical change in the characters. The novel is based on a true story and thus illustrates how ethical speech acts can enable and generate significant ethical changes on two levels—reality and fiction.

Key words: Levinas, Grossman, ethical speech acts, Here I am (Hineni), Saying, Said

## Introduction

Human beings use speech act in all aspects of life, including ethical contexts such as the courtroom or the classroom, as well as religious rituals.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nevertheless, speech acts are mainly studied in pragmatic manners that do not rely on transcendental values that cannot be directly formulated through language.[[2]](#footnote-2) As for the ethical context inspired by Levinas, so far, the research has tended to focus on the text to establish ethical sensitivity in the reader, as opposed to the pragmatic generation of ethical change in the characters.[[3]](#footnote-3) In fact, a methodology for interpreting a work of literature through the study of ethical speech acts has yet to be developed. For this purpose, the current discussion will present an interdisciplinary approach that combines three fields: discourse studies (speech acts), philosophy (the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas), and literary analysis (David Grossman’s novel *More than I Love My Life*).

The main claim to be examined here is that the novel focuses on the unfolding of ethical change embodied in the speech acts performed by the main characters and that aspects of Levinas’s ethics as presented in his book *Otherwise than Being* may clarify this change. Throughout the plot, this change is embodied in the speech acts of the three main characters: Vera, Nina, and Gili. Since speech acts may perform several functions simultaneously, it can be argued that the speech acts in the novel create a dialogic infrastructure that enables the characters to relive difficult events, clarify their circumstances, take responsibility, forgive, and mend that which was broken.

Levinas argued that ethics is transcendental, and therefore, the abstract concepts of ethics precede the concrete speech act.[[4]](#footnote-4) If so, the question arises as to how ethical concepts can be embodied in speech acts. In response to this, we shall clarify that Levinas’s conception of ethical language makes it possible to show how an ethical course of action is conceivable. The speech act “Here I am,” coined by Levinas (inspired by the Bible), embodies the speaker’s response to the ethical obligation toward the other (an extensive discussion of the term will be presented further on).[[5]](#footnote-5) The willingness to detach from one’s personal needs and surrender to the needs of others is expressed in the same ethical encounter that takes place in the Saying, and establishes the Said:

The Saying that states a Said is in the sensible the first ‟activity” that sets up this as that. […] One can show the turning of this Saying, this pure self-expression in a giving of signs to another (language prior to the Said), into a saying stating a Said. […] The Saying is absorbed in the Said, offering in a ‟tale” a structure in which the words of living language inventoried in dictionaries (but which form a synchronic system for a speaker) find their connections.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here, Levinas describes several types of linguistic action: language that precedes the transcribed language (Saying), language in which the Saying is transcribed (Said), a “tale” created by the Saying, and living language, i.e., the context language that contains the stock of possible words. Carrol Clarkson proposes to see Levinas’s relation to the other as a relation to the second person “you” and as a key to seeing the event of reading a literary text as an instance of “Saying.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The text generates an “addresser” and an “addressee” every time it is read, and the artwork effects an open yet responsive encounter with the other. In her 2014 book, Clarkson offers the following connection between Austin and Levinas: “A face-to-face encounter with the other, the Saying in Levinas, is a performative interlocutory event that is to be carefully distinguished from the constative communication that Levinas locates in the Said.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The advantage of the interdisciplinary interpretive method proposed here is that it aims to overcome the shortcomings of each of the three fields: Austin and Searle did not address the ethical aspect of speech acts.[[9]](#footnote-9) When it comes to Levinas, there is a radical shift in his thought, wherein he goes from virtually ignoring the act of communication required for ethical action to placing the act of communication—the Saying—at the center of the ethical discussion. With the exception of his last book, where it becomes the focus of examination, Levinas describes the nature of the ethical speech act—the Saying —in very general terms. Finally, the plot of Grossman’s novel is designed as a process of ethical progress that is embodied in the characters’ speech acts, yet the changes that take place in the characters are expressed indirectly, therefore requiring an interpretative effort to bring this process to light. By combining these approaches, the paper aims to demonstrate that Grossman’s novel embodies the three central ethical concepts Levinas puts forward in *Otherwise than Being*: the “Here I am,” the Saying, and the Said.

## ‟Some Little Good in the World”[[10]](#footnote-10)

He always would say, “to do even some little good in the world, Vera, you have to really make an effort. But evil, you just have to keep it going, just join in with it.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The novel *More than I Love My Life* revolves around three female protagonists: Vera, Nina’s mother and Gili’s grandmother; Nina, Vera’s daughter and Gili’s mother; and Gili, Nina’s daughter and Vera’s granddaughter. The male characters are all relatively secondary and flat compared to the rounded female characters. Nevertheless, the primordial event that sets the novel’s plot in motion is inspired by Milosz, Vera’s husband, Nina’s father, and Gili’s grandfather, since it is his demise that drives Vera to the decision that precipitates the narrative chain of events. The above quote is one of the handful of instances in which we hear from Milosz in the novel. It exemplifies why he is the ethical wellspring for Vera’s decision. Beyond that, the quote reflects the possibility of an ethical position that can be formulated in the aftermath of the Holocaust. It should be noted that Levinas also unequivocally formulated an ethical obligation after the events of the Holocaust, based on the commandment “thou shalt not kill.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Both Milosz and Levinas express the difficulty inherent in the ethical obligation, on the one hand, and the imperative to act according to it, on the other hand, and both impose the ethical obligation through a speech act.

David Grossman is the author of eleven novels. Of these, two bear titles that, in the context of their respective narratives, are revealed to be parts of speech acts that are central to the novels as a whole— *A Horse Walks into a Bar* (2014) and *More than I Love My Life* (2019). The title *A Horse Walks into a Bar* is taken from the opening line of a joke told by the novel’s protagonist, the comedian Dovaleh G., a joke that is meant to cover up the personal crisis the character is undergoing due to past events, as revealed in the course of the novel. The entire plot of the novel unfolds over the duration of a standup comedy set, and even though the narration moves from first person to second and third person, it is possible to describe it as one long speech act. The speech act of communicating with the audience allows the protagonist to use everyday language to expose traumas from different phases in his life, up to the final trauma of showing up late to his mother’s funeral. The novel ends on an unresolved note: Dovaleh and his father are still living in the same house but not speaking to each other—“Me and him, alone.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The protagonist is struggling to come to terms with his feelings of guilt but cannot generate ethical change through the continuous speech act that unfolds throughout the novel.

Grossman’s following novel, *More than I Love My Life*, is also based on speech acts; however, unlike in *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, here they do engender an ethical change in the characters. The starting point for this interpretation is in the title itself. Both the Hebrew title (“With me life plays a lot of games”)[[14]](#footnote-14) and the English translation refer to speech acts performed by the main character, Vera. The English title functions on two universal levels: as a declaration about the ways of fate (assertive) and as a way of expressing an ethical choice (expressive).[[15]](#footnote-15) Vera chose to protect her husband’s, Milosz’s, good name and prevent him from being branded a traitor rather than stay with her daughter. Looking back on the novel as a whole, three questions arise: First, why was it not enough to recount the events of Vera’s life but rather necessary for the three women to embark on a trip to Goli Otok, the island in Yugoslavia where she was exiled? Second, how does fiction contribute to the process of ethical change? And third, how is the paradox of ethical language expressed when, on the one hand, the elements of ethics are not explicit, and on the other hand, the plot of the novel indicates an ethical choice on the part of some of the characters?

