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# 'HELPLESSLY CULPABLE': THE OTHER AND THE ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP IN IAN MCEWAN'S SATURDAY

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‘HELPLESSLY CULPABLE’: THE OTHER AND THE ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP IN  
IAN MCEWAN’S *SATURDAY*

By

Elizabeth M. Faucett

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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2011

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Elizabeth M. Faucett is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

‘HELPLESSLY CULPABLE’: THE OTHER AND THE ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP IN

IAN MCEWAN’S *SATURDAY*

By

Elizabeth M. Faucett

As part of an examination of the post-9/11 novel, this thesis explores the changes that have taken place since September 11, 2001 in the relationship between the self and the Other. While society has grown more hostile and isolated the relationship with the Other has begun to self-destruct, perpetrating a dangerous cycle of mistrust and violence. Specifically, this thesis examines Ian McEwan’s 2005 novel, *Saturday*, through the lens of two conceptualizations of the Other, including that of the Lacanian/Marxist theorist Slavoj Žižek and the philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas. Ultimately, this thesis argues that in order to move beyond the trauma of September 11, society needs to find a more ethically responsible way to coexist with the Other.

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2011

## DEDICATION

For a very dear friend,

Who, despite “the fact that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway,”  
still managed to get it exactly right.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To begin, the director of this thesis, Dr. Gabriel Noah Brahm, should be thanked and, then, thanked some more not only for his seemingly limitless patience and support, without which this thesis would never have been finished, but also for his willingness to help me procrastinate when I needed a break. I have been permanently corrupted by his passion for impossible to understand theory and the Boston Red Sox, and I have never been more grateful.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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## THE GENRE OF THE POST-9/11 NOVEL

This catastrophic event changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years. Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled in theirs (DeLillo, 33).

In the almost ten years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been no shortage of suggestions as to why America was attacked. There are claims, such as those perpetrated by theorist Slavoj Žižek, that it was an inevitable challenge to global capitalism and America's role in the new economic reality. The question, how could a group of terrorists senselessly murder thousands of innocent individuals, still remains, though. Perhaps fed up with finding themselves "caught between the conflicting interests and voice that constitute the national debate" and having to discover a politically correct way to deal with "new forms of otherness that are at best virulently critical and at worst obscenely violent," writers have taken up the challenge of attempting to understand what led to that day and how to recover (Gray 147). By not only calling into question what it means to be "us" and "them," but by exploring how the relationship between "us and "them" has been forever changed and complicated because of 9/11, writers are able to move society one step closer to achieving understanding.

Despite its role in creating the narrative of September 11, the post-9/11 novel has faced difficulty gaining acceptance as a genre. Many critics and scholars find the choice to fictionalize or narrativize 9/11, whether directly or indirectly, ill-advised. They believe that the novels published so far are “more concerned with establishing a thesis about America than with tackling what that September day really meant or what its real impact continues to be” (Miller). Also, because any fictional account cannot only be a retelling of the historical reality, but must also include an attempt at discovering the emotional reality, authors have to situate the attack in the context of something else, most often a domestic conflict. This becomes problematic because “the shadow of the attacks inevitably makes such woes seem trivial, and the word ‘trivial’ hardly begins to capture the moral idiocy of any effort to analogize minuscule domestic difficulties with the fact or the scale of the slaughter and destruction” (Miller). In trying to balance the depiction of not only the large-scale impact of the event, but also the personal impact, authors have struggled with finding the appropriate structure to accommodate both.

It is in this regard that the perceived failure of the genre stems from something deeper than the belief that any attempt to narrativize also trivializes the attacks. As Richard Gray argues, writers fail “to recognize that some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis” (134). For Gray, the problem with focusing the novels primarily on the domestic is that it “simply assimilate [s] the unfamiliar into familiar structures,” and fails to properly represent the event for what it was: a “rupture of continuity” (134; qtd. in Hutchens 86).

The search for a solution to this problem has led to an outpouring of scholarship on the handling of trauma and recovery in post-9/11 novels. This focus, heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud's work on melancholia and mourning, examines the post-9/11 novel as a way to allow those traumatized by the event to "reintroduce [the trauma] into a network of signification" (Versluys 4). The novels allow the victims, both those who directly or indirectly experienced the attack, to gain some sort of understanding by allowing them to situate the event in some larger context. The importance of this activity cannot be underscored enough. September 11 remains a traumatic event. However, as Kristiaan Versluys acknowledges in his examination of trauma in the post-9/11 novel, as "the immediate shock has worn off...the concerns expressed will be less directly related to the experience of trauma" (183). In the years since the attack, the national priority has shifted away from the event itself toward a concern about the aftermath and the repercussions. In response to this, Versluys sees both the genre and the scholarship evolving into an examination of the confrontation with the Other as a way to begin to understand how September 11 changed the way we interact on both a personal and global level.

Critical discussion of this topic remains scarce, however, and what little scholarship there is chooses to focus on the identification of the Other as other or on the process of "othering," or seeing someone as Other because of a prejudice (Versluys 150). Furthermore, the scholarship is as disjointed and unsure of itself as the critics claim the novels to be. What one critic says holds merit only long enough for another to cry foul

and lament the narrowness of the argument.<sup>1</sup> What is regrettable about this is that without an informed understanding of what it means to be Other post-9/11, it will remain incredibly difficult to engage in an effective, yet ethical relationship with the Other.

A possible solution for this, Gray argues, would be for writers to seize upon the opportunity to “insert themselves into the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders” (147). Rather than using the novel as a way to express the author’s personal agenda, which Versluys argues is one of the key downfalls of both Martin Amis and John Updike in their attempts to portray the Other in “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” and *Terrorist*, respectively, authors should focus on the clash that comes from the interaction between the subject and the Other. Not everyone agrees with Gray’s assertion, though. Scholars such as Richard Rothberg propose that novelists should instead use a less domestically America-centered approach to help readers better understand how “we” shape who “they” are. Through this, he argues, we can begin to understand what might have caused the relationship with the Other to turn violent.

