

## Article

# Interlocutors, Nonhuman Actors, and the Ethics of Literary Signification

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**Abstract:** Associating autonomy with art has long been viewed with suspicion, but autonomous signifying agency may be attributed to literary discourse without lapsing into decontextualized aestheticism or neoliberal conceptions of subjectivity. Through literary practices that “move” readers in a “singular” manner, a work becomes what Rita Felski, following Bruno Latour, calls a “nonhuman actor.” Such an actor, Felski observes, “modifies a state of affairs by making a difference,” participating “in chains of events” so as to “help shape outcomes and influence events” (2015, pp. 163–64). Autonomous signifying agency within works and literary discourse more broadly enables them to become actors within what Latour terms “networks of associations” through which “the social” is constantly “reassembled.” But literary works also act as interlocutors, in the sense Levinas gives the word (1996a, pp. 2–10). Though not full-fledged ethical others, they nonetheless, as interlocutors, are sufficiently invested with the attributes and agency of ethical others to be their extensions or ambassadors. Nonhuman, interlocutory literary agency may be explored in iconic passages of ancient literature—Telemachus’ recognition that he is being visited by a god (Odyssey Book 1: ll. 319–24) and Judah’s recognition that Tamar is more “righteous” than he (Gen. 38: 26). In being authoritative but not authoritarian, literary discourse becomes a potentially autonomous actor within the networks of associations in which it participates.

**Keywords:** ethics; literary theory, autonomous signification; literary singularity; Homer; Genesis; interlocutor; nonhuman actor; Felski; Latour; Levinas; evolutionary studies

## 1. Literary Singularity and Autonomous Ethical Signification

Associating autonomy with art has long been viewed with suspicion. While arguing that a literary work’s “singularity” gives it an agency unacknowledged by “instrumental” readings that treat literary texts as examples of or evidence for claims and interests “behind” the work, Derek Attridge carefully differentiates singularity from autonomy by stressing that a work’s agency is going to vary as it interacts with different contexts and circumstances (Attridge [2004] 2017, 2015). The singularity comprising a work’s specific network of textual features and thus its distinctive agency reflects and is directed to contexts that Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as shaping historical cultural, conceptual interpretative “horizons” shared by the writer and the work’s first audience. These in turn are brought into contact with different “horizons” informing and constraining the interpretative activity of later generations of readers (Gadamer 1989). The work’s singularity, on Attridge’s account, becomes an agent in shaping what Gadamer describes as a “fusing” or melting into one another of different horizons (“*Horizontverschmelzung*”)—that is, placing them into pluralistic dialogue (Haney 2001, pp. 21–22, 47, 85–86).

Though literature certainly acts in the ways Attridge and Gadamer describe, it does not just address readers on levels involving ever-shifting historical and cultural contexts. While literature induces readers to construct and to become transported into imagined worlds (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007; Gerrig 1993), it also presents itself as an interlocutor, thus making the experience of encountering and

attending to its discourse what Emmanuel Levinas calls an “event of sociality” (Levinas 1996a, p. 8). That is, literature presses us to transcend the horizons, or conceptual phenomenological frameworks, into which we assimilate phenomena we encounter so as to “make use” of them—either instrumentally (to prove a thesis) or for a more diffuse self-enrichment.

Valuing self-enrichment may be seen as a human elaboration of the endeavor to flourish that underlies organic evolution generally (Damasio 2003, 2010, 2018). Similarly, the moral norms and moral sense woven into contexts and horizons may be understood as diverse historical-cultural efforts to articulate what individual and societal wellbeing is and how to achieve it. If literary singularity interacts dialogically with readers’ notions of morality, as well as other aspects of their contexts and horizons, in ways that improve them, make them more conducive to procuring wellbeing, then readers ought, rationally, to welcome its agency, for they will be beneficiaries of its effects. To the extent that this is the case, what literary works do have an adaptive, evolutionary value akin to that of normative moral sense. Just as taking turns, considering others’ feelings, and monitoring actions for fairness are more likely than not to contribute to success and wellbeing, so welcoming literary singularity and cultivating skill in “taking in” its effects is apt to be at once self-enriching and socially useful.

Literary works in their role of interlocutor, however, model and invite simulations of “events of sociality” that disrupt instrumental assimilation and call into question the intrinsic goodness of self-enriching endeavors. They thus engage and elicit an ethical sense incommensurate with what proceeds from a hyper-prosocial species’ endeavor to maximize flourishing within its peculiar biocultural ecological niche. The primate behavioral ecologist Richard Wrangham notes that just as many “morally reprehensible” tendencies “clearly evolved, including numerous kinds of sexual coercion, lethal violence, and social domination”, so “many morally delightful tendencies did not evolve, such as charity to strangers and kindness to animals” (Wrangham 2019, pp. 192–93). Charity to strangers lies at the heart of ethics for Levinas, which he places in explicit opposition to moralities predicated on evolutionary logic (for Levinas on animals, see Calarco 2010).