The main argument put forth in the present discussion is that the combination of Austin’s speech acts with Levinas’s ethics gives rise to the concept of the ethical speech act, with the help of which we can offer interpretative responses to the three questions formulated above. This shall be accomplished in three phases: **The first phase** will consist of the discussion of Austin and Searle’s conception of speech acts, their views on literature as speech act, and developments in the study of literature as speech act. **In the second phase**, we shall examine the concept of “*hineni*” (“here I am”) in Levinas’s writings, for the first time from a developmental perspective. The methodological claim that will be put forth is that this concept contains Levinas’s ideas of sensitivity to suffering and responsibility as they appear in the speech act, which makes it possible to interpret the ethical process that the characters in the novel undergo. **The third phase** will tackle the speech acts in the novel that reflect the ethical progress made by the characters. The discussion will show that, rather than describing an ethical process, the speech acts accomplish the process in the manner embodied by the speech act “*hineni*,” as described by Levinas.

## Speech Acts as the Focus of Human Communication

The question of how various actions are performed by saying something was formulated for the first time in Western thought by John Austin (1911–1960), an Oxford philosopher who drew attention to the fact that many of the things people say are not intended to state a fact, but to perform an action.[[16]](#footnote-16) Such an action is carried out with maximum efficiency when the speaker uses “verbs in the first person singular present indicative active.”[[17]](#footnote-17) These kinds of utterances cannot be evaluated as true or false; instead, they can only be judged based on how successful they are in performing the action they intend to accomplish. Statements of this type can affect their listeners as well as cause other people to act.[[18]](#footnote-18) Austin’s proposal was based on a distinction between two types of expressions: constative and performative.[[19]](#footnote-19) According to Austin, Kant-inspired philosophy focuses only on the study of verifiable statements, whereas many statements are intended to perform a variety of other actions rather than simply providing a verifiable description. These utterances are what linguists sometimes refer to as “masqueraders”[[20]](#footnote-20) because, while they include familiar grammatical components, they require a different methodological approach, one that examines whether the speech act succeeded or failed rather than looking at whether the statement is true or false. It is at this point that Austin opens the door to the future study of literary works through the identification of speech acts.

Austin then proposes that the way to examine whether these utterances function successfully or unsuccessfully is by evaluating the procedure utilized in the utterance in light of the accepted norms regulating it in a specific society.[[21]](#footnote-21) Along with the dependence of the li nguistic expression on social norms for the successful performance of the speech act, Austin emphasizes the centrality of the **performer’s intention** for the performance of a successful speech act. The person who performs the speech act must have a certain intention, one that is appropriate for the performance of the specific action they wish to perform. These two central criteria—the proper adherence to the existing social procedure and the suitability of the performer’s intention to the action—led Austin to formulate two types of failures in performing a speech act: misfires and abuses.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In addition to intentions, Austin indicates two other states of consciousness whose proper functioning is imperative for successfully performing a speech act: thoughts and feelings.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, the literature pertaining to speech acts tends to focus on Austin’s emphasis on the social aspect of a speech act and the necessity of having an agreed procedure for all its participants rather than just the speaker.[[24]](#footnote-24) There is, therefore, a tension between the criteria for the success of a speech act that are based on states of consciousness in the first person singular, and the claim that a speech act is based on social characteristics. Likewise, there is a tension between the criterion according to which the participants must act in accordance with the required states of consciousness over time, and the difficulty of controlling individual states of consciousness through “public” or “social” means.

These tensions give rise to the question of whether it is possible to recognize the verbal shaping of internal states of consciousness (intentions, thoughts, and feelings) in a speech act. At this point, we discern a unique difficulty in evaluating literary speech acts: does the fact that there is only one author behind all the first person and third person speech acts in the work of literature guarantee their implicit success? Austin’s revolution focused on everyday language. In his investigations, Austin focused on the analysis of everyday speech acts and did not regard the creation of literature as a speech act. On the contrary, Austin saw in literature a “non-serious” use of language, which is not to be included in the category of performative utterances.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Sandy Petrey argues that a speech acts scholar like Austin looks at literary works the same way that a mountaineer looks at a picture of the Himalayas—they are a copy rather than the original. According to Petrey, however, Austin was blind to the power of literary works to perform actions through written language because he focused on the vernacular.[[26]](#footnote-26) Petrey recognizes that the distinction between written and spoken language in the context of speech acts is critical because the instruction in John Donne’s poem to “go and catch a falling star” is certainly metaphorical rather than practical. Nevertheless, in literary language, as in everyday language, there are conventions of interpretation, so Donne’s speech act will be interpreted metaphorically and not as a practical proposition. This means that Austin’s assertion that the success of a speech act lies in its performance in accordance with a set of rules and conventions that regulate the category to which it belongs can also be applied to the category of literature.[[27]](#footnote-27) Petrey points to Searle’s distinction between constitutive rules and regulative rules[[28]](#footnote-28) as an example of conventions that can also be applied in the study of literature: performing a speech act is always done in a certain socio-historical framework, in accordance with its specific rules.[[29]](#footnote-29) In conclusion, Austin’s contribution is relevant to the study of speech acts in an ethical context, since it includes intention, thought, and emotion in the speaker’s consciousness, which constitute an ethical choice. This choice is activated with the help of linguistic means in a speech act (whether in reality or in literary fiction), within the framework of existing conventions, which necessarily include the consent of the recipient.

## John Searle: Categories of Speech Acts, Intentionality, and the Performative Aspect of Literature

John Searle contributed both directly and indirectly to expanding the possible applications of speech act studies by developing Austin’s notions and proposing additional terms for speech act analysis. For example, Searle proposed solving the difficulty of perceiving others’ internal states of consciousness and defining the intention of a speaker who originates the speech act with the help of the concept of “intentionality.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Searle further argued that the mind can impose the intentionality of semantic content on elements that are not intentional in the first place, such as sounds and visual signs.[[31]](#footnote-31) This means that internal states of consciousness can be formulated based on the external sign. Searle, likewise, coined the principle of “expressibility”: “Whatever can be meant—can be said.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This principle further supports the possibility of expressing internal states of consciousness and implies that, in literary fiction, diverse speech acts can be performed according to the intention of the author.

Searle devoted special attention to the performative nature of literary language but narrowed the discussion to the author’s intention.[[33]](#footnote-33) His conclusion was that the difference between the creator of fiction and the creator of a speech act in everyday conversation is that the former decides in advance that they are “pretending” to perform the speech act of assertion.[[34]](#footnote-34) In his article “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” Searle points out three characteristics of literature: First, there is no set of characteristics common to all works of literature and therefore “literature” is a term that must be understood, as Wittgenstein suggested, through “family resemblance.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Second, literature is a set of positions we apply to a type of discourse rather than the name of an internal component. The reader decides if what they are reading is literature, and the author decides if what they want to create is fiction. Third, the literary exists on a continuum with the non-literary. Not only is there no clear boundary between the two, there is no boundary to speak of.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In conclusion, Searle opposes the classification of literature as an independent speech act, and claims that the author’s position can be identified as a position of “pretending.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Although this is a complex speech act, Searle emphasizes the autonomy of the author to create any fictional discourse that he wants to shape.[[38]](#footnote-38) This claim complements the two claims presented at the beginning of the discussion of Searle regarding the possibility of expressing any content and imposing any meaning on anything according to the speaker’s will. This complex position led Searle to favor the creator’s intention over social norms in terms of assigning meaning, a position that has come under much criticism in the field of literary studies.[[39]](#footnote-39) However, Searle’s approach to literature stems directly from his principled position regarding the ability to impose meaning on things, which also includes changing linguistic-literary conventions and the author’s decision that the text they write is fiction when there is no textual, syntactic, or semantic component dictating this. Austin, like Wittgenstein, thought that illocutionary force is a product of social convention and not a force inherent in the language itself and subject to the determination of the individual. With regard to the ethical speech act, both claims are important and can be combined: ethical choice is not dictated by linguistic components and can, in this sense, be “imposed” on words and events, in reality and in fiction. Nevertheless, the two types of rules mentioned by Searle remain relevant in the ethical context. Every society has ethical rules that regulate and determine what is injustice, what is harm, and what is the corresponding punishment. At the same time, society also allows for the establishment of constitutive rules. A work of literature or a writer—certainly one of David Grossman’s stature—may inspire the constitution of new ethical rules among readers.

