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0521651069 - Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America

Adam Zachary Newton

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## Facing Black and Jew

Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America

In *Facing Black and Jew*, Adam Zachary Newton couples works of prose fiction by African American and Jewish American authors from Henry Roth and Ralph Ellison to Philip Roth and David Bradley. Reading the work of such writers alongside and through one another, Newton's book offers an original way of juxtaposing two major traditions in modern American literature, and rethinking the sometimes vexed relationship between two constituencies ordinarily confined to sociopolitical or media commentary alone. Newton combines Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy and Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory in shaping an innovative kind of ethical-political criticism. Through artful, dialogical readings of Saul Bellow and Chester Himes, David Mamet and Anna Deavere Smith, and others, Newton seeks to represent American Blacks and Jews outside the distorting mirror of "Black-Jewish Relations," and restrictive literary histories alike. A final chapter addresses the Black/Jewish dimension of the O. J. Simpson trial.

ADAM ZACHARY NEWTON is Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas, Austin. He is the author of *Narrative Ethics* (1995) and numerous articles in scholarly journals.

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For Buster

. . . and other absent presences:

*כך לזכר פניך כל מקום בגבה פניך...*

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## Preface

... why was there so wide a gulf between person and person; differences so great that to breach them one would have to cross the world itself ... the Negro, who was quite a way down the street, why was he a Negro and I a Jew? Why not the other way around? Or both of us Negroes or both Jews? There was something between us that neither of us might grasp, some understanding of which we had only the dimmest impression; who knew what this was, or what the design was into which we had been cast? The connections between things were too fine to be discovered.

... think for a moment, what was it like to be a Negro? I could only imagine myself to be obsessed if I were one; I should go about thinking, "I am black, I am black." Everything would remind me of it: the cover of the loose-leaf notebook I carried to school, and if it snowed on the way, snow, and therefore rain too; a chance word heard in the streetcar – "I fell off the step ladder and my side is black and blue"; any color named, or the word, "color" spoken, the sight of the pavement, of a coconut or an eggplant in the grocer's window, a black dog, or a white dog, the strong sun in summer – everything would remind me of it. I should constantly be thinking, "I am a Negro, I am black." And yet, here we were, walking about in the street and no one gave a thought to it, no one inquired, no one imagined what the differences were between men.

Isaac Rosenfeld, *Passage From Home*

Old Esau [my grandfather's father] had been a kind of down-home "Misnagid," but Grandfather signed on with the Congregational Church. Darryl Pinkney, *High Cotton*

Can things take on a face? Is not art an activity that lends faces to things?

The presence of the Other dispels the anarchic sorcery of the facts. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

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This is a book about *facing*, though not in the obvious sense of physiognomy. Here facing refers to the ethical possibilities of criticism: facings between literary texts as well as the way in which they are faced – read and given feature – by readers. The plain sense of the title is: juxtaposed literary fiction by African American and Jewish American writers. As this book's most prominent term, and in concert with a set of others, facing provides me with a critical vocabulary. In a deeper sense, it gives the book a voice, its own *idiolect* – something Ralph Ellison described, appositely enough, in terms of human countenance, a self-created and featured face.

The connection between face and text for me here is thus far more *intrinsic* than a connection – popularly understood – between Blacks and Jews. Perhaps it is exactly because Black–Jewish relations, as a constituted discourse, tends to seal off rather than free up their meanings, that this book has needed to discover terms of its own. In turn, such terms seem to me to make better *discursive*<sup>1</sup> sense of that phenomenon, since they represent critical interventions on the plane of literary discourse. But in order to explain why that is so, I need to clarify where they come from.

The term facing has a double provenance. Primarily, it stems from the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose chosen figure of “the face” captures the fact of otherness itself, and the ethical drama between persons that it instigates. Just as we ordinarily identify a person by face, the site and emblem of selfhood, so in Levinas face signifies obligatedness itself. It isn't read so much as recognized and heard: perhaps it is best described as an annunciation. It can mean both ethical exorbitancy – “do no harm to me” – and ethical ardor – “do not turn your face from mine.” Above all, it means that the self is indemnified to the other, even before freely choosing to be so. Faces that summon, faces in asymmetrical relation with one's own, faces “denuded” or exposed “in their nakedness”: this is the hard figural core of Levinas's ethical philosophy.