By “moving” readers in its own “singular” manner, a work becomes what Rita Felski, following Bruno Latour, calls a “nonhuman actor.” Such an actor, Felski observes, “modifies a state of affairs by making a difference”, acting as a participant “in chains of events” so as to help shape outcomes and influence events” (Felski 2015, pp. 163–64). The determinate features of a literary work—its melding of earlier conventions, its thematic or formal innovations and refinements—acquire participatory agency within what Latour terms “networks of associations” through which “the social” is constantly “reassembled” (Latour 2005, esp. pp. 1–17, 62–86, 247–62; Latour 2013, pp. 233–57). This sort of agency, consistent with Attridge’s and Gadamer’s theorizing, is explored by literary and cultural history. For example, *The Odyssey* combines oral discursive traditions celebrating trickster cunning with those admonishing self-restraint and deferred gratification, uniting vividly dramatized narrative with stately hexameter cadences and lofty diction to depict a model of virile morality who is transformed into a figure of amoral realism in Greek tragedy. Ongoing shifts in material social contexts and conceptual interpretative horizons inform the travesty of the poem’s generic, stylistic grandeur by Petronius and Virgil’s separation of cunning and piety in the figures of Ulysses and Aeneas, an uneasily maintained dichotomy amplified in Dante’s portrayal. But by using Odysseus’ journey as the model for Aeneas’, Virgil also brings *The Odyssey* into indirect contact with another network of actors, the one molding medieval moral allegory, through which it enters into networks shaping romance. Later, after the work’s recovery in the West, Homeric style informs and is contested by modern narrative poetry and novelistic prose. Through it all, at once giving rise to reconfigurations and pushing back against their totalizing and reductive aspects, the poem remains a participant in considerations of how, or if, self-assertive shrewdness contributes to or is reconcilable with social morality.

While determinate agency predicated on this kind of singularity is certainly important, literary works are not just “participants in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration” [emphasis in original] (Latour 2005, p. 71), but also interlocutors in the sense Levinas gives the word (Levinas 1996a, pp. 2–10). As interlocutors, they are ethical others, albeit virtual or simulated ones. “[K]nowledge of

the other [as opposed to knowledge about an object] requires”, Levinas argues, “outside all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impassible contemplation”, for “[t]he other (*autrui*) is not an object of comprehension first and an interlocutor second. The two relations are intertwined” (p. 6). If literary works are not exactly full-fledged ethical others, they are nonetheless sufficiently invested with the attributes and agency of ethical others to be their extensions or ambassadors.

Literary works are peculiarly hybrid. They are not persons, and thus *nonhuman* actors. Nonetheless, they act through discourse, which puts them in a double relation to listeners or readers. As an interlocutor, as what Levinas calls “a face”, the work acts not *as* an intentional subject but *on* an intentional subject by eliciting consciousness of the colonizing, appropriative aspect of all contexts and horizons. However, the other is also, Levinas notes, “an object of comprehension”, and what is comprehended in a work is its discourse, the particularities of which activate a kind of intentional agency. As Levinas notes, these “two relations”, with an ethical interlocutor and with an “object of comprehension”, “are entwined”, and this is the case whether the “object” is a person endowed with intentional consciousness or a work marked by determinate, singular discourse.

While the ethical dimension of literary works both speaks to and transcends culturally specific contexts, it also enters into dialogue with moral norms and values rooted in more expansive, species-wide neurocognitive evolutionary contexts. The anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar notes that “[a]lthough other neurotransmitters and neuroendocrines such as oxytocin ... play an important role in mammalian sociality, the evidence points to a unique role for endorphins in the maintenance of close relationships in anthropoid primates” (Dunbar 2016, p. 39). Grooming, touching, and cuddling provide mild opiate “highs” that ameliorate pain and communicate affection, thus fostering trust. By combining tactile contact and pressure with rhythmic stroking, companionability is imbued with ordering, comforting expectancies, fulfillments, and variations. Touch-mediated nascent prosody and touch-generated proto-narrative anticipations, interlaced with audiovocal assurances of caring presence, link memory and trust. What is so experienced is then attested to in and communicated by determinate shapes, gestures, and pulsations that *literary* signification acknowledges and shares, and that literary agency builds on.

The conjunction of interlocutor-mediated “events of sociality” and textually instantiated, singular nonhuman but intentional agency may be explored in iconic passages of ancient literature—Telemachus’ recognition that he is being visited by a god (*Odyssey* Book 1: ll. 319–24) and Judah’s recognition that Tamar is more “righteous” than he (Gen. 38: 26). *The Odyssey* and Hebrew scripture are selected because of their foundational role in shaping Western literary traditions, and because they illustrate divergent ways that literary discourse may be authoritative without being authoritarian. In the passage from Homer, Athena plays the role of an ideal interlocutor (both listener and speaker), standing in alternately for the audience and work. At the same time, the passage is representative of how the work, both in narrative details and the manner of narration, directs its audience to attend to the ethical significance of actions and words. By contrast, in the biblical text, there is no interpretative aid equivalent to Athena. Instead, ethical signification seems to irrupt from narration focused on attitudes and priorities inhospitable to engaging with ethical interlocutors. In this respect, the passage from Genesis is emblematic of many such passages in Hebrew scripture. Together, the Homeric and biblical examples illuminate some of the ways that literary works achieve an autonomous signifying agency, and so become actors within the networks in which they participate. Literary signification involves three aspects that may be heuristically distinguished but in practice are artfully interwoven: an eliciting of fellow feeling and imaginative sympathy predicated on somatic empathy shared by humans with other animals accompanies engagement with culturally sanctioned moral norms and an internalized moral sense associated with rational pursuit of personal and communal wellbeing, to which is added an evocation of ethical significance as enjoining one to make others’ wellbeing, apart from and at the risk of one’s own, the focus of attention and the motive of action. The way these signifying aspects are entwined generates a work’s distinctive singularity, but the effect of the entwinement gives the work an internal autonomous signifying agency, as the readings here seek to sketch.