## Speech Acts in Literature

The development of the interdisciplinary field that combines speech act research with literary studies has followed two main directions.[[40]](#footnote-40) The first of these examines speech acts with the aim of revealing themes, devices, and characterization in literary works. Sandy Petrey, for instance, demonstrated that literary research focusing on speech acts helps to reveal elements of “not being but acting” in fiction.[[41]](#footnote-41) Manuel Garcia-Carpintero similarly showed how, through the application of speech act theory, one might extract philosophical conclusions from fiction.[[42]](#footnote-42) The second direction was championed by scholars such as J. Hillis Miller and Paul De-Man,[[43]](#footnote-43) who were inspired by Jacques Derrida’s assertion that any attempt to stabilize a concept as a foundation for a theory or method is doomed to failure, including Austin’s insights.[[44]](#footnote-44) Derrida recognized the great influence that Austin and speech act theory had on the humanities, and the *Limited Inc* collection includes his articles on the subject.[[45]](#footnote-45) The main issue relevant to the present discussion is the way in which Austin and Searle classified literature as either a non-serious, “parasitic” speech act or one that signals “pretending,” respectively. Derrida objected to this and argued that it is not possible to separate literature from all other uses of language. In fact, he maintained that the only aspect common to every sign or experience, and therefore also to all concepts, is iterability:

Iterability is at once that which tends to attain plenitude and that which bars access to it. […] iterability retains a value of generality that covers the totality of what one can call experience or the relation to something in general. […] It does cover in particular what is called intentional experience. It is presupposed by all intentionality (conscious or not, human or not).[[46]](#footnote-46)

Austin and Searle, on the one hand, and Derrida on the other, present conflicting evidence regarding the relationship between literary creation and speech act: the former claim that literary creation cannot be considered a successful speech act, while the latter argues that literary creation is not distinct from everyday language. Not surprisingly, the first book that directly dealt with the study of speech acts in literature offers a middle ground—an integrative position. Mary Louise Pratt showed that literary creation is an act of communication: instead of focusing on grammatical elements, the study of speech acts focuses on the speakers who participate in the interaction, on the conventions and unspoken rules on which the speech acts are based, as well as on the relationships between the speakers and their intentions.[[47]](#footnote-47) Pratt describes the creation of literature as an event that is inherently context-dependent, and thus her proposal is similar to Jakobson’s interdisciplinary discussion in his article “Linguistics and Poetics,” in which he formulated his model of verbal communication as a key to the analysis of any linguistic performance mentioned above.[[48]](#footnote-48) Jakobson emphasized that the analysis of literary creation is also based on the study of the variety of functions of a speech event.[[49]](#footnote-49) Although all functions are activated in every act of communication, in each act, there will be a function that is more dominant than the others, depending on the element in focus. Crucially, if we use Jakobson’s functions of language model as a dynamic model, it is possible to examine each work of literature individually and show the dominant function at work. For our purposes, it can be said that the dominant function in the novel is the emotive-expressive function, which characterizes the addressee who expresses their feelings.

Pratt’s assertion that the evaluation of a work of literature is based on a shared cultural knowledge of rules, conventions, and expectations, and that these conditions are also the infrastructure for the definition of a work of literature, is not far-removed from Searle’s position.[[50]](#footnote-50) Pratt made three main claims regarding a “situation of literary speech”: 1) It is a category of utterances that address the audience; 2) There are subcategories of utterances that are delivered following appropriate preparation and selection processes; and 3) The category is describable and contains a certain measure of experience.[[51]](#footnote-51) It is important to note Pratt’s emphasis on the fact that prior knowledge is required from the participants in the situation in order to understand the literary speech act.[[52]](#footnote-52) Thus, it should be remarked, with regard to Grossman’s novel, that the characters only partially know about the events that happened Vera, at least initially. A central part of the characters’ speech acts is dedicated to the disclosure of details that the characters lack in order to understand Vera’s ethical choice. In this sense, based on Jakobson’s model, it is possible to say that the speech acts also have significant referential value and operate as means of transmitting information.

Another aspect of the referential function in speech acts in literature emerges from the writings of Richard Ohmann, who proposed a new definition of literature, tying it to the concept of speech acts.[[53]](#footnote-53) Ohmann lists three key characteristics of literature: First, a work of literature brings absent speech acts to the attention of readers, inviting them to fill in the gaps using their imagination. The reader is asked to complete the social and physical circumstances in which the action takes place, thus reconstructing the complete speech act with the help of their imagination. They have to figure out for themselves what needs to be completed for the speech act to function.[[54]](#footnote-54) Second, literature has a dramatic dimension: The world created in the text is activated by the act of speech in a literal rather than metaphorical manner. Even a narrative without a distinct subject-speaker has the built-in dramatic situation of a speaker faced with an audience.[[55]](#footnote-55) Third, the creation of literature has limited perlocutionary force: it is a speech act in which content is delivered without any clear additional impact (such as threat, request, or warning) on the reader. To this, it is important to add that the results of the speech acts in a work of literature manifest in the relationships between the characters.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Finally, Manuel Garcia-Carpintero made an important contribution to the field, suggesting that speech acts in fiction may make truth-value statements about the world.[[57]](#footnote-57) This may appear to be a paradox since fiction is based on fiction-making, while non-fiction is made up of speech acts whose success is based on procedures in everyday life.[[58]](#footnote-58) Indeed, Garcia-Carpintero claims that the two are based on different types of speech acts: “While non-fictions constitutively result from *constatives*—acts of *saying*, […] characterized in terms of norms requiring truth for their correctness, […] fictions constitutively result from *directives* (commands) […] characterized by a norm of providing the intended audience with reasons to imagine the fiction’s content.”[[59]](#footnote-59) The paradox is resolved, according to Garcia-Carpintero, when we realize that the speaker in a work of fiction has an authority that derives from the goodwill of their audience to respond to their request or proposal.[[60]](#footnote-60) Here, we can offer a connecting thread for understanding the nature of speech acts in Grossman’s novel:

The family resemblance common to all discussions on the nature of speech acts in works of literature is that they do not address the ethical aspect of speech acts. Based on the concept of intentionality, one can ask how it is possible to recognize in a speech act in a work of fiction an ethical position that was formulated or considered before its performance. Alternatively, it is possible to ask a question that is particularly critical for the study of literature: how do speech acts establish an ethical position proper to the characters and perhaps subsequently also to the readers?

