

Question of Reception Ethics: Amity and Animosity in Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*

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Abstract

Amsterdam, as distinguished from Ian McEwan's other novels, stands out for its highlight of temporality and the implied urgency to tackle one's moral identity. Namely, the novel is concerned with *waiting*: McEwan shows Clive consistently pressurized by the deadlines of submitting his symphony for rehearsal and Vernon rather obsessed with the day of exposing Garmony's pictures. Such waiting forces them to make decisions, and the decisions invariably suggest applications of values and attitudes. The overriding temporal frame of the novel is even more evocative. Readers are reminded over and over again, along with Clive, that a new millennium is ahead (the novel itself was first published in 1998). In light of this, the author appears to juxtapose two temporal structures: the time of mundanity for the characters and a time that is messianic and affranchising, thus stressing an ethical vision, possibly beyond what the self-centered British society in the novel can foresee. All the underlying attention to temporal expressions and the foregrounded contingency of life only reinforces the author's call for moral inquiries and search for accountable, ethical stances in an era of flux and disintegration. To study the ethical terrain as depicted in the novel, this paper focuses on the ideas of friendliness and enmity and analyzes the interaction between its four male characters. They remain friends, Clive and Vernon in particular, but underneath are the on-going processes of defining and re-defining friendship and the tempting of ethical limits. It is then contended that the author's moral position in the novel tends toward the Derridean unconditional hospitality and, therein conventional understanding of friends and enemies is hardly tenable, requiring, therefore, conceptual revision. To bring home this view, this paper first interprets friendliness and enmity by virtue of Jacques Derrida's theorization of hospitality and next examines the characters' mutual engagement following the Derridean perspective. One comes to realize that the novel is aptly a tale of hospitality, with friendship

narrowly constructed as it is in Conservative rule and the City of Amsterdam—as a spatial metaphor—pointing to the hardly redeeming state of the matter.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*, hospitality, amity, animosity, ethics

I . Introduction

Though a Booker Prize winner in 1998, *Amsterdam* (1998) has received quite divided reviews¹ and has been figured as one of the “lesser” novels written by Ian McEwan (Childs 118). Mainly, this novel has been perceived by some as less gratifying for its perceivable “predictability,” “melodrama,” and “over-coincidence” (Childs 4). The title of the novel, for instance, has a direct correlation (not surprisingly) with the City, one that has legalized euthanasia, where its two leading principals’ make a pact to help each other die. For the critic Adam Mars-Jones, the ending is thus unduly contrived (6). Moreover, one could not but feel keenly that this novel is only too well-structured to move beyond mere symmetry and balance. One then suspects that the prize has been awarded not so much for the novel’s excellence as for the author’s “accumulated efforts” (Head 144). Among others, McEwan’s two previous novels, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) and *Black Dogs* (1992), have been shortlisted for the same prize without actually ever winning it.²

Question-begging as it is, the novel is a satire conscientiously reflective of the British society McEwan finds problematic. The author himself claims that this novel signifies a farewell to the 18-year Conservative reign, serving as “a burlesque of the recently deposed Conservative government led by Prime Minister John Major” (Childs 118-9). One can see this deposition echoed through the downfall of the xenophobic Foreign Secretary, Julian Garmony, in the novel. The implied attack is targeted at the “radical” and “divisive” atmosphere fomented under Thatcherism (Head 145). The reason why is that the kind of individualism prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s has encouraged an exclusive stress on “self-gain” and “personal advantage” (Head 11). Apart from Garmony, the other three male characters (George Lane, Clive Linley, and Vernon Halliday) in the novel are likewise implicated in such a predicament. In particular, McEwan criticizes the enclosure of selves and the inability to engage with others ethically most conspicuously through the portrayals of Clive and Vernon: the former fails to rescue a woman about to be raped in order to grasp an inspiration for his symphony while the latter publishes the pictures showing Garmony in female attire in *The Judge*, a paper which he edits and is currently in decline.

As a matter of fact, the exploration of ethical problems persists throughout McEwan’s novels, most explicitly in *The Child in Time* (1987), *Black Dogs* (1992), and *Enduring Love* (1997). Possessing such an exceptional propensity for linking

* The author thanks the two anonymous reviewers for their inspiring comments and suggestions.

¹ According to David Malcolm, reception of *Amsterdam* “has been, as ever, quite mixed, many critics praising its skill and acute commentary on part of contemporary British life, others finding the piece lightweight and lacking in substance” (190).

² McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) had also been shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001 without ever receiving the award.

novel-writing and morality makes McEwan one of “a quartet of key writers”—others being Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro, Graham Swift—who have undertaken to shape “an ethical vision for the ‘post-consensus’ period”³ (Head 2).⁴ What has confronted him is not just the political inertia as mentioned above, but also “a dislocated generation” no longer compatible with the old class structure (Head 9). New forms of affiliation and responsibility, and of course, social problems, emerge rapidly more than ever to unsettle the moral status of the Britons. Meeting the effervescent newness *vis-à-vis* also entails the question of how to tackle the random and contingent nature of experience—a compelling issue, certainly, so that Clive laments that “There was something seriously wrong with the world for which neither God nor his absence could be blamed” (*Am* 4).⁵ He observes too that identity problems worsen due to the complicated world: “We know so little about each other. We lie mostly submerged, like ice floes, with our social selves projecting only cool and white” (*Am* 71). Pathetically, his stance in relation to his ethical dilemma is not viable enough to cope with a drastically changing society.

However, this paper studies *Amsterdam*, as distinguished from McEwan’s other novels, for its highlight of temporality and the implied urgency to tackle one’s moral identity. It is not far-fetched to say that the novel is concerned with *waiting*: McEwan shows Clive consistently pressurized by the deadlines of submitting his symphony for rehearsal and Vernon rather obsessed with the day of exposing Garmony’s pictures. Such waiting, in other words, forces them to make decisions, and the decisions invariably suggest applications of values and attitudes. The overriding temporal frame of the novel is even more evocative; readers are reminded over and over again, along with Clive, that a new millennium is ahead (the novel itself was first published in 1998). The author appears to juxtapose two temporal structures: the time of mundanity for the characters and a time that is messianic and affranchising, thus stressing an ethical vision, possibly beyond what the self-centered British society in the novel can foresee. All the underlying attention to temporal expressions and the suggested contingency of life only reinforces the author’s call for moral inquiries and search for accountable, ethical stances in an era of flux and disintegration.

To study the ethical terrain as depicted by McEwan in *Amsterdam*, this paper focuses on the ideas of enmity and animosity and analyzes the interaction between its four male characters. They remain friends, Clive and Vernon in particular, but

³ The “post-consensus” period designates the era which had begun after the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Her government aimed to terminate “outdated social solidarities” but understood liberty in the sense of “divisiveness”—thus constituting “a resurgence of English nativism, xenophobia, and nostalgia for the British Empire’s centrality in international affairs” (Walkowitz). What followed was the political agenda for the cultural marginalization and subordination of the other.

⁴ Genealogically speaking, McEwan’s moral concerns also relate the tradition of tackling the “loaded” and “fateful” moral decisions in modern novels “from James to Conrad to Forster” (Allen 60).

⁵ *Am* represents *Amsterdam* in reference to page numbers.

underneath are the on-going processes of defining and re-defining friendship and the tempting of ethical limits. It is then contended that McEwan's moral position in the novel tends toward the Derridean unconditional hospitality and, therein conventional understanding of friends and enemies is hardly tenable, therefore, requiring conceptual revision. To bring home this view, this paper first interprets friendliness and animosity by virtue of Jacques Derrida's theorization of hospitality and examines the characters' mutual engagement following the Derridean perspective. One comes to realize that *Amsterdam* is aptly a tale of hospitality, with friendship narrowly constructed as it is in Conservative rule and the City of Amsterdam—as a spatial metaphor—pointing to the hardly redeeming state of the matter.

II. Friends and/or Enemies: *Hostipitality*

The fact that the friendships between the four males in *Amsterdam* are merely nominal but have to be maintained suffices to attest to McEwan's awareness of the necessity of adopting ethical stances in relation to the others, even if in a crumbling social network. The rub, however, lies in the difficulty of repositioning oneself in a debilitating structure. This is how Clive feels when he thinks of leaving Molly's funeral as the weather is too cold. Moments earlier, he has supposed "something seriously wrong with the world for which neither God nor his absence could be blamed" because the temperature is "minus eleven" in London on the funeral day (*Am* 4). Yet, precisely, "no one could escape the centripetal power of a social event" (*Am* 9). The centrifugal drive against social cohesion becomes more strained when one realizes that Molly was in fact George's wife and used to be the other three men's lover at one time or another. Friendship (socially defined) hence serves as a microcosm presented by McEwan to inspect the moral complications resulting from the loss of an ingratiating 'center.'⁶

The interpersonal involution derived from the commingling of friendliness and animosity exemplifies Derrida's idea of "hostipitality." The term is nonexistent just as Derrida considers hospitality (when truly ethical) to be "inconceivable" and "incomprehensible" (*AoR* 362).⁷ It is in this stalemate where 'hospitality' and 'hostility' encroach upon each other and, in a subtle twist, one usurps the other. As Derrida writes of hospitality, it is "a word which carries its own contradiction

⁶ The loss of the "ingratiating center" appears to imply the moral superiority of women over men in the novel. Please see note 13 for more discussion. However, it is interesting to note that Christina Byrnes surmises that Molly might have contracted syphilis and died of it (146). This could, in turn, explain both Clive's and Vernon's anxieties about death. If that is the case, the threats arising out of promiscuity may perhaps reflect the moral straits confronting the male characters in the novel. McEwan's envisaging of women hence partakes of complexity and needs further exploration elsewhere.