Additionally, Rothberg does not believe that the post-9/11 novel should limit itself to focusing on resolving the problems of otherness in the United States. He warns:

While a renewed commitment to hospitality toward the other ought certainly to remain on the domestic agenda (now, as ever), and even more challenging agenda awaits those who want to grapple seriously with the

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of this back-and-forth see: Richard Gray, “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at the Time of Crisis.” *American Literary History* and the response, Michael Rothberg, “A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray,” *American Literary History*.

contemporary context of war and terror...to dwell only on this dimension of the problem would risk reproducing American exceptionalism and ignoring the context out of which the terror attacks emerged in the first place. (157)

He believes that what the ultimate goal of the post-9/11 novel should be is to “imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others” (158). Whether or not an individual agrees with Rothberg, considering this point-of-view, it becomes easy to pinpoint one of the central faults of the post-9/11 novel: its inability or unwillingness to examine the Other as something other than an Other. For example, in Updike’s *Terrorist*, which is told through the point-of-view of a would-be terrorist, Ahmad, the reader is never able to imagine Ahmad as anything other than a horrific Other.

Ultimately, the hope is that by engaging in a examination of not only the role of the Other, but ways in which we can more meaningfully interact with the Other, we might be able to reverse having turned “9/11 into a Manichean struggle between good and evil” (Kauffman 657). In order for the trauma of September 11 to be healed and to prevent a similar attack from happening again, there needs to be an attempt made to understand the role the relationship, or lack of one, had and continues to have.

This process has been a difficult one to properly represent in fiction post-9/11. On the one hand, authors are supposed to be able to represent the world as they want. On the other hand, authors are confronted with the demand that they not only “describe the new view through...glittering fragments” but also show us how to glue the window back

together: to give us meaning, hope, and even happy endings” (Cleave). An honest portrayal is dangerous because “as many novelists are discovering....there is a worse sin than getting a contemporary novel ‘wrong’—namely, getting it right” (Cleave). There is a demand that authors be both sensitive to wound caused by the event, but that, at the same time, they cannot, especially in an age when anyone with access to a television or computer can know the facts of that day, lie about what happened. What is more, considering that terrorism has not abated and still remains a very real concern, there is an urgency to the demand that authors grapple with the difficult themes and issues that might not otherwise get represented, including the interaction between the self and the Other. Although many scholars touch on this subject within the broader discussion of trauma, there are almost no in-depth, focused examinations of this topic’s representation in the post-9/11 novel.<sup>2</sup> I attempt to fill that void.

Scholars cannot write about what is not there, though, and attempts by authors to seriously examine the role of the Other have had varying degrees of success. The result is, more often than not, “a kind of imaginative paralysis” (Gray 135). As of 2009, there had been over thirty so-called post-9/11 novels written (Minzesheimer). The quality of these novels ranges from nonexistent to excellent. Among the more respected novels are Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008) and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005). And yet, almost without

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<sup>2</sup> Versluys briefly discusses the relationship between the subject and the Other in a chapter of his book, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009) titled “September 11 and the Other.” However, his examination of this topic is regrettably shallow and leaves something to be desired. See my review of his text in *Politics & Cultures* 2010, Issue 3 & 4.

exception, critics and scholars alike state that “it’s impossible... to stop scanning the horizon for something else—the bracing, wide-screen, many-angled novel that will leave a larger, more definitive intellectual and moral footprint on the new age of terror” (Garner). The great post-9/11 novel has not been written they argue, and there doubt it can be.



‘HELPLESSLY CULPABLE’: THE OTHER AND THE ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP IN  
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And it interests him less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained. The times are strange enough. Why makes things up? (McEwan 65)

In trying to contextualize September 11, novelists have explored everything from the moment of impact through characters both in the towers and on the planes to the broader ramifications of the event. Primarily, the genre is an American one and has been dominated by the works of Don DeLillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, and John Updike. These novels no doubt deserve the critical attention and scholarship they have fostered. However, in attempting to move beyond the role of trauma to a critical examination of the changes that have occurred in the ability of the individual and society to relate to the Other, to the terrorists who committed the crime against America, these novels prove problematic. The American novel remains, like American society, trapped in the trauma of the moment. However, by looking to writers outside of the United States, readers can gain a new perspective. By approaching September 11 indirectly, writers like Ian McEwan are able to better see how the event fits into the long history of terrorism and, as

such, their novels provide a better means through which to hypothesize what the next step is in the search for a solution.

The choice to focus almost exclusively on McEwan's 2005 novel, *Saturday*, is, then, an attempt to engage with the response from a country that is all too familiar with terrorism and the need to find a solution. McEwan's fiction, as Zoe Heller argues in her review of the novel, is able to "capture the moral tangle of personal life and historical context that is our lived experience" and to explore the complexities of dealing on a personal level with morality and ethics in a world that is almost anything but moral in a way not found in many post-9/11 novels. The real strength in McEwan's book, and the reason for its inclusion in this thesis, however, lies in its ability to not only depict the dangers of isolation and alienation, but also the need for a relationship with the Other based on responsibility.

McEwan's novel can be approached in a variety of different ways. Much of the early scholarship on the novel is focused on the inequality of wealth and social standing depicted in the novel, which such criticism sees as indicative of a need for a radical response to the political and economic changes that have occurred since 2001.<sup>3</sup> Central to this critical piece, however, is the presentation of the relationship between the self and the Other and what potentially dangerous, yet rewarding, consequences an interaction between the two can have. By reading *Saturday* through the lens of two conceptualizations of this relationship, that of Slavoj Žižek and of Emmanuel Levinas, a reader is able to not only discern a sharp critique of terrorism, but a critical awareness of

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Andrew Foley's article "Liberalism in the New Millennium: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," *Journal of Literary Studies*, 26.1 (2010): 135-62.

the need to take responsibility for finding a more ethically acceptable way to coexist with the Other.

The juxtaposition of Žižek and Levinas poses some problems. On one end of the argument, Žižek's psychoanalytical interpretation positions the self and the Other in a back-and-forth game of using and exposing the other in order "to retain what one desires" (Hutchens 162). In this, both the subject and the Other remain other to each other, neither wanting to move beyond the bounds of the deception needed to gain what the self needs or wants. Additionally, Žižek's conceptualization of the Other is structured around his use of the Lacanian orders of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. He identifies three versions of the Other: the "imaginary other—other people...who I am engaged in [a] mirrorlike relationship [with];" the "symbolic 'big Other'—the 'substance' of our social existence;" and the "Other qua Real, the impossible Thing...the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue...is possible" ("Neighbors" 143). The Other, or "neighbor," as he calls it, is primarily a radical, horrific being, which any interaction with should be moderated by "the symbolic order qua Third," or, simply "the Third," which, for Žižek, is the law or system of justice that is supposed to make social interaction tolerable (143-3).

