

Against an Ethics of Absolute Otherness, for Cross-Cultural Critique: A Response to Tammy Amiel-Houser*

LARS ECKSTEIN

In "The Ethics of Otherness in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," Tammy Amiel-Houser proposes a Levinasian reading of McEwan's 2005 novel which argues that most approaches to *Saturday* have so far misread its core ethical thrust. While reviewers and critics (including myself) have either enthusiastically or very critically observed McEwan's self-professed liberal humanist leanings in a post-9/11 world which celebrates literature's "potential to enrich the readers' knowledge of themselves and others" (128), Amiel-Houser insists that this is taking us down the wrong track. Mapping Levinas's thought in *Totality and Infinity* onto the novel, she instead claims that at the novel's ethical core is the "infinite responsibility toward the ever-strange and incomprehensible Other" (128).

For Amiel-Houser, the Levinasian drama is mainly played out in the novel's confrontation between the focalizing character, bourgeois neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, and the socially underprivileged criminal Baxter. In this drama, she attributes to Baxter the role of a "singular, enigmatic Other" (129), "most strange, incomprehensible, illogical, and absolutely different to me, in whose place I can never imagine myself, whose perspective I cannot share and whose motives I cannot understand" (150). Perowne, in turn, is ultimately shaken in his "indifferent subjectivity" (129) by the encounter with Baxter-as-Other, towards whom he eventually acknowledges his fundamental

*Reference: Tammy Amiel-Houser, "The Ethics of Otherness in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," *Connotations* 21.1 (2011/12): 128-57.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debamiel-houser0211.htm>>.

responsibility. The dramatic scene in which Perowne's crucial reform takes place, of course, is the "break-in" scene, where Baxter forces Perowne's pregnant daughter Daisy first to undress, and then to read from her newly published volume of poetry. On cue from her poet-grandfather John Grammaticus, Daisy rather recites, from memory, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and thus curiously works Baxter into a state of childlike elation. The core twist of Amiel-Houser's argument, here, is that it is not Baxter's transformation which marks the ethical core of the text, but Perowne's. This is her central thesis: "My contention is that the break-in, combined with Daisy's reading and Baxter's unexpected exhilaration, work together to shake up Perowne's subjectivity, opening him to experience the wonders of the Other's enigmatic singularity and so, finally, to acknowledge his involuntary debt to Baxter" (139).

In order to convincingly argue against liberal humanist readings of this scene, Amiel-Houser goes at some length to dissociate the rendition of Arnold's poem from Arnold himself (and the masculine Victorian baggage of his liberal humanist convictions). She holds that the poem needs to be evaluated primarily through the agitated subjective lens of Perowne, who, like Baxter (and, claims Amiel-Houser, at least initially the reader), is incapable of placing the poem correctly, but is exposed to it through Daisy's "speech (and body) act" (144). Drawing on sections of Levinas's later work on language ("saying") and femininity ("maternity"), she locates Perowne's "ethical transformation" in his witnessing "Daisy's literary feminine address to Baxter" which ultimately also forces Perowne to acknowledge "Baxter's human face," as it "asserts his singularity as a human being who deserves to live and to enjoy (in Arnold's terms) the world of joy, love and light" (148).

Without being able to do justice to the nuances of Amiel-Houser's argument, let me in the following draw out some of my misgivings about the central scope of her essay which I find, I am afraid, highly problematic. I will limit myself to three points, the first of which is brief and mundane. It concerns a very basic yet curious omission in