That also means the subordination of the political to the ethical – or as Levinas might put it, the primacy of alterity over difference, “the face” over its features, a summons behind inflection or timbre. Obviously, that has certain implications for a book about books by American Blacks and Jews, and perhaps even greater ones for Black–Jewish relations. But the face-to-face in Levinas does not describe a symmetry. As Alain Finkielkraut has put it, “[T]he assigning of difference, the process of confusing one's neighbor with his attributes” (italics in original) bows to the fact that “our difficulties before the Other, in



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effect, go deeper than our notions of him."<sup>2</sup> Still, that is a proscription for life not literary criticism, since texts in part depend on such difficulty; they are mediated many times over. The face, contrariwise, *demands* immediacy.

An ethics of the face, then, does not so readily translate into an ethical-politics of criticism, into facing. Consequently, my book, while it may acknowledge the influence of Levinas, attempts no *programmatically* adaptation of his characteristic trope to literary categories.<sup>3</sup> In a Levinasian spirit it eschews a facile symmetry. In any event, texts cannot be made to stand for persons, though they can be made to preserve the strangeness of each other's strangeness. Such call-and-response lies at the core of this book, but it does not model an encounter to be conducted out in the world, except for the fact that, like Levinas's construct, facing takes place in language.

A parallel genealogy for facing is found in the work of Walter Benjamin, specifically his innovative notion of allegory from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and emblemized in the "Angelus Novus" section from "Theses on the Philosophy of History."<sup>4</sup> An arc between the two texts – one didactic, the other lapidary – suggests a fruitful synergy between the trope of face and the workings of allegory. In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin defined allegory dialectically, as a hinge or interface that, while premised upon fragmentation and ruin, can itself "spring over" redemptively. Even if the referent itself signals a dead-end, the play of allegory permits an aesthetic way-out. "[A]llegories fill out and deny the void in which they are presented," Benjamin writes, "just as ultimately the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection."<sup>5</sup>

Allegory is representational salvage, a dialectical mediation between history and material culture. It is also, as Benjamin said, a form of expression – like writing or speech. Tropes and figures offer an opportunity to free up meaning dialectically, to display it as produced and therefore movable. Allegory's movement, from melancholy reality to compensatory figuration, is rehearsed by Benjamin's criticism itself, from the Baroque emblems of *facies hippocratica* in the *Trauerspiel* book, on the one hand, to the image of ceaseless facing in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," on the other. In the latter, Benjamin allegorizes Paul Klee's painting of "Angelus Novus" as the Angel of History, a fecund image critics have not tired of citing. But at the core of Benjamin's text (especially against the background of the *Trauerspiel* book), is the visage of a figure who perpetually faces.

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Allegory in Benjamin charts the gap between sign and meaning. As Benjamin's contemporary, Theodor Adorno put it, the aesthetic understood in this sense disenchants an already enchanted world.<sup>6</sup> It breaks the spell that locks figures into ruin or disaster. "As sensuous images and things decay," writes Theresa Kelley of Benjamin, "the effect is akin to phosphorescence – a sensuous because light-full (or light emptying) process whereby things become allegorical signs."<sup>7</sup> There are two connections to make here. One is back to Levinas for whom "the face" dispels the spell cast by persons themselves, and rectifies "a borrowed light" (in his words<sup>8</sup>) with revelation. The other is to Black–Jewish relations itself, trope-haunted, unbound, bewitched by images – a world where, in the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz's words, persons become "the slaves of each other's faces."<sup>9</sup> In such a *Trauerspiel* world and its semiotic dead-end, the only way-out is to face the Other (ethics), and thereby undo the spell of figures (allegory). And it is in exactly that dual sense – both figurational and ethical – that Black and Jew in this book are faced.