On the other end of the argument, there is Levinas, who believes that taking responsibility for the Other, especially in the face-to-face relationship, is central. Toward this end, he called for an "ethics of ethics," in which ethical priority "occurs as the moral height of the other person over being, identity, manifestation, principle, in brief, over [the self]" (Cohen 10). The self is commanded to be responsible for or to the Other and is rewarded with a release from being.

Žižek is critical of Levinas. For instance, he believes it is naive to think that the command for responsibility has the ability to prevent violence, and that ultimately the only path to truly ethical behavior is through an emphasis of the role of justice, or the Third. Žižek is not entirely wrong to point out that there are some instances Levinas's argument leaves something to be desired, especially when it comes to understanding how events like September 11 happen. There is no denying that September 11 poses a problem for Levinas's theory. The terrorists certainly did not heed the call to responsibility for their victims, and it is almost absurd to think that the victims should have to be held responsible for the actions of the terrorists. As Naida Zukić correctly argues, "complicating [the] notion of ethical hospitality are narratives of mass atrocities within which lurks the neighbor—the unfathomable abyss, the radical otherness in all its intensity and inaccessibility" (2). Žižek argues that Levinas's Other is "the imaginary other—other people 'like me,' my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirrorlike relationship of...mutual recognition" ("Neighbors" 143). Žižek's problem with the relationship with the "imaginary other" Levinas describes is that it fails to take into account the "radical otherness" that leads to events such as September 11.

Levinas's engagement with the political is problematic, mostly because he almost always chooses to circle around the issue in his writings, but his understanding of how and why traumatic events—he is centrally concerned with the Holocaust—occur offers more of a chance at resolution than Žižek's belief that it is an inevitable step in the revolutionary activity needed to either maintain or overthrow the current social structures. Levinas writes:

There must be a rupture of continuity, and a continuation across this rupture. The essential in time consists in being a drama, a multiplicity of acts where the following act resolves the prior one. Being is no longer produced at one blow, irremissibly present. Reality is what it is, but will be once again, another time freely resumed and pardoned. (qtd. in Hutchens 86)

According to this, such blatantly unethical and immoral events as genocide occur outside of our conception of the world as a primarily ethical place. After these violent disruptions, ethical behavior begins again and attempts, by taking responsibility for what happened, to create a way to assimilate the event into our conceptualization of history. The event remains traumatic, but, in Levinas's view, the ethical assuming of responsibility on the individual level, rather than on the symbolic level, allows for a reconstruction of humanity even in the absence of the Law, which Žižek wants society to believe will unfailingly intervene.

Levinas's belief in the power of assuming responsibility for the Other might be naive, but it offers a chance at redemption and a way of moving beyond the dangerous cycle of distrust currently in place. The transition from a paranoid, Žižekian view in which justice has the final say and the self is taught to fear the Other, to a Levinasian view, in which the both the self and the Other benefit from a responsible interaction, is not easy, especially in a post-9/11 world. However, as McEwan demonstrates through his central character, Henry Perowne, the transition is possible. By setting up a confrontation between Perowne and a man, Baxter, who terrorizes Perowne and his family, McEwan is

able to chart the difficulties and the eventual rewards of rejecting the objectifying approach of avoidance and exploitation in favor of true communication with the Other.

### *I. The Call to Responsibility*

In his reading of Levinas, Hutchens writes “On every occasion in which we respond to someone, we are being responsible to them in an *indeclinable* way” (20). An individual can either act on or ignore the call to responsibility, but either way the individual is still responsible for the Other. *Saturday* opens with this call to respond. After having woken up for no logical reason at 3:40 a.m., Perowne witnesses the landing of a plane, part of which is on fire, at Heathrow. Although he knows none of the specific details surrounding what he is witnessing, Perowne’s reaction is influenced by the memory of September 11. The image in his head—of “the screaming in the cabin partly muffled by that deadening acoustic, the fumbling in bags for phones and last words, the airline staff in their terror clinging to remember fragments of procedure, the levelling smell of shit”—is the one imagined in films released both pre- and post-9/11 (15). This understanding of what could be happening compels Perowne to realize that there is a need for someone to take responsibility.

However, Perowne is reluctant to get involved. In his discussion of the novel, Versluys writes that the reader is given two significant clues that Perowne’s response to the call to responsibility will be conflicted. Firstly, Perowne’s name, which not only invokes “a reference to possession and identity,” but also to “introversion and self-

preoccupation,” foreshadows the difficulty Perowne will have moving beyond his own being to help another (188; 191). Secondly, as a doctor, Perowne serves as a “ready-made example of the faculty of agency in times of distress” (188). More than most, Perowne knows he could be of assistance to anyone who is injured, and “it occurs to [him] that there’s something he should be doing” (McEwan 16). Yet, he attempts to rationalize his way out of the responsibility by dismissing his feelings as a “problem...of reference,...an inability to contemplate [his] own unimportance” (16-7). That he saw the plane at all is a matter of coincidence, and should not be confused with anything more significant than that.

Perowne’s reaction here is one echoed by Žižek when he writes that Levinas, in asserting that “giving has meaning only as a tearing from oneself,” is displaying an “inverted arrogance, as if I am the center whose existence threatens all others” (“Neighbors” 156). Žižek believes, as Perowne does at this point, that rather than the self being unsubstitutable, the self necessarily functions as part of the “wider reality,” which offers the only chance to overcome “the opposition of egotism and altruism” (156).

In his reading of Levinas, Žižek identifies three stages in the emergence of the ethical: “the subject emerges as an ego,” the subject experiences a “separation from [the] familiar world: when [s/he is] addressed by the absolutely Other,” and the subject “enter[s] the domain of justice and universal justice and universal laws...and offer[s] to see things from the standpoint of the Other” (“Neighbors” 144-5). Perowne’s actions throughout the novel and his evolution into a subject fully responsible to the Other mirror this transition from stage to stage.