## 2. Attending to Interlocutors and Ethical Enjoining in *The Odyssey*

Telemachus' recognition that he has been conversing not with a mere stranger but with a divine being is linked discursively, textually, to his own "godlike" attributes. As she departs, Athena is said to put (*thekê*) into his heart (*thumo*) strength and courage (*menos kai tharsos*) (Book 1: ll. 320–21). Homer's use of "put" (Homer 1995, p. 37) at the beginning of line 321 may be read, in accord with archaic Greek horizons, as a preemptory supernatural event, the goddess at that moment infusing the youth with spiritual moral attributes that make him "godlike" (*isotheos*) (1: 324). But it may also be read as denoting the effect of his having attended to Athena as an interlocutor, a narrative sequence that begins at line 122. Indeed, the appellation "godlike" in alternative form (*theoeides*) is applied to Telemachus prior to his seeing and speaking to Athena (1: 113), in the context of describing his being "troubled at heart" (p. 21) (*tetiemenos êtor*, 1: 114) while thinking of, daydreaming of, his father's returning to rout the suitors and reclaim his honor and house (1: 115–17). Since *-eides* denotes "like" and *iso-* "the same as", the sequence of terms implies both growth and movement from godlike thoughts to godlike actions, as though Athena's intervention calls forth her own qualities already latent in Telemachus. His welcoming the other in the vocative, "Hail, stranger" (p. 21) (*Chaire, xaine*, 1: 122), and offering hospitality crucially precedes access to divine wisdom's speech and companionship. Moreover, describing the as yet untried Telemachus as "godlike" shifts what is like (*-eides*) from contexts involving physical power, martial valor, and beauty to ones involving qualities of heart and mind—having a sense of what is due others, of what conduct is worthy of emulation. Telemachus is "godlike" in his aversion to submitting cravenly to any order of things in which might is the only right.

The poem's opening scene, set on Olympus, prepares its audience for so hearing the word. It recounts how the marooned Odysseus is "pitied" (p. 13) (*elêairon*, 1: 19) by all the gods except Poseidon and how Athena, in urging Zeus to let Odysseus return home, appeals to his sense of justice (1: 46–62). If to be godlike involves feeling pity and being concerned with justice, then humans who possess such qualities integral to moral sociality will be, in effect, "godlike", and so in contact with the divine. Giving narrative expression to logical, causal, and moral inferences, in the manner of mythic discourse generally (Blumenberg 1985), Homer portrays Telemachus' welcoming of the disguised Athena as the consequence of his being angrily indignant and ashamed (*nemessethe*) "in his heart (*thumo*, 1: 119) ... that a stranger should stand long at the gates" (p. 21). As an apparently needy stranger, Athena is an interlocutor for Telemachus. To the extent audiences simulate Telemachus' experience, she is an interlocutor for them as well. Still, the work, through the singular intricacy of verbal associations and narrative construction noted above, also functions as an interlocutor to be welcomed and given attention. It is able to act intentionally, to interact with others' intentional subjectivities in a dialogic, pluralistic manner, by virtue of its being approached, as is Athena, ethically. The more intently this is done, the more the work speaks to and with individual readers. To the extent it is allowed to do so, its participation in shifting Greek culture from archaic to early philosophical interpretative horizons comes into view, which in turn illuminates what literary discourse does and why its modes of signifying matter.

Indignation at another's not being treated properly and shame at his own (inadvertent) role in allowing it to happen not only puts Telemachus in contact with a god, but also invests his discourse with reasoned, sociable eloquence: he is able to speak "with winged words" (p. 21) (*phonesas ... pterôenta*, 1: 121). There are of course culturally historically specific aspects to the feelings moving Telemachus to action: the idea that hospitality to strangers is enjoined by Zeus, apprehensions that strangers may be gods in disguise (as indeed this one is) and thus fear of incurring divine wrath, an aristocratic sense of decorum and of responsibility for the actions of those attached to one's household, etc. Still, cultural distance does not preclude imaginative participation in Telemachus' emotions, for they do not depend solely on sociocultural moral peculiarities (the value tribal and chieftain societies worldwide place on elite generosity (Flannery and Marcus 2012, pp. 91–183; Boehm 1999, pp. 90–124)). They also reflect species-wide human evolutionary legacies, building on mammalian primate empathy but also shaping moral sociality generally. These include affective attunement to others' intentions, needs, dispositions,

and judgments, rooted in biocultural dependence on others' goodwill and trustworthiness (Gopnik 2016; Colombetti 2014; Klimecki and Singer 2013; Zaki and Ochsner 2011; Machin and Dunbar 2011; Hrdy 2009; Dissanayake 2000; Bowlby 1999). Such attunement is inseparable from an experiencing of second-order consciousness; that is, consciousness of consciousness (LeDoux and Brown 2017; Hirstein 2012; Metzinger 2003). This in turn enables us—indeed, impels us—to see and judge ourselves from a third-person perspective detached from selfish aims but invested in communal wellbeing (Tomasello 2016, pp. 85–134; Tomasello 2019).

The signifying work of *The Odyssey* as a nonhuman actor, however, goes beyond simply inducing audiences to simulate, in an abstract, spectator-like manner, the qualities of consciousness that, on Homer's account, move Telemachus to ethical sociable action and thus toward companionship with the divine. Homer also calls on the audience to recognize that angry ashamed indignation is precisely the emotion that Telemachus *should* feel—not only because it is appropriate to his character or social status, but also because it is ethically enjoined. By bringing to mind a web of related terms through his word choice, Homer or the work “acts on” and “reassembles” networks of neural connections: since neurons that fire together wire together (Hebb 1949), poetic diction's triggering of synaptic links within and among brains makes its interventions consequential materially, biochemically (Buck 2014, p. 36; Lamprecht and LeDoux 2004). *Nemeseáo* denotes “to feel just indignation” [my emphasis], *nemesomai* “to be displeased or vexed with oneself; to be ashamed”, *nemesetós* “causing indignation or wrath, worthy of it”, and *némesos* “just or deserved indignation, anger at anything unjust” (Liddell and Scott 1958, pp. 460–61).