Levinas’s concepts are germane to this discussion for two reasons: the first is the precedence of ethics to the speech act, and the second is Levinas’s own essays on literature, which were collected in the book *Proper Names*.[[61]](#footnote-61) The present discussion will focus on Levinas’s contribution to clarifying an ethical position in speech acts in literature, with the help of his use of the biblical expression “*hineni*”—“here I am.” Levinas saw the Torah as the most important ethical text, and his multiple use of the phrase “*hineni*,” especially in *Otherwise than Being*, sheds light both on biblical stories and on the nature of ethical positions as embodied in speech acts. Levinas formulated this biblical phrase as an interdisciplinary key for the interpretation of the Bible, literature, philosophy, as well as ethical obligations in everyday life.

## From the Saying to “*Hineni*”: Witnessing and Responsibility as an Ethical Speech Act

Saying is communication, […] but asa condition for all communication, as exposure. […] The unblocking of communication, irreducible to the circulation of information which presupposes it, is accomplished in Saying. It is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the Said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding done by the other. It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability[[62]](#footnote-62)

Levinas’s frequent use of the phrase “here I am” in *Otherwise than Being* also deserves examination against the background of the significant change Levinas makes in his description of the place of language in ethical action.[[63]](#footnote-63) This change is embodied, as mentioned previously, in the coining of two central neologisms: the Saying (*le dire*) and the Said (*le dit*). As emphasized by Colin Davis, “Every aspect of the text, including its ethical ambitions, is commanded by his account of the distinction between *le dire* and *le dit*.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Levinas mentioned these concepts in previous writings, but in *Otherwise than Being* they occupy a central place and are formulated as a condition and an infrastructure for ethical action, which, as emphasized in the opening quote, is an act of communication. In this way, Levinas links the elements of Austin and Searle’s speech acts with the ethical obligation: the ethical obligation is fulfilled in the act of saying (the Saying), which cannot be reduced to verbal content. However, the Saying creates a movement toward the Said and thus toward interpretation. The conditions for communicating with the other are honesty and the willingness to lower one’s defenses and surrender to the vulnerability and trauma of the other. Not every act of communication

The main interpretive question regarding ethical speech acts in the novel *More than I Love My Life* is how the nature of the communication between the characters in the novel changes during the journey, making possible the transition to understanding and forgiveness. Levinas offers a successful interpretive answer to this question, an answer that cannot be found in the various distinctions between different categories of speech acts. What Levinas proposes is a category of **communication that positions the other in a way that precedes the ontology of the subject-speaker**. For this purpose, he distinguishes between two types of language: the first relates to comprehension and reason, while the second relates to the other. In an article that is seldom cited in research, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, Levinas criticizes Heidegger’s ontological conception.[[65]](#footnote-65) In this essay, Levinas prominently places language as a significant and essential medium for the establishment of the ethical relationship with the other.[[66]](#footnote-66) Under a subtitle that illustrates the centrality of communication in relation to the other, “The Other as Interlocutor.” Levinas formulated the following: “No meaningful language can argue in favor of a divorce between language and reason. But we may legitimately wonder whether reason, posited as the possibility of meaningful language, necessarily precedes it—whether language is not based on a relationship that is prior to understanding, and that constitutes reason.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Levinas here is responding to a question that became central after the linguistic turn: What is the use of language based on? Do reason and comprehension precede the use of language? His answer is that the meeting with the other takes place in language and precedes the understanding of the other. The condition for knowledge is the meeting, and the medium in which it occurs is speech:

The other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other. To understand a person is already to speak to him. […] Speech delineates an original relation. The point is to see the function of language not as subordinate to the *consciousness* we have of the presence of the other, or of his proximity, or of our community with him, but as a condition of that conscious realization.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Heideggerian phenomenology would dictate that language exists exclusively on the plane of understanding, thus making our relation with the other a feature of our understanding of them. Contrary to this, Levinas posits that meeting the other in language enables the expression of a partnership. This attitude means noticing the unique being of the other, as opposed to understanding them as a universal concept.[[69]](#footnote-69) Levinas expands the concept of “meeting,” which he probably borrowed from Martin Buber, and claims that the meeting with another person must be expressed in language. An expression of a meeting is different from an expression of knowledge because it contains “A greeting—even if it is the refusal of a greeting.” Levinas, thus, qualifies the speech act as one that “is not reducible to the representation of the other, but to his invocation.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

For Levinas, the biblical phrase “here I am”[[71]](#footnote-71) is the key to unlocking the meaning of this speech act, distinguishing the uniqueness of the other, and expressing an obligation toward them in a way that precedes actions that distinguish the subject-self, such as free choice and being (Sartre’s freedom and Heidegger’s being):

The subjectivity of the subject, […] is a pre-originary susceptibility, before all freedom and outside of every present. It is accused in uneasiness or the unconditionality of the accusative, in the ‟here I am” (*me voici*) which is obedience to the glory of the Infinite that orders me to the other (‟Here I am! Send me” [Isaiah. 6:8]). “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others,” writes Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*.[[72]](#footnote-72)

“Here I am” is thus, for Levnias, the ultimate ethical speech act.[[73]](#footnote-73) The Saying is the framework of the communication action in which ethical obligation is expressed, while the “here I am” pours concrete content into this vague framework. The Hebrew *“hineni”* embodies in the Bible the essence of ethical commitment, as will be detailed later. This is the most frequent Hebrew expression in Levinas’s writings, especially in *Otherwise than Being*. This choice illustrates Levinas’s claim that his goal was not to establish ethics but to find the meaning of ethics, indicating that the meaning of ethics already exists in the world and must be shown.[[74]](#footnote-74) This meaning is not revealed in the dialogue in which the other is found: the infinite escapes thematization and dialogue, and the imperative is not delivered directly. Rather, the person finds it within their response, which is embodied, according to Levinas, in the expression “here I am.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

In the above quote, Levinas demonstrates its interdisciplinary function: philosophically, “here I am” is the initial stage of the establishment of the subject. At this point, the question arises as to why Levinas chose, of all the biblical contexts in which the phrase “*hineni*” appears, the quote from Isaiah chapter 6. Other contexts in which the phrase is spoken could appear more significant than Isaiah’s vision: Abraham in the story of the binding of Isaac, Jacob in the revelation of the angel, Moses in the story of the burning bush, and Samuel the prophet. Levinas does not justify his choice of Isaiah specifically. However, we can offer the following interpretation: Isaiah chapter 6 contains Isaiah’s vision of heaven, and specifically of a conversation between God and his angels. (This is a very rare description in the Bible; apart from this instance, a similar depiction of heaven appears only in Ezekiel’s chariot vision). God is debating who to send as a prophet to the Israelites, to which Isaiah answers: “Here I am! Send me.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Even before God turns to him, Isaiah puts himself forward and takes on the mission for the sake of the other (the nation of Israel). Levinas completes Isaiah’s response with a quote from *The Brothers Karamazov* and shows how an ethical position may be embodied in a work of literature. The sense of guilt described by Dostoyevsky is very similar to the guilt described by Levinas: it is perpetual and not the result of injustice, but of a constant willingness to respond to the other and express responsibility toward them.