In the first stage, the subject appropriates “alterity through labor and possession, thereby creating a realm of familiarity in which he can dwell” (“Neighbors” 144). The subject controls the interaction with the Other by creating a space in which the Other and the command for responsibility is domesticated, or neutralized. Perowne fully embodies this idea. As Andrew Foley points out in his reading of the novel, “there remains something disengaged about [Perowne], as if he were emotionally removed from the troubles and dangers of contemporary existence...What Perowne lacks is both an awareness of his relationship to the life around him as well as a genuine sense of imaginative empathy for those less fortunate than himself” (149). Because he believes there is a scientific explanation for everything, Perowne is unable to properly respond to situations that have no discernible cause and which appear to merely be the product of irrational human behavior.

Perowne’s education and ability to rationalize are doomed to ultimately prove unfulfilling and even dangerous to his well-being. Levinas writes, “The most audacious and remote knowledge does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not take the place of sociality; it is still and always a solitude” (60). With Perowne’s knowledge and education, comes a great deal of responsibility. However, as is demonstrated when he views a young girl—a drug addict, Perowne decides after observing her erratic behavior from his window—his ability to diagnose the ailments of others is only part of taking responsibility for that person. His knowledge does no one, including the girl, any good unless he is also willing to take the necessary steps to provide aid. The person-to-person interaction this would necessitate would allow Perowne to come into communion with



the Other, which Levinas argues is the only way to move beyond solitude and to experience an “escape out of being” (69). It cannot happen from the window of Perowne’s bedroom.

Žižek would also agree that Perowne’s access to knowledge creates a tension in his interactions with others. Using the example of Huntington’s chorea, which, coincidentally Perowne’s primary antagonist, Baxter, is revealed to suffer from, he says that the knowledge that the Other knows the truth about the illness “expos[es the self] to horrifying gnawing suspicion” (*Welcome* 62). Žižek contemplates the possibility that ultimately the more ethical option would be to keep the Other in “protective ignorance” as a way of preventing pain (63). However, while Levinas would agree that it is primarily the responsibility of the self to help the Other who is in pain, in Žižek’s “ultimate fantasy of happiness” the state would intervene before it became necessary for the self to become involved in the interaction with the Other. In Žižek’s fantasy, Perowne’s responsibility would be strictly limited to his role as a doctor. Those needing help would be identified, brought in, and cured without any sort of meaningful face-to-face interaction.

The limitations of Perowne’s kind of knowledge and thinking are further demonstrated by his daughter Daisy’s attempts to cultivate his literary repertoire. Perowne, who, as a neurosurgeon, is able to understand the workings of the human body down to the molecular level, is nevertheless unable to understand the emotional motivations of the characters in the books Daisy sends him to read. Frustrated with what he sees as the “childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real,” Perowne decides he’ll chronicle his cultural education outside of literature (66). His admiration for

musicians and architects stems from his belief that they perform “work that you cannot begin to imagine achieving yourself, that displays a ruthless, nearly inhuman element of *self-enclosed perfection*—this is his idea of genius” (67, emphasis added). Perowne attempts to understand the characters in the novels Daisy sends and their actions through what he sees as the practical options available to them. This inability to empathize emotionally with others is what ultimately keeps him from being able to surrender himself to the Other and is what puts him in danger.

Perowne makes no attempt in the early scenes of the novel to rectify this situation. After watching the plane land, he thinks that the only way to properly regain control of his thoughts is to communicate what he saw to another person. In this moment, Perowne is at least somewhat cognizant of the difficulty of moving beyond solitude when, upon closing the shutters on the window, he experiences a sense of unease:

He feels culpable somehow, but helpless too....Culpable in his helplessness. Helplessly culpable. He loses his way, and thinks again of the phone. By daylight, will it seem negligent not to have called the emergency services?...His crime was to stand in the safety of his bedroom, wrapped in a woollen dressing gown, without moving or making a sound, half dreaming as he watched people die. (22)

Here, if only briefly, Perowne recognizes the danger of isolating himself. Once the command to responsibility is issued, the subject can choose to ignore it, but they are not freed from the consequences of doing so. Perowne’s feeling of being “helplessly culpable” is a product of his inability to choose to whom or what he is responsible.

However, his desire for meaningful interaction is short lived. Perowne's only attempt to communicate occurs with his son, Theo, who he knows will willingly "look away and shrug," rather than question the choice to not act responsibly (30). Perowne time and again chooses to remain in the safety of his isolation, whether that be from the window of his home or from the driver's seat of his car, and merely observe others. Any possible interactions outside these two protected spaces are prevented by his unwillingness to engage.

For example, when Perowne is walking to his vehicle, he passes a man cleaning the sidewalk.

As the two men pass, their eyes meet briefly, neutrally. The whites of the sweeper's eyes are fringed with egg-yellow shading to red along the lids. For a vertiginous moment Henry feels himself bound to the other man, as though on a seesaw with him, pinned to an axis that could tip them into each other's life.

Perowne looks away. (73)

The differences between the sweeper and Perowne are clearly laid out in the scene before this. Both men belong to a different social class, and Perowne clearly regards the activity the man is engaging in as futile, thinking that the streets will quickly become dirty again as the waves of protestors make their way through that part of the city. However, rather than risk feeling empathy for this man, Perowne continues to avoid being put in a situation where he would be responsible to another. There are hints in this interaction, though, that Perowne's ability to shut himself off is beginning to waver. He understands

that the command to responsibility exists in the nature of the situation he is in—  
ontologically, or rather, as Levinas would insist, “prior to ontology”—and feels it briefly  
in the few seconds he and the sweeper are bound together. The cracks are appearing in the  
protective bubble Perowne has created for himself.

## ***II. The Self as Hostage to the Face***

The second stage in the subject’s acceptance of the ethical occurs when the  
subject is cut off from the familiar and confronted with the Other. This act requires the  
subject to “renounce [his/her] egotism and the safety of [the] Home” (“Neighbors” 44).  
This stage begins when the subject comes in contact with the Other by way of the face.  
For Levinas, the command for responsibility to the Other is contained in this interaction,  
and it is impossible to avoid the imperative given by the face. In *Saturday*, Perowne is  
literally “shattered from the complacency of [his] lifeworld” when, after driving out of  
his way to avoid the protests taking place around London, he is involved in a car accident  
(144). This event not only occurs in an area of town literally outside of Perowne’s  
familiarity, but also damages his car, the one thing protecting him from the intrusion of  
the outside world. It also brings him in contact with Baxter. Versluys writes, “Baxter  
plays the role of revenant, the ghost of irrationalism that haunts and threatens a perfectly  
ordered existence” (191). Baxter will consistently challenge Perowne’s ability to  
rationalize his way out of responsibility.