Facing thus also means the relationship between ethics and allegory. Allegory, in Benjamin's sense, and ethics, in Levinas's, have this in common: they both intervene in an inadvertently enchanted world. One could say, therefore, that Black–Jewish relations describes a world where allegory and face both *miscue*, where the one stands in lack of what medieval writers called the clarifying *integumentum* – the allegoresis – between persons, while the other cannot positively *show forth*.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, facing appeals to the aesthetic and the textual as the place where meaning is freed up, but also and at the same time to ethics as the space where distance and difference are at once mediated and preserved.<sup>11</sup>

To call literary criticism allegorical in this sense means that facing texts creates a dialectical interface between them – the crack that constitutes rather than divides.<sup>12</sup> To understand criticism as ethical means that facing texts contrive a space of approach or proximity for them to draw near without coinciding. This tangency between ethics and allegory – but also between Benjamin and Levinas – can be clarified by a small moment in an early essay by Levinas entitled "Reality and its Shadow" (1948). There, Levinas speaks briefly but suggestively about allegory, and by implication, its relevance for ethics and criticism, when he delineates the meaning of an image as uniquely predicated on resemblance – a doubling between original and copy, *already* allegorized from within.

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But then to understand an image as such is to see the anomaly it locates in being *itself*.

Being is not only itself, it escapes itself. . . . Reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image. . . . Every image is already a caricature. Thus a person bears on his own face, alongside of its being with which he coincides its own caricature, its own picturesqueness. . . . There is then a duality in this person, a duality in its being. It is what it is and it is a stranger to itself.<sup>13</sup>

This other name Levinas gives to the problem of self-resemblance is *allegory*, “an ambiguous commerce with reality in which reality does not refer to itself but to its reflection. An allegory thus represents what in the object itself doubles it up.” Art, as he puts it later, lets go of the prey for the shadow. But reality, one realizes, is shadowed too.

While not dialectical in any obvious sense (Levinas at one point says that art stops both dialectics and time), Levinas’s allegory implies a twoness not unlike Benjamin’s: the tension between visage and caricature. And whatever else the essay says, the relevance here is exactly that doubling or parallax of entity and shadow, self and image: between Black and Jew, and “Black” and “Jew.” “The whole of reality bears on its face its own allegory, outside of its revelation and its truth,” Levinas writes. Art lends its own terms to the insight, just as “in utilizing images, art not only reflects, but brings about this allegory.”<sup>14</sup> The result, however, is that allegory leaves its traces in the world.

Seeing the discourse of Black–Jewish relations as afflicted by its own representational flaw or blind spot is to see it allegorically, figurally, as haunted by shadow and caricature. Black and Jew shadow each other, in the double sense of tracking and obscuring. The title of a vexed essay by Cynthia Ozick, “Literary Blacks and Jews,” *already* describes a certain fate American Blacks and Jews have unwittingly assumed: *literaturization* (albeit not in any critical sense). Criticism, on the other hand, poses the alternative of self-conscious and figural facing, unsettling the accidental allegorizations that take the place of facing the Other. (Another possible title for this book had been *Facing Black and Jew: Allegories of Reading*.)

While, as I said, it cannot substitute text for person, it “lends its terms” to the ethical and political exigencies of encounter. It shifts the ground, if you will, from Black–Jewish relations by exploiting “relations” in its most underused sense – tellings, narrative, the call-and-response of novelistic prose. From that perspective as a poetics of

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recognition, even the epigraphs to this book by Rosenfeld and Pinkney accomplish, in tandem, a minor facing – an asymmetric reconnoiter with otherness, and with each other.<sup>15</sup>

A few methodological signposts, then. The two-part Introduction treats the connection between allegory and Black/Jewish relatedness at greater length. The readings in successive chapters do not pretend to be comprehensive. Some merely pinpoint moments within a particular text (chapters 1, 3 and 5); others follow an entire novel's or story's trajectory, but within a purposefully circumscribed ambit (chapters 2 and 4). All make infrequent reference to socio-historical contexts, and secondary literature generally.<sup>16</sup>

I leave it to the readings themselves to clarify that the method here is not comparativist for comparison's sake alone (for indeed, one can "compare" any number of likely elements that form a pair from among a whole array of literatures). This applies even to the epilogue – the post-face to this pre-face – whose material is neither literary nor strictly textual. Finally, as readers can perhaps surmise already, *Facing Black and Jew* situates itself on the hither side of a cultural studies-based approach (with which it may suggest possible affinities, however).<sup>17</sup>