⁷ *AoR* stands for *Acts of Religion*. See works cited.

incorporated into it” and becomes “parasitized by its opposite, ‘hostility,’ the undesirable guest” (“Hosti” 3).⁸ The ethical dilemma also finds its embodiment in the French word *hôte*. The uncertainty regarding the confusion and reshuffle of social roles that McEwan has his readers reflect on points to the indeterminacy of this word: host or guest? In any case, Derrida thinks it is likely that “the guest...becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of host” and then “The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*)” (*OH* 125).⁹

Such *aporia* is Derrida’s critical approach to the ethics of hospitality in the West. For Derrida, hospitality is in truth “ethicity itself, the whole and principle of ethics” (*Adieu* 50).¹⁰ He specially deliberates about Immanuel Kant’s mode of receiving strangers. Because of humans’ “communal possession of the earth’s surface,” Kant conceives that strangers are endowed with a “cosmopolitan right” (qtd. in “Hosti” 5). It is, as he explains, “the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory” (qtd. in “Hosti” 4). This liberal attitude aptly complies with the idea of the global village and pertains as well to contemporary environmental issues. Nevertheless, one particular defect about such liberal-mindedness is that the Kantian hospitality, though universal, remains juridically denoted. As Derrida himself indicates, this seemingly embracing hospitality actually suggests “state sovereignty”: namely, either private or public reception of the other is “dependent on and controlled by the law and the state police” (*OCF* 22).¹¹

Consequent upon this legal state of hospitality is a quasi-welcome, not quite. It engenders a “circular commerce” by which kindness is possible only when the guest stays subject to the host’s laws (*AoR* 398). Mark W. Westmoreland explains that the host-guest relationship, thus, contracts reciprocity and partakes in “an economy of exchange, even an economy of violence” (2). The guest, so to speak, assimilates himself in the semiotic grid of the host: to speak the host’s language (“Hosti” 6) and to be named in that language, bereft of any otherness that necessitates a genuine hail. The conventionally understood hospitality is accordingly conditional, harboring limits, boundaries, and confines in order to secure the sovereignty of the host. Receiving the other forms a way of reaffirming the authority and lawful status of the master (“Hosti” 4). It turns out that *xenia*, the pact of hospitality, subsumes and abjects a foreigner (*xenos*) simultaneously (*OH* 29). Otherness is neither in nor out in its peripheral standing.

⁸ “Hosti” stands for “Hostipitality.” See works cited.

⁹ *OH* stands for *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. See works cited.

¹⁰ *Adieu* stands for *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. See works cited.

¹¹ *OCF* stands for *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. See works cited.

A substantial welcome, as Derrida expounds, entails no restrictions, no regulations, without reaching any pact:

...absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (*OH* 25)

It appears that Derrida proposes an ethical vision in which reception does not require identification of any otherness. Otherwise, the moment *names* (as conditions for showing kindness) are enquired, guests but enter into the economy of exchange with hosts and become subjugated in the latter's semiotic mechanism as an object to be invested with sameness. This passage also indicates that unqualified hospitality discharges hosts from their masterfulness, to make them overtaken by otherness—so that “the guest becomes the host of the host.” Moreover, for the reason that this absolute hospitality welcomes the unknown, waiting to be surprised and usurped, the arrival of the other hence instantiates “visitation,” as opposed to the act of “invitation” inherent in conditional generosity, which is set about to the exclusion of differences (“Hosti” 14).

In either case of hospitality, though, the self can rarely remain intact. Authority of the host in the hospitality qua *xenia* does not in reality liquidate the otherness received. As Derrida notes, curiously enough, the host enforces the law of hospitality not so much by terminating heterogeneity as by “folding the foreign other” into his sovereignty (“Hosti” 7). That is, the erasure by the host of the other fails to eliminate the differences that underpin his very being. On the other hand, in unlimited hospitality, the self is pronouncedly toppled by the other and becomes the “hostage” of the guest (*OH* 123). For Derrida, however, this plight has always been germane to the host—the host “who really always has been” the hostage (*OH* 123). In sum, hospitality must be “an interruption of the self,” willed or unwilled (*Adieu* 51). Both friendliness and animosity thus inhere in relationships between either friends or enemies. An ethical approach to the connection would be, as Derrida comments on Emmanuel Levinas, to “welcome the infinite,” to traverse “beyond the capacity of the I,” and to recognize oneself as an inmate of the other (*AoR* 386).