One may, certainly, *understand* and thus simulate the suitors' shameless arrogance; one may even appreciate, from a disinterested aesthetic viewpoint, the suitability of their actions to their characters and circumstances—and thus enjoy, in recitation or imagination, impersonating them. One may, in accord with Text World Theory, be incited by Homer's words to construct a mental representation of how the suitors perceive and feel (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), or be transported by the work's evocation of their perspective into an immersive co-experiencing of it (Gerrig 1993), but only to a limited degree. The poem as interlocutor calls us to a different relation to Telemachus' “winged speech”, one anchored in shared experiencing of the ethical as an order of significance that cannot be escaped or relativized. It is not simply that we can detach ourselves from our perspective and enter into that of a collective intentionality, assessing our actions and thoughts in terms of their effects on communal wellbeing (Tomasello 2016, 2019), nor is it just that we project on gods, ancestors, and spirits the judgments we would make if we were unaffected by self-interest or desire (Boyer 2001). Narrative action in the poem begins, in Ithaca as on Olympus, with the *effects* of pity and concern for justice, thus intimating narratively what Levinas insists phenomenological analysis reveals, that the ethical is experienced as enjoined, as already there “prior to my freedom”, *before* the time of “representable” presences, “the time of beginnings or assumings” (Levinas 1989b, p. 180).

In *The Odyssey*, Book 1, Telemachus is *already theoeides* through feeling the emotions proper to one susceptible to and respectful of ethical registers of significance. He is thus brought into association with an apparent ethical other whose effects upon him, making him *isotheos*, disclose divine solicitude. Once moved out of self-preoccupation and into the world of action and social relations, Telemachus promises the stranger food and invites him to speak of what he needs: “[I]n our house you shall find entertainment (*philéseai*—friendly, affectionate welcome), and then, when you have tasted food, you shall tell (*muthéseai*) what you have need of (*se chpé*)” (p. 21, 1: ll. 123–24). Solicitude for the other's bodily wellbeing modulates into welcoming an interlocutor from whom comes discourse concerning justice leading to companionable association. This narrative sequence, beginning with a Levinasian sense of being unconditionally enjoined, then unfolds in a way that uncannily anticipates evolutionary accounts of moral sense: susceptibility to experiencing somatic empathy and to simulating how others likely view us yields sufficient moral consciousness to make concern for justice the basis of cooperative sociality (Tomasello 2014, 2016, 2019; Buck 2014; Boehm 1999, 2012; Krebs 2011; Kitcher 2011; Joyce 2006).



After providing the stranger abundant food, and placing him apart from the “proud suitors” (p. 23) (*mnestêres agénōres*, 1. 144), Telemachus asks him about his circumstances, noting that they will not be overheard because the suitors are consuming the household’s minstrel’s song with the same greedy insouciance with which they have consumed its food. The word translated as “proud” (*agénōr*) has a semantic range—from manly and splendid to headstrong and haughty—that requires ethical sense to discern what in context it denotes (the same applies to “godlike”). Homer’s selection of terms ambiguously perched between celebrating power and subordinating it to considerations of pity and justice underscores poetic signification’s potential to educate moral perception and right feeling, while his calling the audience’s attention to the suitors’ egocentric, unreflective pleasure in hearing a “sweet lay” (p. 25) (*kalôn aëidein*, 1. 155) intimates that attending to the interplay of ethical sense and literary significance in his own discourse requires a kind of understanding, and yields a quality of pleasure, to which they have no access and in which they have no interest.

Moreover, the suitors are occupied with lyre and song “without misgiving” (p. 25) or lightly, carelessly (*rei*) (1. 160), for they “without atonement [*nèpoinon*—with impunity, like heedless children] ... devour the livelihood of another ... ” (p. 25). In sharing a world through discourse in which significance is regulated by ethical sense, Telemachus and Athena are united in moral outrage at the suitors’ bullying rapaciousness. Their “just or deserved indignation”, the *némesos* binding them to one another, proceeds from “anger at anything unjust”, and thus entails outrage not simply at the effects of the suitors’ predation on themselves, but also at the very idea of arrogant rapacity determining the order of things within actual or possible humanly inhabited worlds.

Since she is an immortal and cannot be affected in relation to life prospects by what the suitors do, Athena’s interest in events in Ithaca notably resembles that of the poem’s audience to its imagined world. What connects humans to gods and audiences to narratives is a concern for pity and justice that transcends such cooperative sociality as “altruistic reciprocity” engenders; that is, concern for others’ wellbeing motivated, directly or indirectly, by the selective advantage it provides oneself or one’s affiliates—through fostering teamwork, building goodwill, enhancing reputation (Tomasello 2016, pp. 9–38; Kitcher 2011, pp. 17–66; Krebs 2011, pp. 75–160; Joyce 2006, pp. 13–44; Alexander 1987; Trivers 1971). Moral sociality accommodates biological endeavors to flourish to the ecological conditions of human communal life. By contrast, to be godlike for Homer is to be moved by consideration of what sort of behavior and what order of things sustains *for others* a flourishing, caring, just, and humanly meaningful quality of life.

This requires empathy, but also exceeds it. The primatology-trained cultural anthropologist Christopher Boehm notes abundant evidence (Melis and Warneken 2016; Warneken and Tomasello 2006; Boesch and Boesch-Achermann 2000; Whiten and Byrne 1988; Goodall 1986) that chimpanzees resemble “normal [non-psychopathic] humans” in “feeling the pain and needs of others”, in demonstrating “empathetic perspective taking” behavior, but adds, “There is no sign that chimpanzees have a conscience with moral feelings that involve internalizing group rules (e.g., Gintis 2003), or a shameful, self-judgmental sense of right and wrong” (Boehm 2017, p. 748). Thus, while “chimpanzees understand very well the rules imposed on them by a dominant other, ... when rule-breaking becomes attractive, and they believe there are no rule enforcers present, there is no sign that they are reining themselves in” (Boehm 2012, p. 748). The same may be said of at least the most aggressive of Homer’s suitors.