The connection between guilt and the impulse to take responsibility is also linked to Isaiah. In all the other biblical contexts in which the phrase “*hineni*” appears, the phrase is always uttered— by Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Samuel—in response to a call issued by God or an angel who calls them by their name. In contrast, Isaiah is not chosen to carry out the mission; he volunteers for it on his own initiative. The quote from Isaiah demonstrates Levinas’s claim that ethical compliance precedes free will and precedes choice. Following his response wherein he takes on responsibility, Isaiah is constituted as a subject with a mission. The sense of mission that motivates Isaiah to take responsibility is not unlike Levinas’s interpretation of Dostoyevsky’s concept of “guilt”: it is a feeling of guilt that originates in responsibility rather than an act of wrongdoing.[[77]](#footnote-77)

It is important to note that Levinas turns once again to Isaiah (chapter 65) in order to demonstrate how the Saying is linked to the “here I am,” which exemplifies the idea of response before the call to ethical action:

The Infinite orders to me the neighbor as a face, without being exposed to me, and does so the more imperiously that proximity narrows. The order has not been the cause of my response, nor even a question that would have preceded it in a dialogue. Find the order in my response itself, which, as a sign given to the neighbor, **as a ‟here I am,**” brings me out of invisibility, out of the shadow in which my responsibility could have been evaded. **This saying belongs to the very glory of which it bears witness**. […] An obedience preceding the hearing of the order. […] **‟Before they call, I will answer.”**[[78]](#footnote-78)

Isaiah prophesies God promising that he will answer Israel’s call before they make it: “Before they call, I will answer, and while they are yet speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24). Levinas uses the words of Isaiah to demonstrate the response that precedes the call: the ethical action, the Saying, is a response that is not preceded by a command nor provoked by a question within a dialogue. The compliance precedes the hearing of the order that is evident in retrospect, in the compliance itself: the phrase “here I am” already assumes that there is someone calling out for compliance and the taking of responsibility. In the book *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (1975), Levinas makes another connection between the Saying and the phrase “*hineni*” in a way that applies the biblical phrase in a humanist context.[[79]](#footnote-79) As Hilary Putnam suggests, the word “*hineni*” performs a speech act that is not a description but a giving of attention.[[80]](#footnote-80) This attention is ethical and indicates that I am ready to exist for the other: I am here, in the present; I am here for you. This speech act is the result of proximity, which Levinas claims precedes the transcription of the ethical action.[[81]](#footnote-81) The speech act is, in fact, a response rather than the first step of the ethical action. In the next phase, this interpretive horizon will be applied toward understanding the speech acts in the novel *More than I Love My Life*, and in particular, toward understanding the change that takes place in the three female protagonists.

## “Here I am” in the Novel *More than I Love My Life:* Speech Acts as a Reflection of Ethical Development

“I want to go back to the beginning, to the family incubators.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

Before we launch into the interpretative mode, some justification must be made for the choice of an interdisciplinary approach to the novel, the use of speech act theory, and Levinas’s conception of ethics as embodied in the phrase “here I am” and in the speech acts of the Saying and the Said. The sentence quoted above is a perlocutionary, expressive speech act in which Gili expresses the motivation for going on a trip to Goli Otok: tracking down the “family incubators.” Although this decision is justified by practical reasons (Nina’s illness and Vera’s ninetieth birthday), it is, in fact, an action of “here I am.” This speech act reflects her decision to stand up and take action for the restoration of her family, to convince her grandmother and mother to go on a journey, and to return to the place where the family’s troubles began.

Indeed, the journey drives the dialogue, and inspired by Milosz, Vera proposes a kind of motto for the novel and the possibility of change: “He always would say, ‘To do even some little good in the world, Vera, you have to really make an effort. But evil, you just have to keep it going, just join in with it.’ And he also would say: ‘You brought me light, Vera, you gave me happiness, you gave me a path. Alone I had no path and I had nothing.’”[[83]](#footnote-83) This quote, part of which we have already seen at the beginning of our discussion, expresses the effort it takes to bring about the Saying: it is not enough to have a dialogue; a special kind of exertion must be made to do good to others. The journey to Goli Otok marks the beginning of an effort by the three women to do good. The journey allows all three of them to reacquaint themselves with what happened while emphasizing their different perspectives. The fact that the three of them travel together creates situations in which each has the opportunity to express her position regarding the events, but at the same time to be exposed to the positions of the others. The entire journey is an act of Saying embodied in the story told by Gili, which is the Said.

Even though Gili is not to blame for the two instances of abandonment that took place, and she does not understand why they happened, she takes responsibility for the family and tries to rehabilitate it. This ethical action drives the plot, during which Gili continues to take responsibility and try to promote solutions even though she did not cause the problems. This is in line with the sense of guilt that Dostoyevsky wrote about, as quoted by Levinas. Gili’s speech acts indicate a significant internal shift from being a victim of circumstances to trying to reshape the family infrastructure. A clear example of this can be seen in Gili’s speech act in the following tripartite dialogue:

“Enemies of the people?” Vera hits her own thigh angrily. “I should sign that we were spies for Stalin? That we wanted to kill Tito? Liars!”

[…]

“So you didn’t sign for them…,” Nina mumbles, looking suddenly exhausted.

“How can I sign something that isn’t the truth?”

Sign already, I whisper again silently, and we can all go home, and draw the blinds and mourn Milosz, and ourselves, and together we can slowly repair what is repairable.[[84]](#footnote-84)

In the passage above, ten pages before the end of the novel, Gili expresses the novel’s turning point to herself. At the beginning of the segment, Vera states that they (the authorities) tried to convince her to lie and admit that she and her husband betrayed Tito and wanted to murder him. She refused and is sure that she did the right thing even fifty years later. Nina, the daughter, is exhausted from the physical and emotional journey to Goli Otok, and disheartened by the discovery that her mother still stands behind her choice to abandon her rather than betray her father. Whereas Gili, the granddaughter, tries in her imagination to change her grandmother’s position, and influence her to repent. Ostensibly, only the grandmother’s retroactive willingness to sign, will make it possible to repair the destroyed relationships. At this point, Gili reflects the possibility of change, the possibility of repair: “together we can slowly repair what is repairable.” This is an example that illustrates the effectiveness of the act of creating fiction: Gili does indeed perform a speech act in the first person, thereby shaping a possibility that is fictional at this stage, but which is realized later in the novel.

Although Gili’s ethical speech acts are what drives the plot, the most significant changes occur in Vera and Nina. These changes can be described methodologically through the study of their speech acts, yet such a description would not suffice to explain the nature of the changes. The central claim in the current discussion is that Vera embodies a transition between the two types of “here I am,” a transition that can best be understood through Levinas’s brilliant interpretation of the binding of Isaac. Levinas, in his discussion of Kierkegaard’s perception of Abraham, draws attention to the fact that in the tale of the binding of Isaac, Abraham says “*hineni*” twice.[[85]](#footnote-85) The first time he obeys God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. The second time, he responded to Isaac’s call.[[86]](#footnote-86) Levinas claims that this repetition signifies Abraham’s transition from obedience to God to an ethical obedience to his son, meaning: the ethical is superior to the religious.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Like Abraham, young Vera believed in “the truth”: she refused to sign a document saying that Milosz was a traitor because it meant veering away from the truth. And yet, this truth caused enormous suffering to her daughter Nina. The story of the binding of Isaac, in Levinas’s interpretation, is analogous to the process undergone by Vera and Nina. Just as Abraham suddenly realizes how much Isaac suffers and is bound to suffer, so Vera understands in retrospect Nina’s suffering, as illustrated in the following conversation between them:

“I don’t remember anything. That whole period is gone, my whole childhood is gone…”

“Yes,” Vera says.

“Because of what happened afterward.”

“Yes.”

“How you went to Goli Otok.”