Levinas defines violence as “war,” which he describes as “an attempt to master the other by surprise, by ambush,” in which the self becomes a “hostage” of the Other (qtd. in Pugliese). Perowne, annoyed by the delay the accident puts into his schedule, wants the interaction to be minimal, but quickly finds himself overpowered by Baxter and his accomplices. Despite the increasingly hostile behavior exhibited toward Perowne, who is literally ambushed into a corner and physically threatened, it is he who retains the position of power. He is able to look at Baxter directly, an action that leads to unexpected revelations. “Watching him unobserved for a few seconds, Perowne suddenly understands—Baxter is unable to initiate or make saccades, those flickering changes of eye position from one fixation to another. To scan the crowd, he is having to move his head” (91). Baxter is literally unable to directly return Perowne’s gaze, and the face-to-face interaction that Levinas argues is crucial for the command to responsibility does not, in contrast to Perowne’s interaction with the street sweeper, occur for both men.

This does not, of course, release either of them from being responsible for the Other, but it does make the outcome of the interaction much more variable. Perowne, since he is able to look Baxter in the face, becomes responsible to him. However, since Baxter is unable to fully participate in the interaction, he does not experience the same command. This inequality creates a dangerous situation for Perowne. While the face is “what one cannot kill,” “what forbids us to kill,” it is also “exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence” (Levinas 86-7). Violence becomes possible when the subject chooses to proceed with “ignoring the face of a being, avoiding the gaze, and catching sight of an angle whereby the *no* inscribed on the face becomes a hostile or

submissive force” (qtd. in Pugliese). If the subject is able to become convinced the gaze of the Other is a threat, the subject can legitimize the use of violence as a defense. By viewing Perowne this way, Baxter is able to interpret Perowne’s actions, which, albeit, are meant to manipulate Baxter, as a threat.

Žižek interprets the function of the face differently. Rather than just being the means through which the subject receives the command of the Other, the face becomes fetishized. The face is “the object which fills in (obfuscates) the big Other’s ‘castration’ (inconsistency, lack)” (“Neighbors” 146). The face allows the subject to see the big Other as complete. Žižek’s problem with this is that by removing lack in the Other, the face “gentrifies the terrifying Thing that is the ultimate reality of our Neighbor” (146). Rather than seeing the potential for violence in the Other, the self is duped by the face. The only way to experience the *true* Žižekian nature of the Other—the Other as the monstrous Thing—is through defacement, which ultimately seeks to destroy the view the self has of the Other.

In his essay, “In the Ruins of the Future,” Don DeLillo explores what happens when the subject refuses to even acknowledge the existence of face of the Other: “Does the sight of a woman pushing a stroller soften the man to her humanity and vulnerability.... This is his edge, that he does not see her.... He knows who we are and what we mean in the world—an idea, a righteous fever in the brain. But there is no defenseless human at the end of his gaze” (34). The terrorist is not committing a crime against innocent people. For the terrorist, there is no person or gaze to command him to

be responsible. There is only the commitment to a brotherhood structured around the idea of “judgement and devastation” (34).

Baxter’s reaction can be better understood in light of how the interaction with the face of the terrorist has changed post-9/11. No longer is the face of the Other a neutral thing. In his short story, “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta,” Martin Amis examines this shift. Focused on Atta, the piece is a hypothetical answer to the question of what he and his accomplices were doing in Portland, Maine on September 10, 2001. It is also a keen comment on the power of the face. In it, Atta dreads the power of the face. So much so, in fact, that he even resists the interaction with his own. He dreads the prospect of having to shave because he knows it will “necessarily involve him in the contemplation of his own face” (95). He understands that when others view his face they will understand that the responsibility they will come to bear for him will not be reciprocated, but will, instead, be met with his “detestation of everything” (96). Yet, according to Amis, prior to September 11 Americans did not yet have a reason to distrust this face. He writes:

[Atta] was amazed that he was still allowed to walk the streets, let alone enter a building or board a plane. Another day, one more day, and they wouldn’t let him. Why didn’t everybody point, why didn’t they cringe, why didn’t they run? And yet this face, by now almost comically malevolent, would soon be smiled at, and perfunctorily fussed over...by the doomed stewardess. (96)

Levinas warns us about the need to avoid being violently manipulated by the Other, by regulating the amount of power the subject gives to the Other. In blindly submitting to the

command to responsibility, we run the risk of forgetting that the Other maintains a relationship not just with us, but with other people too. “Do I know what my neighbor is in relation to someone else? Do I know if someone else has an understanding with him or his victim? Who is my neighbor?” (Levinas 90). We cannot forget that we also have to honor the relationship to potential “other Others,” or those individuals that the Other might seek to harm. The importance of this is demonstrated by Amis:

In the last decade, only one human being had taken obvious pleasure from setting eyes on [Atta], and that was the Sheikh.... Muhammad Atta knew that the first thing he would be asked was whether he was prepared to die. But the Sheikh was smiling, almost with eyes of love, when he said it. ‘The question isn’t necessary,’ he began. ‘I see the answer in your face.’ (96)

We cannot know what understanding the Other has with others, and the responsibility that he owes to them might be in direct contradiction with his ability or willingness to act on the responsibility that he owes us. Žižek would also caution that by blindly submitting to the command of the face, the self is forgetting that if the Other is the impenetrable Thing, the face is “the extreme/impossible point at which opposites coincide, at which the innocence of the Other’s vulnerable nakedness overlaps with pure evil” (“Neighbors” 162). By assuming that the Other means us no harm, we open up the possibility for our own destruction.