III. Demand, Supply, and *Xenia*

Amsterdam burlesques the decline of the Conservative rule—that is, McEwan might have adjudged the confining hospitality of the then British government as in the destiny of Garmony. Yet, one can find that the burlesque is intricately embedded in a larger structure of reception that makes the novel distinctly a tale of hospitality in its tainted form: *hostipitality*. At the outset is the funeral for Molly, with George being the legitimate host. Problems with reception arise forthwith. He “had made it clear there was to be no memorial service” though Molly’s friends “would have preferred not to be at a crematorium” (*Am* 8). George, Molly’s husband, as the narrator explains, “didn’t want to hear these three former lovers [Garmony, Clive, and Vernon] publicly comparing notes...or exchanging glances while he made his own speech” (*Am* 8). Besides, there were even no beverages offered during the funeral—complained about rather indignantly (*Am* 18). Obviously, George exercises his sovereignty, and the hospitality he demonstrates requires his guests to be servile to all of the inconveniences. In the end of the novel, equally unfavorable is that—as Clive and Vernon are dead by now and Garmony has lost his political power—it occurs to George that it might be a good time for him to hold a memorial service and “his mind was already settling luxuriously on the fascinating matter of the guest list” (*Am* 179). This completes the novel as a ghastly fable of hospitality.

Furthermore, it appears that George is the manipulating host behind the scenes, determined to cleanse his dominion of otherness. It is his selling of Garmony’s cross-dressing pictures to Vernon that triggers off the complications in the novel for the sake of “being oneself in one’s own home” (“Hosti” 4). His masterfulness is, hence, maintained “by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence” (*OH* 55). Such exercise of authority leads George to find the creating of a guest list enthralling for it demands the sameness requisite to friends and insulated against enemies. His kindness therefore instantiates the “circular commerce” in conditional hospitality, feasible only when regulated by terms and practiced in exchange. This may explain the narrator’s comment that he is “incapable of taking friends for granted. A burden of the hugely rich” (*Am* 9). His wealth and property merely position him more firmly in the social grid of trade.

Acting as the overarching host in *Amsterdam*, George spreads out his sovereignty also in relation to his wife, Molly, portrayed as a victimized guest. As McEwan writes of her rapid slip into death,

Poor Molly. It began with a tingling in her arm as she raised it outside the Dorchester Grill to stop a cab; a sensation never went away. Within weeks she was fumbling for the names of things. *Parliament, chemistry, propeller* she could forgive herself, but less so *bed, cream, mirror*. It was

after the temporary disappearance of *acanthus* and *bresaola* that she sought medical advice, expecting reassurance. Instead, she was sent for tests and, in a sense, never returned. How quickly feisty Molly became the sick-room prisoner of her morose, possessive husband, George. (*Am* 3)

Being the dynamic center of the novelistic narrative, Molly is somehow able to smooth away interpersonal uneasiness. However, her death occasions George's chance of rising to the status of a host. The passage above recalls the host's dictatorial language: Molly's linguistic competence gives away, symbolically, to the infringing sovereignty of her husband. His violence, in trying to assimilate otherness, thus, makes him a "morose, possessive husband." The confirmation of Molly's ownership is again highlighted by the fact that George can now access Molly's room inside the house. Previously, this couple occupies different rooms, each living an agreed upon independent life; friends of Molly enter her room outside the house. Yet, George could now lead Vernon to her room just inside it (*Am* 53)—a sign of regaining control and claiming sovereignty. His role, hence, exemplifies the etymology of 'hospitality': the *potis* in it signifies, in all its possibilities, a composite of power, master, and husband ("Hosti" 13). All the while his friendliness to Molly's once lovers simply camouflages his scheme of becoming the primal master. It is no wonder that George lies to Garmony about his not being the one supplying the scandalous pictures when they start out to visit Amsterdam to escort the bodies of Clive and Vernon back to England (*Am* 174-75). He upholds a friendly façade but corroborates his majestic station.

Amid George's act of hospitality, or hostipitality, the dialectic between friendliness and animosity is most prominent in the friendship between Clive and Vernon. Both are likewise embroiled in the "circular commerce" by which kindness and generosity are given based on points of reference. Beset by Molly's death, Clive gravely requests his friend to help him die a dignified death, not "to die that way [how Molly's life ends], with no awareness, like an animal..." (*Am* 5). He also says:

Especially if I got to the point where I couldn't make the decision for myself, or act on it. So, what I am saying is this—I'm asking you, as my oldest friend, to help me if it ever got to the point where you could see that it was the right thing. Just as we might have helped Molly if we'd been able.... (*Am* 49)

Unable to take such "uncomfortable emotional proximity" and the heaviness of this responsibility for his friend, Vernon replies that he needs some time to think about it

and leaves for a previously settled appointment with George (*Am* 49-50). That very night, he writes a note for Clive, making a promise that “*Yes, on one condition only: that you’d do the same for me. V.*” (*Am* 57).