“How I was put on Goli Otok.”

**‟And you left me alone, both of you, you and Dad, in one day.”**

[…]

“Your father, he had a saying: ̔Every person, his turn in the game comes only once.̓ And that is how he lived.”[[88]](#footnote-88)

Vera admits that she and Milosz abandoned their daughter. Yet her citation of Milosz here is significant: every person is free to choose when faced with their life’s turning point.[[89]](#footnote-89) Further on, Nina delivers a harsher depiction of her parents’ abandonment and describes it as a sacrifice, another chilling echo of the binding of Isaac:

As I write now, it is eight years after that night. […] Here is home; that is clear. It’s a hellish home, but it is where her longings and pleadings and pain were directed all those years. Here is where her soul was deposited. Here, I think, is where Nina was when she was gone. She tires out. Walks through the rain, indifferent to it. […] Mumbles Vera’s words […]: “What would I give them so as not to betray your father?” “Me,” Nina splutters, **“I am what she gave them so as not to betray Dad.” […] Unbearable pain bursts out in every limb, all the way to the tips of her body. […] Of course, Vera gave them herself, too. Almost three years of hard labor and torture. “But it was me she sacrificed,” Nina murmurs**, **tasting the words, as I do along with her.** […] “She could have chosen!” […] “They gave her a choice, and she chose […] I felt it all these years”[[90]](#footnote-90)

In the introduction to the above, Gili states that she is writing these words eight years after the trip, but the passage itself is mostly written in the present tense. This passage may be considered the climax of the novel as it gives us the most precise and poignant account what happened. It also answers the two questions we raised at the beginning of this discussion: the journey to Goli Otok was necessary because that is where the home is, the incubator of the family’s suffering. It is also the place where the suffering can be said directly. Gili understands that Nina abandoned her because she was on Goli Otok, just as Vera effectively stayed on Goli Otok and could not be a real mother to her daughter, even after she returned to her.[[91]](#footnote-91)

The emphasized section of the text illustrates the unique ability of fiction to bring together three points of view simultaneously: Nina’s sense of victimhood, Vera’s suffering, and the shared experience of Nina and Gili—two girls abandoned by their parents. Fiction makes it possible to go back to the past, reconstruct it, and understand the climax as a turning point. Gili imagines the island coming to life, and the poignant confrontation allows Nina and Gili to see Vera’s suffering as well, to open up, to forgive, and to transform anger into closeness, responsibility, and devotion. Furthermore, the fiction allows the narrator to place Nina in the camp, next to her mother during her imprisonment, where she can take care of her: “When Vera comes back to the barracks after being interrogated, Nina tends to her wounds. When the wardens force Vera to stand all night […] Nina stands next to her. When Vera chops wood, […] Nina runs for some goat fat to spread the ax. What’s left of the fat, they stealthily rub on their cracked lips.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Nina is transformed from a victim to a character who expresses compassion and concern for Vera and sees her through the horrors of the camp. On the next page, the plot returns to the time of the trip to Goli Otok, where Vera also undergoes a radical change: when Nina complains of hunger, Vera turns from a sacrificing mother into a nurturing mother, as she brings out sandwiches for everyone (it is not clear how and where she made them). When she sees Nina enjoying the sandwich, Vera tells her: “Enjoy it, […] you can have mine, too.”[[93]](#footnote-93)

## Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates how speech acts work in the novel on two levels: the descriptive-plot level and the ethical level. **On the first level**, there are two central speech acts: the speech act happening in the present tense, which is the novel narrated by Gili, Vera’s granddaughter. The second speech act recounts the story of Vera, who in her youth was exiled to a labor camp in Goli Otok, and was forced to abandon her daughter, Nina. This speech act is formulated in the past tense, in the third person, in a different typeface, but it takes place in the present of the story, as flashbacks in Vera’s consciousness.

**On the second level**, we have expressive speech acts that express ethical positions and ethical choices. To be clear, the characters do not directly state that they have decided to shift positions, to open up to the other, forgive, and take responsibility, as if they have actually through Vera’s suffering together with her. The reader becomes aware of the change only indirectly, through the speech acts described on the first level. Likewise, Vera’s choice not to sign Milosz’s confession of treason is explicitly described only in the last part of the novel. Vera’s reason for concealing this fact is the fear that if Nina, her daughter, finds out about her choice it will kill her. However, looking back, it seems that the characters, and the readers, need the reconstruction and detailing of the events, feelings, and emotions, in order to create the infrastructure for reconciliation.

The speech act of refusing to sign the confession is a particularly clear example of a performative utterance: the confession was supposed to free Vera from captivity. Her refusal to sign was not only a refusal to discredit Milosz’s name but also a choice to suffer the tortures of life in a labor camp and abandon Nina, her daughter. At the same time, the reader learns with the help of speech acts made by the other characters how Vera’s speech act affected them. In this way, a tension is created throughout the novel between speech acts that represent the first person certainty of the speaker, which utilize present tense verbs, thus allowing the reader to know the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of each character, and speech acts that are reported by a third person narrator. While throughout most of the novel the characters do not doubt the certainty of their first person narratives, once they arrive in Goli Otok, a significant change takes place. The speech acts become dialogic, and the renewed experience of Vera’s suffering allows her daughter and granddaughter to forgive her, sympathize with her, and express responsibility toward her.

Through the use of fiction, the speech acts in the novel escape Austin and Searle’s categories to enter the ethical space formulated by Levinas. A dialogue centered on understanding the suffering of another is a Saying. This concept answers the first question that was raised at the beginning of the discussion: why was it necessary to travel to Goli Otok in order to reconstruct Vera’s stories, which could have ostensibly been told just as well in Israel. Inspired by Levinas, it can be suggested that traveling together created the necessary closeness to allow Vera, Nina, and Gili to create a Saying. Gili also takes responsibility for writing the novel, that is, for turning the Saying into the Said. Furthermore, Levinas’s interpretation of the binding of Isaac deepens the understanding of the ethical plane in the novel: Abraham’s first “*hineni*” is given in obedience to the “truth” he believed in. However, his second “*hineni*” answers Isaac’s call, following the voice of the angel. Isaac, as the Sages maintain, was indeed aware that Abraham was ready to sacrifice him, and that had inevitable consequences. Nina was also aware that Vera was ready to sacrifice her, and that had consequences as well.

At this point, the role of fiction can be expanded to answer our third question. As Manuel Garcia-Carpintero argued, philosophical conclusions can be drawn from fiction, and in the context of the present novel, it is possible to show how it accomplishes paradoxical feats, such as the transcription of the ethical, which cannot be transcribed. Reproducing the suffering in the place where it happened creates the ethical change. The reconstruction is accomplished via speech acts, which contain an ethical dimension. However, no character expresses ethical decisions directly. None of them describe the transformations that took place inside them; instead, these are expressed via indirect speech acts (such as the description of Nina joining Vera at the camp, or the distribution of the sandwiches). The novel demonstrates that ethical decisions can be expressed in the act of saying. Gili’s act of writing the novel expresses a peak of commitment and responsibility for the fates of her grandmother and her mother, and the novel ends with a speech act that is both referential and expressive—the birth of Gili’s daughter, Nina: “We named the little one Nina. […] She is my speck of earth. Ours.”[[94]](#footnote-94)