Levinas says that the notion of the shadow enables us to "situate the economy of resemblance within the general economy of being."<sup>18</sup> And it is that sense of the pathos of self-resemblance, it seems to me, that cultural studies tends to sidestep. Even when it eyes both prey and shadow, socio-historical facts and their ideologization, what it typically does not do is to answer such ambiguous commerce with *allegoresis*, a self-conscious conjuring of its own. To that extent it recapitulates the discourse of Black–Jewish relations, rather than seeking to disenchant through imaginative re-enchantment. If, as an accepted commonplace, culture is fundamentally "discursive," in this book it is the purposeful facing at one another of literary texts and traditions that produces the *counterdiscursive* movement. That would be the face *in front of* feature, or, to blend Levinas with Ralph Ellison once again, a cleaving of shadow and act.

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## Acknowledgments

In the oral Torah, Jews are told of the importance of greeting those who approach them; the exteriority of a face demands its due regard. The most compelling instance of such a principle I know comes from a Hasidic tale penned in Auschwitz. A rabbi encounters, or rather, re-encounters, a Polish *Volksdeutsche* from Danzig, now the SS officer whose job is to select out those for immediate extermination. To an astonished rabbi, the officer repeats the very formula the two of them customarily performed when they both lived in a very different Europe: “Good morning, Herr Rabbiner.” “Good morning, Herr Müller.” The SS officer points his baton right, sending the rabbi the way of reprieve.<sup>1</sup> Levinas extends this notion one step further – or back, as it were – by speaking of one’s answerability to/for the other person as an always obligatory “After you!” *L’havdil* – in Hebrew, “to mark the distinction” – I am nevertheless reminded of the gravity and humanity inhering in the simple exchange of greeting even amidst the most trying of circumstances, whether face-forward or about-face.

This book has taken a long time to come to light, having weathered trying circumstances of its own. Supervening turns in fortune have attended its unfolding – the private space beneath the public. If I make reference to travail, however, it is simply to lay claim to the wisdom of acknowledgment when the approach of others calls one out of, and to, oneself. It is in such a spirit that I acknowledge all those who in one way or another greeted the writing of this book together with its writer, whom I therefore thank and address in return. I owe a deep material debt to Martin Peretz and Walter Scheuer without whose personal generosity I could have devoted neither the time nor the resources to complete this book, and to Robert King in the same

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Back at what still remains improbably home, I thank all those colleagues and friends of mine at the University of Texas for intellectual and salutation exchanges of various kinds, in particular, Susan Sage Heinzelman, Kurt Heinzelman, Itzik Gottesman, Evan Carton, Brian Bremen, Jack Farrell, José Limón, Craig Ackerman, and the students in my classes. Ilana Blumberg, Timothy Brennan, Vasilis Lambropoulos, James Phelan, Shaindy Rudoff, Jack Salzman, David Suchoff east of Texas; futher east, Ray Ryan and Peter Rea in Cambridge, Avivah Zornberg and Emily Budick in Jerusalem; and Jo Keroes, a beacon in the West, all deserve my deep gratitude for their collective receptivity. Lastly – in echo of a preface by Levinas – I descry again the shadow of that Other too often present to be cited. *¡Oh siempre, nunca dar con el jamás de táno siempre!* (Vallejo).

I thank my parents again, and their parents, and parents all the way back for filiation in its broadest, most encompassing sense – for a religious and cultural tradition that creates the conditions for ceaseless answerability. In my own case that has meant the kind of mind which, in estranging itself toward other particularities, more responsibly affirms the one it calls home; for such air as one's ethnic soul needs to live, I have discovered that the richest oxygen abides somewhere between native grounds and diaspora.

Something very like that tension I have to believe I share also with my readers, according to that "singular and, moreover, providential law of mental optics," as Proust put it, "that our wisdom begins where that of the author ends, and we would like to have him give us answers, when all he can do is give us desires."<sup>2</sup> Positioned at the threshold of the book where preface gives way to face, I extend a final address to readers who turn now to face this text.