A “sense of morality”, Boehm argues, hinges on not just knowing but also internalizing rules so that “[w]e make ‘right or wrong’ judgments about others, and also about ourselves, based on shame and a moralistic sense of remorse” (p. 749). Homer depicts moral sense and moral social regulation in relation to Telemachus. Once internalized, rules governing a group are applied to self and others and discussed (via gossip). This in turn prompts “joint opinions”, which can lead to “group action” fostered by “consensus” so that “the disruptive free-riding behaviors of cheaters and bullies can be curbed” (p. 752). Homer’s narrative depicts such a process fairly closely, with the difference that conduct and judgments are made answerable not just or primarily to calculations of what courses of action most likely promote our own and our group’s wellbeing, but to an ethical order of significance

rooted in feeling pity and valuing justice *disinterestedly*, not merely in regard to oneself *and* others, but also *for others* in worlds we may attend to without being subject to. Thus, gods as well as humans experience moral outrage, and humans partake in “godlike” qualities of caring about the maintenance and renewal *for others* of sustainable ethical sociable human life.

“[S]tirred to anger” (p. 31) or troubled and grieved (*èpalastésasa*) (1: 252) by Telemachus’ account of the suitors’ “shameless” (*anaidés*) (1: 254) conduct, Athena models an ideal auditor’s responsiveness to Homer’s poem. By this means, the work itself, through its narrative and verbal structures, through the analogy it develops at this point between Athena and the audience, highlights the paradoxical “disinterested interest” linking ethics and narrative. Being so affected by what she hears and imagines, Athena offers Telemachus, in addition to fellow feeling and shared judgment, wise counsel—both by devising a plan of action (that Telemachus consult Nestor and Menelaus) and by urging trust in a better, more just future. The instigator of narrative action at this point, she, but through her the work, moves from modelling ethical responsiveness to assuming intentional agency. Maintaining her disguise, she prophesies, not on claims of supernatural insight or skill in augury (1: 202), but on the basis of what the immortals have placed in her heart (*thumô*) (1: 200), that Odysseus will find a way to return, as he is a man “of many devices” (*poluméchanos*) (1: 205). Initiating movement from “joint opinions” to “group action”, Athena sets in motion a plot exemplifying patterns that contemporary primate and early human studies place at the center of evolutionary accounts of the origins of human morality.

Groundbreaking social analysis of chimpanzees and other apes in the wild and captivity (Goodall 1986; de Waal [1982] 1998, 1996, 2009) has fostered a body of scholarship delineating the intricate interplay of competition and cooperation, dominance and submission, shaping the hierarchical but unstable group life of the species most nearly related to humans. While violent encounters between groups, involving raiding to ambush isolated males and abduct females, and to extend or protect territory, are common (Wilson and Glowacki 2017), documented in-group violence invariably involves attacks on overbearing “alpha males” by gangs of bullied males (and sometimes females) (Boehm 2017, pp. 754–61). Effectively, the same pattern is commonly observed in forager and hunter–gatherer communities (Boehm 2017, pp. 764–79; 2012, pp. 75–87; Boehm 1999, pp. 90–224; Flannery and Marcus 2012, pp. 91–183). Social mechanisms of balancing prestige and egalitarianism, managing competition and promoting cooperation, allow small-scale societies to discourage in-group self-aggrandizement and protect less competitively able group members, thus fostering a level of social cohesion and affective wellbeing that gives communities or cultures selective survival and flourishing advantages (Krebs 2011, pp. 116–42; Kitcher 2011, pp. 104–37; Boyd and Richerson 2005; Boehm 1999, pp. 149–224; Boehm 2012, pp. 133–212).

What may be inferred about prehistoric social life from ethnographic research is necessarily limited (Kitcher 2011, p. 105). Still, combined archaeological and anthropological evidence suggests that for at least “forty thousand years” after the development of language and symbolic culture, people dwelt in “small bands, each elaborating a socially embedded mode of normative guidance” intended to prevent or minimize the consequences of in-group “altruism failure” (p. 107), for unchecked lack of pity and disregard for justice imperils group survival. Though societies may “choose to fail” in multiple ways (Diamond [2005] 2011), the prevalence of functionally equivalent “normative guidance” in small-scale societies worldwide suggests a non-arbitrary selective process. Cheaters and bullies are curbed in analogous, escalating ways everywhere: social disapproval expressed by mild, then harsher remonstrance, is followed by lesser and greater ostracism and, then as a last resort, exile or execution.

In accord with this pattern, *The Odyssey*’s suitors are given repeated opportunities to mend their ways before finally being killed. Homeric social worlds vividly illustrate what comparative anthropology and historiography document: core “normative guidance” characteristic of small-scale, egalitarian societies continues, with modifications, in early hierarchical polities: the elite are expected to be generous and protective, the non-elite grateful and loyal, and everyone considerate, merciful, and just (Flannery and Marcus 2012, pp. 187–337; Tu 1986). Actual practice, of course, can diverge

sharply from such expectations, but as ideals made socially visible, for example, in the appellation Homer frequently gives an elite male, “shepherd of the people” (*poimena laon*—as in *The Iliad* Book 10: l. 73), such expectations nonetheless become potent nonhuman actors within networks of associations. They offer “ideological” justifications or “naturalizations” of power differentials, to be sure, but also valorize consideration of others and press toward some measure of social justice.