1. The term “speech act” was coined by John Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). Following in Austin’s footsteps, John Searle developed the study of speech acts in his book *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics,* ed. Manfred Bierwisch, John R. Searle, Ferenc Kiefer (Springer, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carrol Clarkson suggests using Levinas in the following manner: “The instance of the Saying in Levinas as the demand for ‘I’ to become ‘You.’ This demand, I have suggested, provides a way of thinking through to a possible intersection of ethics and aesthetics in Levinas. Art’s appeal (which constitutes its value, in Sartre’s sense) instantiates the reader or viewer as addressee, as ‘you’” (Carrol Clarkson, *Drawing the Line: Toward an Aesthetics of Transitional Justice* (Fordham University Press, 2014), 105). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the preface he wrote to *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas states that the purpose of the book is to demonstrate the link between ethics and transcendence: ‟If, as this book will show, ethical relations are to lead transcendence to its term, this is because the essential of ethics is in its *transcendent intention*, and because not every transcendent intention has the noesis-noema structure.” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 29 (emphasis in the original)). Further on Levinas relates the concept of “God” to ethics: “A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is the spiritual optics. The subject-object relation does not reflect it; in the impersonal relation that leads to it the invisible but personal God is not approached outside of all human presence” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 78). It is worth noting in this context the similarity between Levinas’s position and that of Wittgenstein, regarding the transcendental nature of ethics and its being outside the boundaries of language. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein makes two claims virtually identical to those made by Levinas: “Ethics is transcendental. […] God does not reveal himself in the world” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1961), 6:421; 6:432). For further comparisons between Wittgenstein and Levinas, see Bob Plant, *Wittgenstein and Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). The importance of pointing out the parallel between Levinas and Wittgenstein lies in the fact that Wittgenstein first formulated the limits of thinking in language, including the claim that language can show what cannot be transcribed. This claim is central to the current discussion and it helps to understand Levinas’s thinking in *Otherwise than Being*, where Levinas shows how ethics is embodied in the linguistic concepts of the saying and the said. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The ego […] is reduced to the ‘here I am’ as a witness of the Infinite, but a witness that does not thematize what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation, is not evidence. There is witness, a unique structure, an exception to the rule of being, irreducible to representation, only of the Infinite. The infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it. It is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is glorified” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 146). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Carrol Clarkson, “Embodying 'You': Levinas and a question of the second person,” *Journal of Literary Semantics* 34, no. 2 (2005): 95–105. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Clarkson, *Drawing the Line,* 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While Searle added the category of “expressives” to his taxonomy of speech acts, he did not go into the detail of different kinds of positions or the repercussions of an emotion or a position on the other. See, John Searle, ‟A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts,” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Language* 7 (1975): 344–369. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David Grossman, *More Than I Love My Life*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New-York: Alfred A. Knope, 2021), 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ‟To see a face is already to hear 'You shall not kill', and to hear 'You shall not kill' is to hear 'Social