Amiel-Houser's otherwise very detailed and perceptive reading of the novelistic plot. While much is made of Perowne's reformed state after the "ethical magic of Daisy's feminine spectacle, which succeeds in reminding Perowne of Baxter's vulnerability and 'how much he [Baxter] wanted to live'" (150), Amiel-Houser completely fails to mention that the next thing Perowne does is lure Baxter into his upstairs office on false pretence, only to knock him down the stairs with the help of his son Theo. Baxter ends up with a fractured skull and potentially serious brain injury, and it is only after he almost killed him that Perowne offers to personally operate on him, assuming an almost uncanny position of absolute control over his life. I find it hard, frankly, to read into this the kind of "responsibility" and "care" that Amiel-Houser has in mind. Perowne's eventual "climactic realization: 'He's responsible, after all'" (149), for me, is neither climactic, nor does it resonate with Levinas—Perowne is simply quite literally responsible for Baxter's condition. Overall, I doubt the proposition that the encounter with Baxter has changed very much in Perowne's life, just as the novel fulfils a circular movement, emphatically closing with the act of lovemaking in the marriage bed that it began with.

I do not wish to carry this argument about incongruities between theoretical design and narrative evidence too far, however, as I have more fundamental reservations against the usefulness of Levinas's ethics of Otherness in the post-9/11 rhetoric of *Saturday* in particular, and as a tool of (trans)cultural critique more generally. Before exploring this, however, let me address a second reservation, which concerns the rather light-hearted dismissal of the ideological complications which come with the intertextual references to Matthew Arnold. As I have argued elsewhere, McEwan's recourse to Matthew Arnold's poem in the showdown scene is neither accidental nor innocent; instead, "Dover Beach" in many ways encapsulates the ideological movement of the novel at large (cf. Eckstein, "Saturday on Dover Beach"). I do not have the space to fully unpack this, and will limit myself to two observations.

First, *Saturday* is replete with references to *Culture and Anarchy*, and it is difficult not to metonymically identify the Perowne family with Arnold's Culture with a capital "C," ultimately uniting, in true Arnoldian spirit, the forces of science (Henry) and poetry (Daisy, Grammaticus, Theo) against the forces of anarchic disruption from below (Baxter). Arnold wrote his meditations on *Culture and Anarchy* in immediate response to the Hyde Park Riots of 1866, when more than 10,000 Londoners marched to Hyde Park to protest in favour of the Reform Bill (which Arnold was deeply sceptical about as he believed that the extension of democracy in itself is an invitation to "do as one likes" in society, and will lead to anarchy rather than social health; cf. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* 81-101). It is not accidental that McEwan chose to set his novel around the events of February 15, 2003, when an estimated one million protesters marched to Hyde Park again, this time to protest against the imminent war in Iraq. While the 2003 protestors were granted admission to Hyde Park (against the objection of the Secretary of State in charge, who worried about the flowerbeds), the 1866 protestors found the gates of Hyde Park locked. While the majority peacefully moved on to Trafalgar Square, a minority remained behind, tore down the railings and trampled the flowerbeds. In the novel, the first thing Perowne remembers when looking out of his bedroom window in the morning is operating on the brain of a Hyde Park gardener—there is indeed no reason to doubt that McEwan is very conscious of a persistent Arnoldian echo in *Saturday*.

My second observation on Arnold is that the pervasive intertextual dimension then also bears, obviously, on the "break-in" scene and the rendition of "Dover Beach." While I greatly enjoyed Amiel-Houser's perceptive phenomenological reading of the (repeated) recital of the poem, I do not agree that the poem's ideological complexities are simply lost in its embodied performance. I would insist that the impact of Arnold matters beyond Perowne's mediating role as (unreliable) focaliser whose philistinism (a term stressed by Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*) is ironically exposed. Another vital thing that