This is where justice comes in. How, if we are supposed to be committed to the Other, do we also prevent the Other from getting away with causing trauma? The answer



is complicated, of course, because as Levinas states “justice does not result from the normal play of injustice. It comes from the outside... For me to catch sight of the possibility of justice, a new situation is required: someone has to call me to account” (qtd. in Pugliese). Someone outside the face-to-face interaction between the subject and the Other has to witness the injustice and call attention to it. The outside perspective is necessary because the subject, in fulfilling his/her obligation to the Other, could become unable to clearly delineate the boundaries between what is and is not acceptable for the Other to demand. Furthermore, as Kenneth Reinhard argues in his examination of both Levinas and Žižek, there is a fundamental problem with trying to impose ethics on the political or vice versa. Because “ethics is inherently apolitical, [it] must willfully ignore what would be fair or for the general good. To shift the other as neighbor into mediation with the other in the polis is precisely to *give up* on ethics” (“Toward” 49). In being responsible to the Other, the self is necessarily privileging one individual over “other Others.”

Žižek’s rejection of the primacy of the Other over the symbolic Third is one of his central critiques of Levinas. Rather than favoring the Other over the masses, Žižek believes that the truly ethical approach lies in the enactment of justice, which he says “begins when I remember the faceless many left in the shadow in this privileging of the One” (“Neighbors” 182). The Third requires that the self act not out of responsibility to the Other who is in front of them, but rather with the awareness that any action taken will have a direct consequence for someone outside the interaction. This approach directly serves Žižek’s belief that it is ultimately more important to do what will serve the social

symbolic order. In addition, in Reinhard's examination of the incompatibility of ethics with politics, he points out that what is so crucial about Levinas's theory is that it draws attention to the fact that "the love of the neighbor cannot be generalized into a universal social love" (49). The self will always choose to favor one person or group of people over the Third.

September 11 has changed the way that we, America/the West, interact with the face of the Other. We have learned to mistrust the face and to limit the privilege it has to such an extent that we no longer feel immediately responsible for it. Žižek believes that this reaction is justified. In Europe, he points out, tolerance is easier because social life has become so alienated. Rather than encouraging direct interactions with the Other, modern societies function on the principle that even though the self and the Other exist with each other they do not acknowledge each other. Alienation has become "indispensable for peaceful coexistence....[It] is not a problem but a solution" (*Violence* 59). In other words, we have learned how to recognize the Other as an other. Amis writes, "The profiling wouldn't need to be racial; it would be facial, merely. No sane man or woman would ever agree to be confined in [Atta's] vicinity. With that face, growing more gangrenous by the day" (96). The "facial profiling" removes Levinas's middleman and replaces him with a mistrust that leads the subject to assume that because there is a possibility that an interaction with the Other will end in violence, s/he is exempted from having to engage in an interaction that would make him/her responsible to another.

The problem with this, however, is that we cannot, according to Levinas, simply reject the command given by the face of the Other because we are worried that our efforts

will not be reciprocated. He writes, “I am responsible for the Other without waiting for his reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjected to the Other” (98). To insist on the Other’s responsibility as a condition for ours is to get locked in a dangerous game in which neither individual is willing to back down for fear of being bested by the other.

### ***III. Moral Equivalence and Responsibility***

In Amis’s story, Atta is reminded by the imam of the varied crimes American society has committed against the world, namely that “depending on how you tallied it, America was responsible for this or that many million deaths” (108). The argument for moral equivalence is unfortunately not just an idea explored in short stories. In his examination of the London bombings of July 7, 2005, which killed fifty-two people, Joseph Pugliese attempts to align the victims of that day with the Iraqi civilians who have died since the US’s occupation and argue that the terrorists who committed the bombing were acting against the West’s refusal to claim responsibility for its actions. He further points out what he sees as the hypocrisy of the West’s over-willingness to place blame and demand justice for the terrorist actions committed against it. Pugliese is right in pointing out that in the West the deaths of the three thousand victims of September 11 have become more significant than those caused by the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. But he is wrong for believing that the West’s actions somehow excuse the continuation of terrorism. The relationship between the East and the West will never be

one-hundred percent reciprocal, but that does not excuse the senseless murder of innocent people. Justice, as laid out by Levinas, is perpetrated specifically against an Other who is a threat to the social order, not against the others who happen to be associated with that Other. However, this belief that the subject, the terrorist, has somehow been unfairly treated, creates an opportunity for the terrorist to convince himself he is right in rejecting the responsibility he bears for the Other's suffering. He chooses instead "to be morally ambivalent to the other's wretchedness" in favor of becoming "obsessed by one's own assailability" (Hutchens 97).

Baxter embodies this idea. Although he, through the help of his friends, has control of the situation immediately following the car accident, he quickly realizes that Perowne, who correctly identifies and draws attention to Baxter's physical limitations, has power over him. To protect himself and his "self-respect," Baxter believes he cannot acknowledge the responsibility that he in turn bears for Perowne (86). Also, as Perowne realizes later in the novel, when Baxter makes another violent intrusion into his life, Baxter "is a special case—a man who believes he has no future and is therefore free of consequences" (217). This is similar to the reasoning given by terrorists, who see themselves as having no future but what God wills for them. Their sole obligation is to fulfill their responsibility to their cause. Furthermore, because their actions are supposedly in service to God, they are absolved of any responsibility for them. In Amis's piece, Atta's suicide, for which he should, according to the citation he reads the imam, be tormented in Hell, is instead excused because it will be committed in order to destroy infidels.

According to Levinas, “Killing aims at dominating the other, at reducing the other to something that can be controlled by power” (Hoy 160). If the subject is meant to act ethically toward the Other, then s/he is unable to exploit that relationship and, thus, unable to dominate them. In killing the Other, however, the subject can feel as though s/he is removing the responsibility owed to the Other. However, as philosopher David Hoy points out, murder fails as a means of gaining power because it “does not exert power over the sheer transcendence of the other and the unforeseeableness of the other’s reactions” (160). In death, the victims of the terrorists’ attacks become more significant than they ever were when they were alive.