### 3. Ethical Sense and Natural Histories of Morality

Contemporary rethinking of moral philosophy in light of evolutionary research helps explain why literary practices that appeal to a socially cultivated moral sense (somatic empathy enhanced by regard for fairness and reciprocities) seem to partake of an autonomously signifying agency that moves any auditor not, like the suitors, aberrantly or willfully antisocially arrogant. Humans’ sense of and concern about morality can now be explained in terms of species adaptation, viewed as effects of “pragmatic naturalism”—that is, a hyper-prosocial organism’s discovery over time of what works to promote its survival and flourishing (Kitcher 2011, pp. 3–13). The very plausibility of natural historical accounts of *why* humans experience moral sociability as obligatory, however, threatens to divest such experiences of what has traditionally been associated by philosophy with the ethical—namely, that its claims appeal to transcendent, enjoining, or meta-ethical warrants, that the good is distinct from what is advantageous to oneself and one’s genetic or social affiliates (Joyce 2006, pp. 179–219). Dennis L. Krebs argues, “When viewed from the perspective of evolution, an important reason that children and adults resist the temptation to behave in selfish and aggressive ways is because these forms of conduct evoked fitness-reducing consequences in ancestral environments, just as they do today . . . . The reason that people copy the moral behavior of some people and not of other people is because being selective paid off in ancestral environments, just as it does today” (Krebs 2011, p. 273).

If humans experience appeals to the value of moral sociability as compelling for the same reason that polar bears grow white fur, then its valorization within the imagined worlds in which humans dwell (whether through phenomenological consciousness of biosocial life or vicariously via literary art) may well be adaptively useful, but nonetheless constitute a type of ruse conflating subjective projections with objective attributes. This distinction’s importance for moral philosophy has a complex prehistory. Drawing on both primatology and early childhood research, Michael Tomasello argues that through joining others in shared attention to something (an object or animal), humans become aware of discrepancies of perspective between self and other, which spurs them to postulate an “objective” view (neither mine nor another’s but showing what “really” is) (Tomasello 2019, pp. 45–90). Joint attention and shared intentionality make possible imagining an “objective” view, first attributed to society as a collective and to gods, but then sought after by philosophers and later scientists in efforts to determine what is “in” external reality, as opposed to what is “projected” on it by human minds.

If a sense of being ethically enjoined, as opposed to being morally inclined by temperament or interest, may be accounted for as simply an adaptively useful “projection”, then natural histories of morality would appear to imperil what moral philosophy calls ethical naturalism—the view that “there are moral properties and facts” that exist objectively, apart from human projections and intentions (Nuccetelli and Seay 2012, p. 1). Richard Joyce suggests that skepticism toward any “objective” basis for morality need not impede acting as though ethical significance adhered to natural properties and facts, because doing so remains adaptive (Joyce 2006, pp. 229–30; Joyce 2012). Kitcher argues further that our dispositional and cognitive propensities have been bioculturally primed to attribute “normative guidance” to transcendent authority: “Commands promulgated by elders can be identified with the wishes of the gods or spirits (or with the tendencies of the impersonal forces affecting human success). . . . Crude fear of punishment is transmuted into more positive emotions—awe, reverence—and the commands are welcomed as a mark of the favor of an extraordinary being” (Kitcher 2011, p. 113). While the natural selective value of moral judgments lies in their “encouraging successful social behavior”, this end is facilitated by having moral judgments “seem like they *are* depicting a realm of objective



moral facts”, thus imbuing “practical considerations with inescapable and authoritative force” (Joyce 2006, p. 131, his emphasis).

To the extent that “inescapable and authoritative force”; that is, autonomous signifying agency, is felt within moral judgments, they in practice function, Joyce argues, as what Daniel Dennett calls “conversation-stoppers” (Joyce 2006, pp. 111–12; Dennett 1995): they constitute points beyond which one cannot argue, put limits on what can be objected to, what needs to be explained or legitimated, and thus endeavor to restrict what moral skepticism may unravel or dissolve (Joyce 2006, p. 131, his emphasis). Levinas’ insistence that ethics is first philosophy, that signification and rationality presuppose rather than ground or explain ethical sense, might well appear to be such a “conversation-stopper” (Levinas 1989a, pp. 76–87). Claiming that ethical sensibility registers the enjoining significance of what is “otherwise than being”, what exceeds ontology and disrupts totality (Levinas 1981, pp. 61–97), Levinas rejects ethical naturalism. At the same time, he likewise rejects what evolutionary natural histories put forth as the only alternative—the equation of “the good” with enhanced biosocial flourishing (Levinas 1981, pp. 3–20).

Levinas addresses “skepticism” at the end of *Otherwise Than Being*, with Derrida in mind, but his argument speaks equally to the moral skepticism of Joyce, Kitcher, and Krebs. The ethical, he maintains, is not “in” the world of being. It is neither an “essence” nor an ontological “natural property.” Skepticism rightly deconstructs metaphysics (and distinguishes adaptive from objective value). Still, for Levinas, the ethical as a “preoriginal” (p. 167) relation, one in which “[n]on-indifference, humanity, the-one-for-the-other is the very signifyingness of signification, . . . and thus reason” (p. 166). What is felt (non-indifference) is felt as enjoining. This simultaneity of affect and imperative transforms somatic empathy from a sensation into a call and distinguishes the impress of unconditional obligation from assessments of some choices as better than others in moral pursuit of wellbeing. As such, the ethical demarcates, for Levinas, the point beyond which skepticism cannot press, because to the extent that skepticism reasons, it speaks to the other as an interlocutor, recognizes the ethical relation as the basis for speech and for concern for truth, for what may “objectively” be affirmed. Sensibility to ethical significance makes acknowledging the other, as in welcoming the stranger standing at the door, an inescapable and authoritative enjoining presupposed by all winged speech, all reasoning—including that of skepticism. This acknowledging and welcoming is inscribed into a dimension of language different from that used to articulate skeptical claims about being (or objective fact), a dimension Levinas call “the saying”, in which welcoming an “other”, acknowledging an interlocutor, precedes and traverses reasoned speech (p. 171). Whereas Tomasello suggests that the very idea of objectivity is an effect of humanity’s deep sociality, its need for and refinement of joint attention, Levinas argues that ethical interlocution enjoins a disinterested interest that breaks with or transcends endeavoring to maximize one’s own flourishing.