There are quite a few things to note about this agreement. Firstly, it partakes of the circularity characteristic of conditional hospitality. Vernon’s consent is conditional—as long as Clive reciprocates (though the contract seems morbid). The reserved compliance counters Derrida’s vision for ethical reception that one has to say *yes* all the time to “let oneself be overtaken...in a fashion almost violent...” (*AoR* 361). Here, violence is mitigated, and the two friends’ pact forms a cycle of demand and supply, with every term precisely fathomed, nothing contingent. Secondly, a dignified death, it appears, contrasts sharply with an animalistic end of life. Pivotal to such a difference is the awareness and agency of humans. Judging from the moral flaws of the two friends, their fault consists mainly in the lack of such awareness and agency: Clive not saving the endangered woman and Vernon not respecting Garmony’s transvestitism. To be morally answerable, McEwan intimates pertinently that one has to take the initiative in ethical dilemmas so as to be a human. Thus, it is intriguing for Vernon to view himself as a “swine” when he fails to respond to Clive’s openhandedness (*Am* 43); for Rose, Garmony’s wife, to condemn him as a “flea” in trying to expose the pictures (*Am* 125); for Clive to denounce him as “Vermin Halliday” in his antagonism for him (*Am* 138). Thirdly, the decision to enter *xenia* with Clive follows the meeting between Vernon and George, in which the latter reveals the pictures to the former while making them available for purchase (*Am* 51-6). That offer, once again, anticipates an occurrence of *xenia*: Vernon would later on seek Clive’s support for his uncovering of Garmony’s idiosyncrasy. Finally, his failure in undertaking such “uncomfortable emotional proximity” in the beginning testifies that friendship, as generally conceived, does imply a certain limit, a limit that confirms and continues sovereignty of a subject but, nevertheless, blunts an absolute reception of otherness. Proximity also means approaching “beyond the capacity of the I,” to the expiration of the self, hence the uncomfortable feeling.

In reality, the friendship between Clive and Vernon has been inherently problematic and troublesome. The former has felt “a certain lopsidedness” in his friendship with the latter and, yet, has dismissed such “unworthy thoughts” (*Am* 65). However, his wrathful dissatisfaction surfaces after they have had a major bickering with each other over whether or not to publish the pictures. Vernon is actually seeking his friend’s support but rages at being pushed away for ethical concerns: to respect privacy and not to betray Molly, the one who has taken the pictures out of the trust shared between her and Garmony (*Am* 70-3). McEwan explicates the long-existing “imbalance,” as recalled by Clive, now dismantled by his friend’s excessive and

unqualified anger:

There was the time, for example, way back, when Vernon stayed for a year and never once offered to pay rent. And was it not generally true that over the years it had been Clive rather than Vernon who had provided the music—in every sense? The wine, the food, the house, the musicians and other interesting company.... When had Vernon ever proposed and arranged some fascinating pleasure? Why had he never properly acknowledged the act of friendship that lay behind his borrowing a large sum to see Vernon through a difficult time? When he had an infection, Clive visited almost every day; when Clive slipped on the pavement outside his house and broke his ankle, Vernon sent his secretary round with a bag of books from *The Judge*'s books page slush pile. (*Am* 65)

To sum up, Clive “had given, but what had he ever received” (*Am* 65)? Besides, “there was really nothing at its centre, nothing for Clive,” except Molly connecting the two friends (*Am* 66).

Clive's appeal may have signification. His disaffection, nonetheless, arises from his thwarted attempt to enter the relationship of exchange with Vernon. His prospect of ‘balance’ thus indicates the circularity in conditional hospitality: generosity presupposes returns from receivers. Clive's continual kindness to Vernon implicitly demands that he comply with the structure of sameness to subordinate himself to a debt that may have initially been a gift. It is then paradoxical for Clive to be downright hospitable but, when pushed to the limit of the self, to shield off the other that would hold him a hostage. Also noteworthy is McEwan's nonchalant and apparent detached account of the psychological state of Clive, which only intensifies the mercantile aspect of his friendship with Vernon, bleaching out whatever feeling that can possibly be called human in a transaction of demand and supply. In the final analysis, he is no better than his friend: both are criticized by McEwan for their pursuit of self-interest encouraged under Thatcherism.

Consequentially, the friendship between the two friends reiterates the concept of hospitality, just as in George's hospitality. The idea of friendliness can hardly be severed from animosity because it implies borders and frontiers that could make amity potentially hostile. This cumbersome parcel of friendliness and animosity is suggested, perhaps, in the news Vernon wishes to release about the “Siamese twins joined at the hip” (*Am* 33). Their disagreement over whether to take a picture or not for *The Judge* incites him further to make public the twins. As he deplores his home editor's hesitation due to their indecision, he cries out: “Oh God! Don't you see? That's all

part of the story. They've fallen out. First thing anyone would want to know—how do they settle disputes" (*Am* 37)? Vernon is even more excited when he knows there are "bite marks" on the twins' faces (*Am* 37). What he does not know, however, is that the story about the twins both foreshadows and embodies his entanglement with Clive. The "parasitized" term "hospitality," thus, makes irrelevant the problem of distinguishing friends and enemies and calls for a revision of "friendship."