Amiel-Houser's argument omits is the fact McEwan made sure that the complete poem is reprinted at the end of the novel. McEwan thus quite literally sets Arnold's Victorian musings about a world without "certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" next to his own reflections about the contingencies of a post-9/11 universe. I am less passionate about the impact of this constellation on the question that interests Amiel-Houser most, that is whether we need to read the ethical force of the central poetic encounter in terms of liberal humanist empathy, or invest in a Levinasian alternative focusing on the "ethics of Otherness." What unsettles me, rather, are the consequences of *either* option for a larger vision of cross-cultural critique. This concern becomes urgent especially when we accept the novel's allegorical dimension, as Amiel-Houser together with most reviewers and critics evidently does: "The metonymy constructed between *Saturday's* events and world affairs, draws attention to the political importance of the literary scene, and we are encouraged to relate the intersubjective experiences of Perowne, Daisy and Baxter to the broader political challenges of the contemporary Western society" (150)—read: the challenges of "the West in the face of Islamic extremism" (154n29), as she specifies in a reference to Dominic Head's survey of critical responses. Let me begin with the Arnoldian option, and then close with some remarks about the proposed Levinasian alternative.

What is my problem with the resonances of "Dover Beach" in McEwan's post-9/11 novel? I take my lead from Paul Gilroy, who uses Arnold's poem extensively to develop his notion of a distinctly Victorian "imperial melancholy" (Gilroy 98). Gilroy, for one, insists that Arnold's famous meditation on a world of eroding political, historical and religious certainties cannot be understood outside the context of Britain's imperial exploits. In *After Empire*, he summarises the thrust of the poem thus:

[P]roximity to the French had helped him [Arnold's speaker] to concentrate his mind with regard to the country's historic responsibilities as well as its relationship to the classical world that had supplied the template for its global imperium. The historic mission to civilize and uplift the world was

England's unavoidable destiny, but he sensed that it would bring neither comfort nor happiness. That imperial mission re-created the national community in a modern form but then drew it immediately into a terrible web of war and suffering, polluting its beautiful dreams, confusing and destabilizing it. [...] His apprehensions were aligned with those of the larger social body, but, as he heard and felt the shingle start to move beneath his feet, he opted to turn away from those public concerns and seek consolation in the private and intimate places where romantic love and fidelity could offset the worst effects of warfare, turbulence, and vanished certitude. (98-99)

If we follow, as I do, Gilroy's insistence that the melancholy of "Dover Beach" is, at least partly, also an imperial melancholy, this raises a few questions about Arnold's liberal humanist convictions and their relation to the imperial mission. It is important to remember in this context that, when Arnold famously defines culture as "the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics and everything of the kind" (*Culture and Anarchy* 36), he does not really mean "world" in a planetary sense. Cultural achievement, for Arnold, is universal and timeless, yet it is also firmly based on the foundation of "sweetness and light," that is, Hebraic moral impulse and Hellenistic intellectual reasoning. Culture, in other words, is a primarily European affair, while its universal value "irrespective of practice, politics and everything of the kind" makes it desirable, nevertheless, not only for the uncultured British masses, but also for the inferior subject races of Empire. Herein lies, then, the supreme irony of "Dover Beach," as I read it—in its failure to realise that the horrors of imperial warfare turning the world into a "darkling plain [...] where ignorant armies clash at night" (ll. 35-37) are in fact inextricably intertwined with, and in part indeed a consequence of, Victorian convictions about the sweetness and light of the colonising mission.

It is in this light that I find McEwan's pervasive intertextual liaison with Arnold utterly disturbing in a novel that has been celebrated as an astute critique of the cultural condition of a Western world no longer at ease after the September 11 attacks. Against the many enthusiastic reviews, I am all with Elaine Hadley, who disbelievingly

wonders: "Are other readers as taken aback as I am by this use of 'Dover Beach' in a post-9/11 novel? Does it seem to others that McEwan, the Homeland Security Chief of the Novel, has offered up duct tape and plastic sheeting as a response to the unknown agents and unpredictable consequences of the new world order?" (Hadley 97). To commend Arnoldian "Culture" as liberal humanist remedy against the anarchic threat of, by metonymical extension, Islamic terrorism surely not only dramatically shuns any critical discussion of the various local histories and global designs which have shaped global modernity as we know it; it also nostalgically recreates a chimera of Victorian morality that is wilfully ignorant of the more unpleasant politics of Victorian class, gender and race. I, like Hadley and, if I understood correctly, Amiel-Houser, find it extremely hard to believe that McEwan can indeed be serious about all this, and even harder to accept that so many zealous exegetes of *Saturday* have swallowed its Arnoldian infatuations whole. But other than Amiel-Houser, I do not believe that by glossing over McEwan's liberal humanist leanings in favour of a Levinasian reinterpretation of *Saturday* any of the problems are solved; rather, they reappear in different form.