#### ***IV. Indclinable Responsibility***

As the confrontation between Perowne and Baxter continues, things quickly become more complicated and dangerous. Outnumbered and physically dominated by Baxter and his friends, Perowne has to make the decision to either submit to Baxter and the demand for responsibility or to manipulate Baxter’s weakness in favor of self-preservation. By distracting Baxter with a series of questions regarding his and his family’s medical history, Perowne both humiliates Baxter in front of his friends, who do not seem to have any awareness of Baxter’s disease, and avoids having any further harm come to him. By doing this, Perowne once again demonstrates that he has yet to move beyond the Žižekian interaction with the Other. Žižek argues that there is inherent in Levinas “a cold acceptance of the fact that we have to kill others in order to survive,” which he sees as “the truth of the Levinasian questioning of one’s own right to

exist” (“Neighbors” 157). However, this misses the point. Levinas would argue that Perowne’s responsibility to Baxter would transcend his own personal well being. Rather than being responsible, though, Perowne is attempting to apply Žižek’s, and by extension Lacan’s, theory that as a desiring subject, Baxter believes Perowne possesses something he desires. In this sense, the easiest way for Perowne to extricate himself from the situation is to make Baxter believe that he has provided a sense of satisfaction. In doing so Perowne has, once again, turned his back on his responsibility to the Other.

In addition, even though he acknowledges the difference in their lives, he does not seem to regret the choice:

And now, what worse situation than this could [Baxter] find himself in?

There’s no way out for him. No one can help. But Perowne knows himself to be incapable of pity. Clinical experience wrung that from him long ago.

And a part of him never ceases to calculate how soon he can safely end this encounter. Besides the matter is beyond pity.(99)

Baxter is a lost cause and beyond any doctor’s ability to cure him. While his Huntington’s can be managed, there is no cure. Perowne recognizes this and uses it to justify manipulating Baxter by drawing attention to his disease, something Perowne correctly guesses Baxter has not told his friends about. Eerily, Perowne’s comments also seem to echo the sentiments expressed by Atta in Amis’s work. If one substitutes America for Baxter in the above passage, McEwan’s words outline one of the main arguments given by Atta to justify the attack on the United States: that American society is simply too

corrupt to tolerate and the only way to act responsibility toward it is to ensure its destruction.

As a result of his actions, Perowne is able to get away from Baxter and attempts to resume his day where it left off. He remains conflicted about his good fortune, though, and experiences a similar sense of internal disquiet as he did upon turning his back on the plane earlier in the morning. This sense of regret is what keeps Perowne from being grouped, despite the feelings about Baxter he expresses in the above passage, with a man like Atta. He understands that in fulfilling responsibility to the Other, the subject must first see the Other as someone with needs, not just as a barrier to his/her own ideology.

At this point, however, Perowne is still unwilling to take responsibility and he begins to resent the inability to decline to do so. He would rather be able to choose the Žižekian option in which the self experiences freedom in his/her ability to “say No! to any positive element that [s/he] encounter[s]” (“Neighbors” 140). Furthermore, this freedom opens up the option for the self to not only refuse the command to responsibility, but to question it. The exposure the self feels when faced with the Other “is *not* incompatible with radical autonomy” (140). The self should still be able to exist outside of the interaction with the Other.

However, because Perowne will ultimately side with Levinas’s approach, he is plagued by his decision to not act, and he expresses annoyance when he is literally confronted with this—he is reminded about the plane crash when he sees footage of the pilots being escorted into a police van—and states, “Isn’t it possible to enjoy an hour’s recreation without this invasion, this infection from the public domain?” (109).

Perowne's occupation allows him to act responsibly toward Others in a very controlled way: he enters work, he performs his duties, and he leaves, knowing that he has fulfilled his obligations. His attempts at structuring his life outside his job around his own desires are ruined when he is reminded by the television just how little control he really has. In contrast to the sense of satisfaction and closure he gets from work, Perowne knows there was something wrong with how his exchange with Baxter, and even the plane, ended. He is plagued, once again, with "a rising unease about the encounter, a disquiet he can't yet define, though guilt is certainly an element" (103). Despite his desire to forget the interaction with the plane and with Baxter, he will not be able to do so until he responds to the command for responsibility. The invasion of the television report is a very literal reminder of that for Perowne.

To further rationalize his reaction to himself, Perowne, while buying fish for his family's dinner, reflects on the changing attitude of society toward moral sympathy:

It was once convenient to think biblically, to believe we're surrounded for our benefit by edible automata on land and sea. Now it turns out that even fish feel pain. This is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. Not only distant people are our brothers and sisters, but foxes too, and laboratory mice, and now the fish... The trick, as always, the key to human success and domination is to be selective in your mercies. For all the discerning talk, it's the close at hand, the visible that exerts the overpowering force. (128)



Modernity has created an opportunity for the subject to know more than ever about the world around him/herself. Through the explosion of the mass media, people not only learn about the suffering of individuals in regions they did not even know existed, but they grow to feel responsible. They ask themselves what they can do to help and wonder if something they did allowed the suffering to happen. The growing concern for victims, according to Rene Girard, makes it so that we “cannot pretend to hear nothing, we condemn our deficiencies, but we don’t know why or in the name of what. [The problem this poses for modernity is that] we pretend to believe that what summons us is something everyone has always heard, but in reality we are the only ones who hear it” (162). We feel compelled to be responsible to Others and harshly condemn ourselves when we do not live up to the expectations, but at the same time we forget that society is, at this moment in history, doing more for victims than ever before.

Perowne is keenly aware of this trend toward a more global consciousness, including its more extreme repercussions. As everything becomes more and more interconnected, including humanity’s relationship to the planet and animals, it becomes impossible to not consider the possible ramifications a seemingly benign action can have thousands of miles away. The problem with this is that taken too far, this kind of thinking makes it impossible to ever act on anything. As Perowne says, “the key...is to be selective in your mercies.” The subject has to decide what is an acceptable amount of risk. And while people might not want to admit to it, he argues, what it invariably comes down to is how an action is likely to affect those people and things a person is directly involved with. It is Perowne’s willingness to fully resign himself to this way of thinking that

prevents him from being able to understand the importance of submitting to the call to responsibility. He does not see that by choosing to not act, he is acting. He is allowing a situation to unfold that could be prevented by his involvement.

Žižek argues that the ability of the subject to resign itself to the role of bystander is a direct result of fetishist disavowal: “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know. I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don’t know it” (*Violence* 53). By choosing to ignore the consequences of his/her choice to deny responsibility, the subject is fulfilling her/his own self-interests.

Levinas would also disagree with the choice to pretend to not know. Not only is the command for responsibility indeclinable, but “one’s responsibility to the other is one for which the self is unsubstitutable” (Hutchens 34). No one except the self can fulfill the obligation to the Other. We cannot choose who to be responsible to, we can only respond when we are presented with the opportunity to.