IV. Moments of the Infinite

McEwan shows, largely in the cases of Clive and Vernon, the indeterminacy of self-contained sovereignty because of the unforeseen arrival of the infinite. As a composer, Clive is commissioned by the British government to write the "Millennial Symphony" to celebrate the upcoming new millennium (*Am* 14). Notable is the point that the task itself forms, again, another instance of *xenia*; though, it is meant for commemoration. There is in it plainly some tension between human and divine rule: 'millennium' connotes deliverance and messianic yearning, but the aforesaid project for celebration, officially assigned, appears to enclose the infinite in the worldly hospitality. The authorities concerned desire, among others,

a symphony from which could be distilled at least one tune, a hymn, an elegy for the maligned and departed century that could be incorporated into the official proceedings, much as 'Nessun Dorma' had been into a football tournament. (*Am* 21)

Namely, the government, as the host, wishes to make the symphony public and ritualistic enough to engage its mass, the guest, giving rise to a contract of clandestine control between them since the latter becomes subsumed. Nevertheless, the result of Clive's composition of the symphony is a fiasco and, thus, is never performed for public ears—possibly due to the influence of the absolute other. Moreover, considering the time of *Amsterdam*'s first publication, one surmises that McEwan is probably launching a parallel critique of the governmental Millennium Dome project. The Dome turns out to be unattractive to visitors in its use in 2000, a significant implosion of conditional hospitality when one contextualizes the novel.

To be specific, the symphony is aborted because it features the unethical inclusion and exclusion of otherness. For one thing, in Garmony's words, "Apparently there's a tune at the end, shameless copy of Beethoven's Ode to Joy, give or take a note or two" so that the premiere has been cancelled (*Am* 176). Clive's plagiarism is, thus, a possessive act of absorbing and appropriating the other without

acknowledgement in order to maintain his authority of being a “maestro”: as Clive prides himself complacently, “Ah, to be in continental Europe and be maestro!” (*Am* 158). Here, one could see an obvious connection between the chase of self-interest and the mode of sameness in confining reception. The other factor for the abortion of the symphony consists in Clive’s refusal to be morally accountable for a woman about to be raped. This occurs when Clive visits the Lake District for getting inspiration to complete the finale for his hopefully lustrous *tour de force*. At the very moment, he identifies *the element* from the notes given out by a large grey bird, his attention is soon diverted to a quarreling couple (in which the man appears threatening and prone to violence) (*Am* 84-5). Desiring to jot down what he has heard in time before forgetting, his reflection is at that moment “as clear as a neon sign: *I am not here*” (*Am* 85). In other words, Clive faces an ethical dilemma but decides to sustain his self-delimited sovereignty by excluding the other. His “self-justification” goes as follows:

...whatever it might have involved—violence, or the threat of violence, or his embarrassed apologies, or, ultimately, a statement to the police—if he had approached the couple, a pivotal moment in his career would have been destroyed. The melody could not have survived the psychic flurry. Given the width of the ridge and the numerous paths that crossed it, how easily he could have missed them. It was as if he wasn’t there. He wasn’t there. He was in his music. His fate, their fate.... (*Am* 88)

Under the critical circumstances facing the woman, Clive still allows his “overweening ambition”¹² to hold sway over his ethical decisions, whereas his musical failure hints at the impossibility of hospitality: the infinite is always there to challenge the self, to force it out of the only-I vision. Hence, the contrast between “invitation” and “visitation” in the ethics of reception informs Clive’s moral predicament. Incapacitated to tackle the randomness of the event above, Clive would render hospitality to the woman only conditionally.

In the moment of self-justification, he also wonders about the identity of the couple, thinking that if they turn out to be “closely bound,” they could “turn on him for presuming to interfere” (*Am* 87). Yet, in absolute hospitality, one is obliged to welcome the anonymous. As Derrida questions, “...is hospitality *rendered*, is it *given* to the other before they are identified, even before they are (posited as or supposed to be) a subject, legal subject and subject nameable by their family name, etc.” (*OH* 29)?

¹² Music has been employed by McEwan in some of his novels in different lights; he explains in his conversation with Ryan Roberts that he has used it in *Amsterdam* as “a means of talking about overweening ambition of wanting to really create this perfect thing” (See Roberts 194-95).

If names are required, it is conditional hospitality being practiced: one identifies the other in order to issue an *invitation*. Conversely, since the infinite is contingent by nature, it could only arrive unawares. Clive then behaves rather impertinently toward the unexpected (as characteristic of *visitation*) in relation to the messianic overtones of the symphony at work.