Let me get to my third and most fundamental reservation, then, which finally has to do with Levinas's ethics of Otherness and its relation to cross-cultural critique. I am aware of the intricacies of my own speaking position in this context, as someone in postcolonial studies in Germany, writing in response to an Israeli speaking position drawing its theoretical framework from one of the foremost Jewish intellectuals in post-Holocaust Europe. Nevertheless, I am really struggling with the gist of Amiel-Houser's conclusions: "This horrible alien, this terrorist from whom I mostly want to distance myself, in whose place I can never imagine myself, whose perspective I do not share and whose motives I cannot understand, is the Other who makes me responsible for him, demanding my help, asking for my maternal care" (Amiel-Houser 150). While I admire the ethical force and daring of such a proposition, not least in view of the locus of

its enunciation, I cannot help problematising it from my own disciplinary background.

Levinas's relation to postcolonial critique can at best be characterised as a very ambivalent one. I am drawing, here, on John Drabinski's recent work on *Levinas and the Postcolonial* which offers the most thorough exploration to date of how Levinas's notion of Otherness relates to alterity as conceived in postcolonial thought. At the risk of simplification, the attractiveness of Levinas for cross-cultural criticism certainly lies in its fundamental critique of the desire to know, of the "omnivorous" and, in this sense, relentlessly "colonising" attitude of the Western philosophical tradition. The ground-breaking idea that the confrontation with absolute alterity in history is a precondition of (ultimately also subaltern) self-realisation and ethical action has influenced several decolonial thinkers, among them, for instance, Enrique Dussel, who met Levinas in the early 1970s and stressed his great debt to his thought. However, Levinas's relation to Dussel and the Americas may also serve as an exemplary case which reveals the limits of Levinas's thought in and for a globalised world.

Drabinski highlights one particular incident in Dussel's conversations with Levinas, revolving around Dussel's question why Levinas never extended his interrogation of catastrophe from the Jewish Holocaust to the Amerindian genocide and transatlantic slavery, a question which Levinas, as the story goes, succinctly answered with: "That is for you to think about" (qtd. in Drabinski 4). This anecdotal line is revealing of Levinas's conception of culture, globality and alterity, not least because it resonates with a range of statements in which he confesses to a distinctly Eurocentric conception of culture, a conception that is uncannily close to Arnold's obsession with "sweetness and light." Here is one of his most often quoted statements among a series of remarks on "dance" (following an awkward interview question about the impact of sexism and racism on his thought of Otherness): "I often say, though it's a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance"

(Mortley 13). Admittedly, such statements have never found their way into Levinas's major works (the "it's a dangerous thing to say publicly" is intriguing, here), yet they nevertheless call for a critical interrogation of some of the major premises of his work from a postcolonial angle.