This is not to say that “encouraging successful social behavior” is unimportant either objectively or morally, but its importance lies in bringing to bear upon the world of biosocial success the relation to others and *their* worlds presupposed by reason, shared by Athena and Telemachus, enjoined by Homer’s discourse and given witness to in his audience’s ability to follow and be moved by its sense. Without this third, ethical dimension, a work lacks the signifying agency distinctive to literature. It lacks singularity, becoming simply one example of among others of topical rhetoric dressed up in the fashions of imaginative discourse. It remains immured in its original contexts and horizons, unable to interact with those beyond its time and place, and so may be a source of historical, sociological information, but have little or none of the autonomous signifying agency that allows literature, in the qualitative sense of the term, to be recognized and appreciated. Of course, there is a continuum of artistry and achievement, diverse forms can become vehicles for more or less literary signification, and receptivity to its effects may be improved with skill and experience. Still, the difference between a work that acts on a reader and one that a reader may simply make use of is readily apparent and needs to be accounted for.

Levinas himself appeals to the example of a “work” (*oeuvre*) to explain how the orienting sense of the ethical, in being concerned for and working toward a future beyond its own time, disentangles the good from proximate personal- or group-enhanced flourishing (Levinas 1996b, pp. 48–51). By urging Telemachus to trust in the prophecy put in a stranger’s heart by the immortals and vouched for through the effects of speech attesting to ethical solicitude and solidarity, Athena puts into Telemachus’ heart strength and courage (I: 320–21). She moves, inspires him “to believe in a nonrevealed future and . . . to work in the present for the most remote things of which the present is an irrecusable denial” (Levinas 1996b, p. 51). From that trust or faith derives “very great nobility in the energy liberated from the hold of the present” (p. 51). For Homer, that energy makes Telemachus a “godlike man” (1: 324). To the extent the audience enters imaginatively into Telemachus’ experience, what Athena as interlocutor and agent does in relation to him, the work does in relation to its listeners or readers.

To be sure, Athena began cultural life as an invented “unseen enforcer” of social norms (Kitcher 2011, p. 113) and Homer’s narrative would affirm that underlying and shaping human events is an order of things responsive to pity and concerned with justice—*themis*, at once a metaphysical principle, a divinity, and a quality (righteousness). Still, Homer’s literary practices go to some lengths to indicate that susceptibility to ethical significance precedes communion with the divine, and that experience of ethical solicitude mediated by discourse gives rise to the trust in others and in the world’s amenability to reparation that puts strength and courage in the “heart” (*thumos*), that arouses sufficient “spirit” (also *thumos*) to challenge egoistic rapacity’s assertion that might is right. In Homer, there is already in literary discourse the “philosophical exegesis” (Levinas 1989c, p. 142; Wood 2009) that separates myth (and by extension poetic representation) from idolatry (that is, naïve assent to claims about what is “in” natural properties or true about being). Myth, “at the same time untruth and the source of philosophical truth”, is “interpret[ed]” (pp. 142–43) by the work’s instigation of entwinements of ethical sense and literary significance. In the case of Homer, his poetry’s participation in reassembling the social begins with it both provoking traditions of moralizing allegory and resisting their reductive, conventionalizing effects (Brisson 2004; Struck 2004; Dawson 1992; Lamberton 1986).

An anti-idolatrous thrust inheres in Homer’s insistence that insensibility to the ethical sociable regulation of any world inhabitable by humans seals the suitors’ doom. Their acting as though pity and justice did not matter, as if force, guile, and interest were the only nonhuman actors who counted, proves both unsustainable and undesirably dehumanizing (a practical judgment that much contemporary evolutionary theory supports). Still, Homer’s literary art interprets the problem only secondarily as misperceiving what forces govern advantage. The primary fault is making advantage the sole measure of significance. By contrast, being “godlike” in acting out of a sense of being enjoined opens one to becoming “godlike” through others’ words and deeds eliciting trust, giving one “heart.” Though Athena is rarely associated with the maternal, and though her guises are masculine (first the stranger, then Mentor), her engagement with Telemachus, like that of a mother with a child, gives rise to a shared imagined world marked by sheltering ethical sociality.

That world which Homer’s audience is invited to share is one that may be inhabited and acted on, for it encourages confidence that wherever one moves within it the qualities and attributes interfusing it will remain at hand, either companionably at one’s side or abidingly in one’s heart. The question is not whether humans will habit imagined worlds, but what kinds—and that is where literary works as singular nonhuman interlocutors intervene. They so interpret myth as to suspend the displacement of one “untruth” (ontological schema) by another in favor of “philosophical truth” that exceeds ontological and thus idolatrous measures of value. If susceptibility to pity and concern for justice order and sustain such worlds, ethical sense’s signifying autonomy also opens them to iconoclastic critique and tireless reform. What gives authority to condemnation of the suitors may also put in question Homeric attitudes about patriarchal privilege, slavery, the scope of warranted violence, and “honorable” ways of attaining wealth, but the same iconoclastic energies allow the work to sharpen our awareness of the suitor-like attributes of neoliberal corporatism and fascistic politics in our time, and perhaps give us some faith, like Telemachus’, that the order composed of such forces need not be all that can be.