The moment of the infinite for Vernon chiefly concerns his treatment of Garmony's pictures. As the editor of *The Judge*, he has been planning to use them to raise the paper's circulation ever since his meeting with George. Enveloping this motif is, nevertheless, the altruistic pompous cause of saving the country from the limbo of poverty and agitation once Garmony becomes elected Prime Minister (*Am* 72). Such disquietude is not groundless for the Foreign Secretary is no other than "the hanger and flogger, the family values man, the scourge of immigrants, asylum seekers, travelers, marginal people" (*Am* 73). It recalls McEwan's critique of Conservatism that underlies *Amsterdam*: the politics of exclusiveness and narcissism of the self. The heroism of Vernon is, nevertheless, undermined by his egoistical ground of glorifying his career. In a sense, the hospitality he has given to the British people reeks of reciprocity and interchange. What is subjugated is the other as epitomized by the cross-dressing Garmony; Vernon is to be the host of the host (Garmony, officially speaking) who subjects otherness to sameness. His sovereignty in this case contrasts sharply with his former capacity as "an apologist for the sexual revolution" (*Am* 73).

Vernon is frustrated in his ambitious project precisely because he is "overtaken" by the other "in a fashion almost violent." This occurs during the press conference in which Rose, Garmony's wife, relates what has happened to her family recently, just the day before the appearance of the Foreign Secretary's sexually expressive pictures in *The Judge*. Remarkably, she draws out one of the pictures (the one for the front page) and displays it downright in front of the camera. For Vernon, the gesture is a "spoiler" (*Am* 124), in that it deadens the sensational force his paper had intended to produce the next day; but it is noteworthy that this gesture signifies a contingent instant by which the other suddenly emerges and surprises the host—Vernon, tensed, watching all this and quite disabled like a hostage.¹³ As Clive concludes his friend's

¹³ One could easily discern that women for McEwan appear to be more moral beings than men. Both Molly and Rose are capable of embracing differences: the former (in a sense) abates the tensions between the four men as host and guest while the latter never shows signs of indignation at her husband's unfaithfulness and the 'indecent' pictures. Dominic Head contends that the author's friendliness toward women has been due to "the second wave of feminism" as shown in Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970)—of which McEwan did read (5). In McEwan's own words, "my female characters became the repository of all the goodness that men fell short of" (qtd. in Head 5). One senses, therefore, the flatness about the characterization of Molly and Rose—one epitomizes sensuous perfection ("restaurant critic," "gorgeous wit," "photographer," "daring gardener," *Am* 3) while the other intellectual beauty combined with maternal tolerance (in her capacity as a pediatrician, *Am* 93-7). Both are further deprived of realism, with Molly dead and Rose taking on media exteriority as she defends her husband in front of the camera.

lukewarm amity and selective support for sex issues, Vernon errs on the “lack of principle” (*Am* 66). The want of principle is the refusal of the self to be interrupted, and, in fact, this “lack” applies to all the men engaged by ethical concerns in the novel.

Conceivably, McEwan is sensible to bring about the moments of the infinite mainly by dint of music and pictures. As humans’ art works, both of them generate meanings in the way Émile Benveniste calls “the semantic mode,” in contradistinction to “the semiotic mode” (241). That is to say, music and photography are systems composed of units (notes, colors, etc.) that, unlike self-sufficient signs, become meaningful only when interpretation sets in. In Benveniste’s words, “They [figurative arts] are designated, they do not designate” (238). To wit, McEwan appears to foreground Clive and Vernon as interpreters of the other: both are in a position to construct what one can know about the world, but the commanding niche they entertain, nevertheless, accompanies moral responsibilities. Somehow, their approach to the other implies and mirrors their narcissistic images; the self returns repeatedly to the sovereign and capable I.

The exertion of authority to persist in finitude points to the blocking of “participatory thinking,” which, as defined by M. M. Bakhtin, resides in “the acknowledgement of my unique participation in that world, by my *non-alibi* in it” (56-7). Accordingly, Clive’s “*I am not here*” powerfully reveals the depravity of focalizing self-interest, and the ‘contemporariness’ of such immorality is aptly evidenced in McEwan’s observation that this thought is “as clear as a neon sign.” Vernon’s stance regarding Garmony’s transvestitism, likewise, founders because of its non-participation in the world. As one newspaper editor comments on Vernon, “It seems to have escaped the attention of the editor of *The Judge* that the decade we live in now is not like the one before” (*Am* 126).