#### ***V. The Release from Being***

Just as Perowne begins to feel that he has regained control over his day, Baxter returns, this time holding Perowne’s wife, Rosalind, hostage to gain entry to Perowne’s home. Baxter and his friend, Nigel, make short work of gaining control of the situation. Perowne’s sudden loss of control in the situation prompts him to search for an explanation, but he finds his ability to rationalize does not fully explain what is happening:

But for all the reductive arguments, Perowne can't convince himself that molecules and faulty genes alone are terrorising his family and have broken his father-in-law's nose. Perowne himself is also responsible.... Naturally, Baxter is here to rescue his reputation in front of a witness.... The story of Baxter deserted by his men, defeated by a stranger who was able to walk away unscathed, all that will be forgotten. (218)

Perowne finally begins to understand how little his scientific knowledge helps him to understand the motivations of people. Baxter's return to his life has nothing to do with his disease. His return is a direct result of Perowne's unwillingness to take responsibility in their initial confrontation.

It is not until Perowne is able to move beyond his concern for his family and begin to understand Baxter as a true Other that he is able to fully commit to helping him. After forcing Baxter's daughter, Daisy, to strip off her clothes, he has her read to him from her recently published collection of poetry. Unwilling to allow Baxter anymore access to her, Daisy instead recites Matthew Arnold's poem, "Dover Beach." Baxter, shockingly, is totally pacified by the moment, and Perowne, for the first time in the novel, is able to understand Baxter as truly Other. Unable to understand the message of the poem—he believes, as does Baxter that it is one of Daisy's poems and, thus, about her—Perowne imagines Baxter in it: "He sees Baxter standing alone, elbows propped against the sill, listening to the waves...Then once again, it's through Baxter's ears that he hears the sea's 'melancholy, long withdrawing roar'" (230). All that is left at the end of

Arnold's poem, Perowne realizes is humankind. The "Sea of Faith" has retreated along with any hope of a divine intervention to rectify the situation. Arnold writes:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain. (29-34)

When there is only darkness left, it is left up to those people that remain to create something new, something ethical. Furthermore, with the removal of the divine, humankind loses the third party, the outsider who can call for justice and hold the subject and the Other responsible for their actions (Hoy 187). For Perowne and Baxter there will be no intervention. No one is going to save them unless they choose to save each other. In situating Baxter inside the poem, Perowne sees Baxter as Other. However, here the Other is not a threat, but rather a way of "seeing the possibilities of the other as your own possibilities, of being able to escape the closure of your identity and what is bestowed on you" (Levinas 70). The Other becomes a way for the subject to move beyond the ego. As a result of this moment, Perowne is finally ready to accept the command issued by the face. This marks Perowne's movement into the third stage of assuming ethical responsibility for the Other. After "renounc[ing] [his] small world and its possessions and offer[ing] to see things from the standpoint of the Other," Perowne is able to fulfill his role as an ethical, responsible being ("Neighbors" 145).

Levinas writes that the relationship with the Other, when boiled down to its most basic understanding, plays out as such: “To say: here I am. To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit” (97). The subject, by being responsible for the Other, becomes a bit of light in Arnold’s otherwise dark world. Perowne understands this in the seconds after he and his son, Theo, push Baxter down the stairs. As he is falling, Baxter is at last able to make direct eye contact with Perowne and communicate his need:

There’s a moment, which seems to unfold and luxuriously expand, when all goes silent and still, when Baxter is entirely airborne, suspended in time, looking directly at Henry with an expression, not so much of terror, as dismay. And Henry thinks he sees in the wide brown eyes a sorrowful accusation of betrayal. He, Henry Perowne possesses so much...and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less. (236)

In this moment, Perowne understands that he has failed Baxter by refusing to accept the responsibility he bears for him. Perowne has consistently tried to lie to Baxter, to give him false hope of a cure, in order to pacify him enough to get him out of his life. Baxter calls Perowne out on his game, and makes him realize that it is not about a cure, but about finding someone who understands. As Perowne begins to comprehend this, he, for the first time, “recognize[s] the alterity of the mysterious other” (Knapp 140). Baxter is not just an annoyance that has ruined Perowne’s day, he is a chance for Perowne to transcend his day-to-day existence.

This change in perception prevents Perowne from seeking justice through an outside entity, and demonstrates a direct rejection of Žižek's argument that "the true ethical step is the one *beyond* the face of the other, the one of *suspending* the hold of the face, the one of choosing *against* the face, for the *third*" ("Neighbors" 183). Although the police are initially involved, in the end, Perowne argues against charges being brought. He also agrees to perform the surgery needed to repair the damage to Baxter's brain caused by the fall down the stairs. Perowne's decision according to Žižek's analysis is the wrong one because it fails to uphold the symbolic order/ the Law. However, the choice of the Third over the Other does nothing for the self. If Perowne were to seek justice, he would most assuredly get it, but he would remain an unsatisfied, desiring subject. By choosing against justice, in favor of being responsible to Baxter, to the Other, Perowne is able to experience a moment of fulfillment and satisfaction:

For the past two hours, he's been in a dream of absorption that has dissolved all sense of time, and all awareness of the other parts of his life. Even his awareness of his own existence has vanished. He's been delivered into a pure present, free of the weight of the past or any anxieties about the future.... This state of mind brings a contentment he never finds with any passive form of entertainment. (266)

The release from being that Levinas argues is the end goal of the interaction with the Other is manifested here. In choosing to act responsibility toward Baxter and not passively ignore the situation, Perowne is able to transcend himself. As he is operating on Baxter, Perowne is able to focus on the face-to-face interaction to such an extent that

nothing else exists for them. It no longer matters why or how their lives became intertwined, just that Baxter needs Perowne and that Perowne can help him.

In contrast to the Žižekian interaction, which results in either the Other or the subject losing something, the Levinasian interaction proposes that the subject has just as much to gain as the Other from being responsible. Early in the novel, Perowne, while watching Theo perform with this band, reflects that “there are these rare moments when musicians touch something sweeter than they’ve ever found before...when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, *but lose nothing of yourself*” (176, emphasis added). Being responsible to the Other does not mean a destruction of the self, but a rebirth of the self into something better. By opening up the possibility for an ethical relationship, we open up the possibility for creating a more tolerant and responsible culture.

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