#### 4. Anarchic Ethical Sense and Autonomous Literary Signification in Genesis

The reading here highlights aspects of *The Odyssey* neglected in Levinas' own citing of the poem as epitomizing Greek assimilative, self-enriching, instrumental rationality as opposed to non-egocentric, non-intentional responsiveness to the other enjoined by Hebrew scripture (Levinas 1969, pp. 102, 176–77). In making such contrasts, Levinas neglects much in biblical narrative that presents advantage, in terms of conquest, plunder, enslavement, and extermination of ethnic cultural rivals, as the reward for a piety largely, though not entirely, comprised of doctrinal and ritual purity (Gen. 17: 3–8; Ex. 3: 7–8; Num. 33: 50–34: 12; Deut. 1: 6–8, 7: 1–6; Josh. 6: 15–21, 8: 18–29, etc.). Even so, the biblical texts act as literature to the extent they are punctuated by moments in which significance and value are configured quite differently from what is normative or valorized within terms of first millennial BCE “adaptive” endeavors to flourish (even if only in relation to an imagined past). In these moments of transcending contexts and breaching horizons, of iconoclastic rebuke, literary quality and autonomous signifying authority are notably combined.

One such instance illustrating literary signification's irruptive reformatory potency occurs in Genesis 38, a chapter which interrupts the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37–50) to describe how Judah told Tamar, the widow of his firstborn son, that he would marry her to his younger son once he came of age. Instead, he seems to forget her. When Tamar sees that the younger son is full grown, while she remains a widow, she conceives a ruse. Pretending to be a harlot, she induces Judah to give her a signet ring, bracelet, and staff in exchange for her favors. She resumes her widow identity but becomes pregnant and is brought before Judah for judgment. He condemns her to be burnt to death, but when she brings forth the signet, bracelet, and staff, he looks at them and then declares, “She is more righteous than I (מִמֶּנִּי מִצְדִּיקָה *memmennî sadeqâh*), because (כִּי *kî*) I did not give her to my son Shelah” (38:26).

The ethical sense that penetrates Judah upends, if only temporarily, hierarchies of gender, wealth, class, and political power (indicated by the signet ring, bracelet, and staff). What makes the passage an interlocutor whose agency exceeds the contexts of its composition are not problematic codes for disposing of widows, or Judah's notions of customary right, but rather the provocation of his grace in seeing in a forgotten underling's bed-trick a righteousness superior to his own. One can dismiss as myth's “untruth” all ontological claims supposed by custom, positive law, Judah's self-understanding, and the text itself without slipping away from entanglement in the ethical sense that breaks in on Judah. In such moments, literary discourse's signifying agency becomes not just autonomous, but also “anarchic” in Levinas' sense of the word.

Levinas argues that subjectivity experienced as a modality of being, in which “possessing oneself, the moment of *having in being*”, leads one to identify consciousness with “self-possession, sovereignty” (Levinas 1981, p. 99). But self-identifications functioning as *archai* (beginnings, principles) are undone when “[m]y responsibility for the other”, as “the very signifyingness of signification”, puts me “anarchically [in] a relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality” (p. 100). This “anarchy” does not denote “another order”, but rather “brings to a halt the ontological play which ... is consciousness” (p. 101), for ethical responsibility attests to obligation anterior to all *archai*. Instead of being “a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, ... I am ‘in myself’ through the others” (p. 112). Narrative evocation of this traumatic being “turned inside out” (Shankman 2017) triggers simulations attesting to the reader's already knowing what being pierced by ethical sense “feels like.” The text itself is notably spare, indicating only that Judah saw and then spoke. It provides gaps that the reader fills in (Iser 1978). This is done with a facility, an automaticity, which places the reader alongside Judah within a world whose ethical sociable textures push inexorably toward “anarchic” iconoclasm.

#### 5. The Scope of Literary Signifying Agency

The exorable push of this third, ethical dimension of literary signification yields of itself, autonomously, implications that once felt cannot be unfelt. They enjoin, partake of non-authoritarian

authority, move us in ways that inform interactive dialogues among contexts and horizons, but are irreducible to them. Of course, as empirical studies of readers indicate, responses to configurations of textual features and patterns vary (Gerrig and Mumper 2017; Gerrig 2011). No work, Attridge reminds us, can preclude its instrumental appropriation, and certainly there has been plenty of that in the reception histories of both Homer and the Bible. Still, in constituting a singularity irreducible to just an example of something else, and in presenting itself as an interlocutor rather than an object or tool, literary works act and make their actions available for responsive engagement. Certainly, the form and character of that engagement is going to vary as contexts and horizons shift, and as literary scholarship and criticism help illuminate with increasing skill (one may hope) diverse strands of philosophical exegesis implicit in the work's own discourse and differing tenors of iconoclasm enfolded into its artistry.

As the passages discussed above suggest, entwinements of literary signification and ethical sense give rise to an autonomous signifying agency through which the work participates within the social as a peculiar hybrid of nonhuman actor and interlocutor. While singular conjunctions of discursive features and sociocultural contexts shape literary and generic histories, and while works engage somatic empathy and intervene in considerations of moral sociality's bearing on personal and communal flourishing, evocations of the impress of the ethical as enjoined underlie the imagined worlds that literature offers and sustains. Diverse literary practices call forth modes of disinterested interest once attributed to gods, but now perhaps more imperative than ever if material and ethical sociable worlds hospitable to human flourishing are to endure.

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