The other, so to speak, forays into the egotistical bastion of the host, not so much to terminate his subjectivity as to establish a viable social network of reception informed by moral causes. The guest, then, as Derrida puts it, acts as the “liberator” (“Hosti” 10), the messianic figure capable of interrupting the self and touching off “participatory thinking.” Hence, the temporal frame in *Amsterdam* (the forthcoming new millennium) is symptomatic of the immediacy and urgency by which one has to contemplate his/her correlation with the other. The meanings derived therein would, therefore, approximate what Walter Benjamin terms as “pure language,” a state where meaning is not determined by the language of the translator but emanates from “the harmony” between the intentions underlying languages (75). The complementary relationship between languages, in a sense, develops into a model of hospitality in which the host’s language becomes liberated from the pen of selfhood and combines

with the language of the other to access the messianic. In this vein, McEwan is being sarcastic as he writes of Clive's "gift of perfect pitch" (*Am* 4). Firstly, such a talent emphasizes an exact imitative translation that appeals to sameness. Secondly, this is said when Clive is creating mental notes for "Man's first disobedience, the Fall, a falling figure, an oboe, nine notes, ten notes" (*Am* 4)—suggesting his incompetence in welcoming the infinite, a theme he is, nonetheless, obliged to meet squarely for his Millennial Symphony.

One may wonder whether the deaths of the two friends in Amsterdam toward the finish of the novel embody the moment of the infinite, since they drink poisoned champagne offered by each other unawares. Such deaths, too, may epitomize the acme of absolute hospitality: the extinction of one's sovereignty by the unknown. However, their hospitality to each other stays inscribed in *xenia*. For one thing, it is out of a pact that they fulfill their promises, resulting from layers of exchange of terms. Besides, the two friends are determined to abide by their promises, because they loathe each other for betraying their friendship and causing the subsequent frustration of each other's ambitions. Therefore, their attempt to "seal the reconciliation" in Amsterdam (Clive is there for the rehearsal of his symphony while Vernon, just laid off, visits the city for employment possibilities) harbors enmity inside (*Am* 162), betokening again the *hostipitality* indicative of conditional kindness. The other element of concern is the City of Amsterdam. It is in this City that the fulfillment of their pact is possible: euthanasia can be practiced without giving rise to legal liabilities. That is, profoundly, the juridical aspect of hospitality Derrida faults about Kant. The deaths of Clive and Vernon in Amsterdam, thus, implicate double *xenia*, by which life and death remain subordinate to sovereign entities.

George is the only one appearing unaffected by the infinite in *Amsterdam*. In the end of the novel, he even savors the thought of holding a memorial service for his deceased wife, Molly, being pleased by the task of drafting a list of guests he would endorse and entertained by the thoughts of dating Vernon's wife, Mandy—"Perhaps it was not too soon to ask her out to dinner" (*Am* 178). Such devices reaffirm his status as the host, with sovereignty confirmed through "filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence." An ending like this is a tantalizing close for the novel, however, because, in so doing, McEwan extends the novelistic world to his readers. The smugness as felt by George is merely temporary; his hospitality calls for a scrutiny inside and outside the novel with the new millennium only some years ahead.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Amsterdam* thus exemplifies what Kiernan Ryan terms as the "art of unease," which he applies to McEwan's oeuvre (5). Here, the uneasiness extends, as the present study contends, to the readers, who share the same temporal frame with the characters in the novel.

V. Conclusion

Amity and animosity between the four males in *Amsterdam*, as seen in the foregoing analysis, bespeaks an ethical mess in which friends and enemies are identified through the politics of sameness. It is the kind of complication that spells out the Derridean “hostipitality”: the taken-for-granted hospitality is untenable for its impossible reception of the other and its already interrupted subject of reception. Clive and Vernon are even placed *vis-à-vis* the infinite, thus revealing the pressing urge to move beyond one’s self-interest into the realm of otherness. All is set in anticipation of the new millennium, to accentuate the compulsoriness of McEwan’s explicit call for an ethical inspection of the self in relation to the society and the world. George’s exemption from the infinite connects the novel to readers all the more because of the temporal frame they have in common with the characters in it. The overarching host of the novel, namely, remains in indeterminacy but readers know his sovereignty is contrived, awaiting the arrival of the Guest from nowhere.

One final consideration to note regarding *Amsterdam* is its title. It is true that this title selected by the author might have formed one of the reasons why some critics find the novel unappealing for its predictability. However, it may also be true that the evocation of the City of Amsterdam is quite pertinent to McEwan’s concern about the ethical ineptitude in conditional hospitality in point of friends and enemies. The City not only suggests *double xenia* for Clive and Vernon (see discussion above) but also indicates that the ultimate other, death, is regulated by law. Such lends an intimidating sense of self-confinement to the ethical dilemmas as depicted by McEwan. Not even the Lake District where Clive pursues inspiration can escape the anathema of closure. For him, this sanctuary for the Romantics merely serves as a repository of useful arousals: the moment he obtains one, he desires “the anonymity of the city again, and the confinement of his studio” (*Am* 89). Some form of *xenia* obviously inheres in his attempt to liberate himself in the District. Correspondingly, Amsterdam becomes a potent trope that recapitulates the ethical entanglements throughout the novel—perhaps it is not a coincidence that, as Vernon visits George for the pictures, the latter opens “the door of his *Holland Park* mansion [italicization mine]” (*Am* 51). This opening, in retrospect, signifies much.

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