Two things particularly matter in this context: First, that Levinas's conception of global modernity deliberately ignores the constitutive and violent colonial entanglement of Europe with the Americas, Africa and Asia (even though his thought helped Dussel, Walter Mignolo and others to powerfully conceptualise this entanglement in their writings on modernity/coloniality). Instead, Levinas clings to the conception of separate, and, with an almost Arnoldian quality, hierarchical cultural fields with locally restricted critical obligations. Second, and more crucially, perhaps, Levinas's statement unwittingly reveals that Otherness is indeed not only a proto-ethical condition prefiguring any engagement with the world at large, but that Otherness—here, the exotic, "dancing" non-European stranger—is also *performatively produced and reproduced*, and not least so in Levinas's very own rhetoric. Drabinski is very clear in this context that, in light of Levinas's Eurocentric cultural convictions, his "conception of the ethical, while absolutely transformative of our notion of obligation, remains tied to a kind of metaphysics, and so also a kind of epistemology of alterity" (Drabinski 3). While Drabinski takes this as a cue to embark upon the project of "decolonizing Levinas" (8), I tend to be slightly pessimistic about the chances of an ultimately fruitful reconciliation. Levinas's programmatic disavowal of any epistemological dimension to his ethics of Otherness quite simply *forecloses* postcolonial critique in so many ways, where Otherness is precisely not an anterior fact, but a secondary *epistemological project* through and through. From a postcolonial perspective, Otherness may be fundamentally rooted in primary ethical disruption, yet it becomes cultural precisely when it is performatively *inscribed* into the world in concrete historical, political and medial practices, when it enters the complex economies of knowledge and power.

Back to Amiel-Houser's explorations of "The Ethics of Otherness in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," then. Apart from the fact that, as expressed in my first reservation, I am not so sure that the novelistic plot conclusively lends itself to the admittedly compelling and nuanced mapping of Levinas's notions of Otherness and obligation, I find the Levinasian reading difficult to accept for more fundamental reasons. My worry is that the stylisation of Baxter as a "singular enigmatic Other" too comfortably alleviates us of having to talk about the ways in which Baxter is *produced*, both textually, intertextually (in relation to Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*) and contextually, in relation to larger politics of class in the (literary) marketplace. This disavowal of critique in literary and cultural criticism becomes a real problem especially when the argument shifts to the allegorical level and assesses *Saturday*'s contribution to the economy of knowledge about post-9/11 anxiety—when Baxter turns into "this terrorist from whom I mostly want to distance myself, in whose place I can never imagine myself, whose perspective I do not share and whose motives I cannot understand" (150). Despite their absolutely incompatible ethical orientations, there is something that McEwan's liberal humanism and the ethics of Otherness which Amiel-Houser detects in *Saturday* have in common: both, in their own way, largely reduce the problem of terrorism to the "beautiful drama of moral agency," as Elaine Hadley succinctly put it. While Hadley is furious about McEwan's Arnoldian "shift of attention away from the persistent 'ebbs and flow of human misery,' or from class oppression in the marketplace of goods" (Hadley 99), I contend that Amiel-Houser's reading is wide open to a similar critique. In unreservedly following Levinas, her ethical argument slides into a "metaphysics" of Otherness even while disavowing it. Through evoking "[t]his horrible alien, this terrorist" (150) in terms of an infinite alterity, firmly set beyond and before the historical and political, Amiel-Houser's reading of *Saturday* forecloses, rather than allows, any genuine cultural critique. What is more, her text actively participates in discursively inscribing this absolute difference into the world, it actively produces the "horrible alien,"

even while it calls for an ensuing ethical obligation towards “our worst enemy” (151).

Surely, the liberalist proposition that the problem of terrorism is essentially a problem of lacking empathy that is “the beginning of morality” (as passionately argued by McEwan in a widely publicised immediate response to 9/11, cf. McEwan, “Only love and then oblivion”) is utterly reductive—yet to inversely conceive of ethnic and religious violence *only* in terms of an infinite ethical obligation toward the absolute Other is equally problematic. Ethics matter, but ethics need to be realigned with the thorough medial and material analysis of deeply entangled local histories and global designs. This entails that ethics need to be translated across what Walter Mignolo refers to as the colonial difference—and not only from exotic “dance” into culture proper, but on mutual and equal terms. Such “border thinking” (Mignolo) does not aim at subsuming cultural difference in humanist universals. Yet neither does it conceive of alterity as absolute and infinite, but as emerging from a plurality of epistemological trajectories, designs and practices, and thus ultimately permeable and open to change. Its ethical investment is an investment in cross-cultural critique.

University of Potsdam

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