    justice'. And everything I can hear [entendre] coming from God or going to God, who is invisible, must have come to me via the one, unique voice. 'You shall not kill' is therefore not just a simple rule of conduct; it appears as the principle of discourse itself and of spiritual life. Henceforth, language is not only a system of signs in the service of a pre-existing system. Speech belongs to the order of morality before belonging to that of theory. Is it not therefore the condition for conscious thought?” (Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and Spirit” in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) (Originally published in French in 1963 and in English in 1976), 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. David Grossman, *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New-York: Alfred A. Knope, 2017), 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Grossman, *More than I Love My Life*, 182. This is the Hebrew title of the novel in a literal English translation. This sentence is spoken by Vera when she tries to explain to her daughter, Nina, the circumstances by which she was forced to abandon her. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Searle, Austin’s successor proposed dividing speech acts into five categories: representatives (or assertives)—by which we tell people how things are, directives—by which we try to make people do things, commissives—by which we commit ourselves to do things, expressives—by which we explicit our thoughts and feelings, and declarations—by which we brings about changes in the world through the act of speaking. John Searle, ‟A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts,” 354–361. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “To utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing1 or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 3–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Austin lists six conditions for the success of a speech act: the existence of an acceptable conventional procedure, including words, people, and circumstances; the suitability of the people and circumstances for the operation of the procedure; carrying out the procedure in a correct and complete manner; in the event that the procedure is intended to result in a subsequent action, it is required that both the performer and the other participants have compatible intentions, thoughts, and feelings; they must then act accordingly. Ibid., 14–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Altiery, in *Literary Studies and the Philosophy of Literature*, 502. Full reference needed here [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Surely the words must be spoken ‘seriously’ and so as to be taken ‘seriously’? This is, though vague, true enough in general—it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem. a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” (Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Regulative rules independently dictate existing forms of behavior. For example, the rules of tact that dictate interpersonal behavior. Constitutive rules create or define new forms of behavior, such as the rules of chess or soccer. Searle, *Speech Acts*, 50–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, 61–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. John Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Searle, *Speech Acts,*19. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. John Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” in *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 58–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 64–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Wittgenstein proposed a comparison of wordplay, and since he could not find a common denominator between wordplay, he suggested that they bear a “family resemblance.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and J. Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 66–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Searle, “The Logical Status,” 59. The second characteristic is also formulated in the spirit of Wittgenstein who claimed that there is no internal and fixed meaning component to any concept, but rather that meaning is expressed in use. See: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “Two quite different senses of ‘pretend’: In one sense of ‘pretend,’ to pretend to be or to do something that one is not doing is to engage in a form of deception, but in the second sense of ‘pretend,’ to pretend to do or be something is to engage in a performance which is as if one were doing or being the thing and is without any intent to deceive” (Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 65). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “The author of a work of fiction pretends to perform a series of illocutionary acts, normally of the assertive type. Now pretend is an intentional verb: that is, it is one of those verbs which contain the concept of intention built into it. One cannot truly be said to have pretended to do something unless one intended to pretend to do it. […] The identifying criterion for whether or not a text is a work of fiction must of necessity lie in the illocutionary intentions of the author. There is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it (Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 65). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Petrey opposed it in particular on the grounds that Searle limits illocutionary force to the individual author “whose illocutionary intentions are all by themselves able to suspend the illocutionary conventions that govern linguistic performance for the rest of the world” (Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (Routledge, 1990), page number). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The first essay that utilizes the interdisciplinary application of speech act theory to literature is Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). The methodologies implicated in the study of speech acts in the literature are diverse and include, among other things, disputes about the nature of a speech act. For example, Hillis Miller described the creation of literature as a speech act thus: “If each work is […] singular, its performative effect will be singular, not fully authorized by prior conventions. It will be a form of speech act not condoned in standard speech act theory. The performative effect of the work is, moreover, dissociated from authorial intent or knowledge. This disjunction is already anticipated by the father of speech act theory, J. L. Austin when he tries, at least momentarily, to separate the “felicity” of a speech act from the subjective intention of the one who enunciates it” (J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (New-York: Routledge, 2002), p. 112). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Manuel Garcia-Carpintero,“To Tell What Happened as Invention: Literature and Philosophy on Learning from Fiction,” in *Literary Studies and the Philosophy of Literature, New Interdisciplinary Directions*, ed. Andrea Selleri, Philip Gaydon (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 124. Garcia-Carpintero pointed to the debate between Austin and Searle, on the one hand, and Grice, on the other, who emphasized the individual aspect of the speech act through the speaker’s reflexive examination of their intentions. Paul Grice, ‟Meaning,” *Philosophical Review* 66, no. 3 (1957), 377–388. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979); Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Miller devoted two important studies to the examination of speech acts in literature: J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New-York: Fordham University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. “I will thus rely often and at length on Austin’s now classic distinction between performative speech acts and constative speech acts. This distinction will have been a great event in the twentieth century— and it will first have been an academic event. It will have taken place in the university and in a certain way, it is the Humanities that made it come about and that explored its resources; it is to and through the Humanities that this happened, and its consequences are incalculable. […] After having made this pair of concepts count for so much, I will end up designating a place where it fails and must fail” (Jacques Derrida, “The Future of the Profession,” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988). The collection also includes the summary of John Searle’s article written in response to Derrida: John R. Searle, “Summary of Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida,” (Ibid.*,* 25–27). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 129. Hillis Miller elucidated the way in which iterability, for Derida, can also form a basis for understanding the nature of literature: “The ‘normal’ and ‘serious’ speech act cannot be used to set aside and devalue in advance ‘non-serious’ ones. Literature is for Derrida the possibility for any utterance, writing, or mark to be iterated in innumerable contexts and to function in the absence of identifiable speaker, context, reference, or hearer. This does not mean that the referential function of language is suspended or annulled in literature. The referential function of language cannot be suspended or annulled” (Hillis Miller, “Derrida and Literature,” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Albert Sebeok (New York: M.I.T.), 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory*, 78; Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 59. An example of the importance of conventions in the study of literature can be seen in the context of the concept of genre: for example, an elegy assumes that there has been a death, and its content is devoted to the description of the deceased. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Pratt expanded the linguistic application of the interpretation of communicative action to include the principle of cooperation formulated by Paul Grice (Pratt, ibid., 154). This approach seems to me to be a reduction of literary creation to an everyday act of communication, and even if there are authors who intend for their creations to create cooperation with their readers, an interpretation that is guided by this principle tilts the dominant function of the literary creation from poetic creativity toward message clarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Richard Ohmann, “Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 4, no. 1 (1971): 1–19; Richard Ohmann, “Speech, Literature, and the Space Between,” *New Literary History* 4, no. 1 (1972): 47–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ohmann, “Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature,” 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Garcia-Carpintero, “To Tell What Happened as Invention.” [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. “Narrative non-fiction consists of an *assertoric* core—a speech act governed by a norm requiring truth for its correctness” (Ibid., 123). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names,* trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. For more on the shift in the place of language in ethical action in *Otherwise than Being*, see, for instance William Large, “Levinas on the Problem of Language: Expressing the Inexpressible,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed, Michael L. Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 749–768. Large referred to the language in Levinas’s writings as being “a problem” and explored the tension inherent in the inability to express in language content that is outside its boundaries. Language is central to Levinas’s thought, but at the same time, there appears to be a constant struggle between schools of thought that place language at the center of philosophical discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame Press: The University of Notre Dame, 1997), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Levinas criticized Heidegger's ontology in every one of his significant texts. Prominent examples include: “The primacy of ontology for Heidegger does not rest on the truism: ‘to know an existent it is necessary to have comprehended the Being of existents.’ To affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), *subordinates justice to freedom*” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45 (my emphasis)). The following quote is more provocative: “To conclude, the well-known theses of Heideggerian philosophy—the preeminence of Being over beings, of ontology over metaphysics—end up affirming a tradition in which the same dominates the other, in which freedom, even the freedom that is identical with reason, precedes justice. Does not justice consist in putting the obligation with regard to the other before obligations to oneself, in putting the other before the same?” (Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 1993), 52–53). See also: Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 17. The contribution of the present article is that its discussion uniquely focuses on Levinas’s conception of language in the ethical process. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Levinas’s ambivalent attitude has been widely discussed in the research, and this is the prevailing approach. The present discussion is unusual in that Levinas describes language only in positive terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, in *Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other*,trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. “The person with whom I am in relation, I call being, but in calling him being, I call upon him. I do not just think that he is, I speak to him. He is my partner within a relation that was only to have made him present to me. I have spoken to him, that is, I have overlooked the universal being he incarnates in order to confine myself to the particular being he is” (Ibid., 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. The use of the phrase “here I am” or *“hineni*” appears in Levinas’s writings starting from *Prison Notebooks* (which he wrote between the years 1940–1945), and up until his final essays (indicated with the years of their original publication): *Otherwise than Being* (1981); *Ethics and Infinity* (1985); *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. “The French text, which reads, ‘Accusatif merveilleux: me voici sous votre regard’ could also be translated to highlight an accusative indiscernible in English: ‘you see me here beneath your gaze […].’ The French idiom, ‘*me voici*,’ has preserved the accusative form *me*, which English translates as ‘here I am.’ The preposition *voici* amalgamates ‘to see’ or *voir* in the form *vois* and the preposition *ci*, or here. *Voici* is thus ‘you see me here’” (Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 201). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. “My task does not consist in constructing ethics, I am simply trying to find its meaning” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. “It is in prophecy that the Infinite escapes the objectification of thematization and of dialogue. […] The Infinite orders to me the neighbor as a face, without being exposed to me. […] The order has not been the cause of my response, nor even a question that would have preceded it in a dialogue. *I find the order in my response itself, which, as a sign given to the neighbor, as a ‘here 1 am’*” (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150, my emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. “In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. / 2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly./ 3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. /4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. /5 Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. /6 Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: /7 And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. /8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6, 1–8). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. “Here I am, in that responsibility cast back toward something that was never my fault, never my doing, toward something that was never in my power, nor my freedom—toward something that does not come back to me from memory” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michel B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150, my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. “Saying precedes every Said. Before uttering a Said, the Saying is already a bearing witness of responsibility […] The infinite is not “in front of” me; it is I who express it, but I do so precisely in giving a sign of the giving of signs, of the “for-the-other” in which I am dis-interested: here I am [me voici]. A marvelous accusative: here I am under your gaze, obliged to you, your servant. In the name of God. Without thematization! […] It is the “here I am,” said to the neighbor to whom I am given over, and in which I announce peace, that is, my responsibility for the other” (Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 74–75). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Hilary Putnam, “Levinas and Judaism,” full reference here please [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. As Jeffrey Bloechl explains: “The subject speaks from exposure to the other; speech is the giving forth of meaning after the fact of proximity, and in that sense always responds. This is not only a matter of the words one freely chooses, perhaps after a pause or with a controlled cadence. It is not even to be restricted to the formal use of language. Rather, the proximity of the other person ensures that all meaning consists in a giving forth of oneself that occurs in the ambience of someone else” (Jeffrey Bloechl, “Theological Terms in the Philosophy of Levinas,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed, Michael L. Morgan. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 410). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Grossman, *More than I Love My Life*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid., 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Levinas, “A Propos of Kierkegaard Vivant,” in *Proper Names,* 75–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. […] And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Genesis, 22: 1–2, 6–7 (King James version)). In the original Hebrew version, Abraham says ‟*hineni*” to both God and Isaac. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. “Abraham’s attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice— that is the essential” (Levinas, “A Propos of Kierkegaard Vivant,” 77). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Grossman, *More than I Love My Life*, 181–182, my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Milosz’s attitude here is in tension with the statement Vera makes a few lines later, and which inspires the nove’s Hebrew title: “‘All in all,’ Vera said softly, to herself, ‘with me life plays a lot of games’” (Ibid., 182). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ibid., 272–273, my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. As a result of these two instances of abandonment, Gili states about herself: “Me having a child is not possible. I’m a child-accursed” (Ibid., 82). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Ibid., 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Ibid., 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid., 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)