

Performing the Ethics and Aesthetics of Violence in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of violence in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*. It considers the critical reception of the work before moving on to a closer examination of the complex aesthetic skills and ethical considerations displayed by the work. The reading is largely based on the performative aspects of the text, but in the process also borrows Julia Kristeva's native/foreigner dialectic and delves into the postmodern ethical/aesthetic issues. It is an attempt to understand why McEwan's luridly provocative novel is so often approached with reverence rather than disgust. One possibility is that the role of violence in the novel is not as gratuitous as it seems and induces a very active form of self-questioning. Indeed, using violence as the focus, it is possible to argue that McEwan has not only mastered the art of writing, but in practicing his art has perfected a very sophisticated form of moral awareness. *The Comfort of Strangers* provides a very particular form of moral questioning by engaging the reader in a coherent,

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powerful and meaningful reading experience.

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It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality. (McEwan, 2001)

Reviewers and critics alike never fail to start their writing on Ian McEwan by drawing on some of the following appellations: king of macabre, writer of grotesque extremes, *enfant terrible*, chronicler of obscenity, etc. McEwan's reputation for writing "literature of shock" rests mainly in his early fiction, with his works following *The Child in Time*, first published in 1987, considered psychologically disturbing but also much more socially and politically sophisticated. According to Peter Childs, *The Comfort of Strangers*, which was first published in 1981, is a representative work of shock literature, because it is preoccupied with sordid sexuality, violent relationships and disturbing mentalities (2006: 3, 6). Since most critics seem to agree that McEwan's early writing is morbid, lurid and even obscene, it is surprising that so few have truly castigated him for his early style.

Lewis Jones, reviewing *The Comfort of Strangers* in 1981, criticised the work as yet another venture into filth. Yet he was careful to explain that it was a special kind of filth where "perverted sex" had a "fresh style" and taboos displayed an unusual quality of normality. His verdict on the book was: "It is short, it is about sex and it is excellent" (1981: 23-24). In another contemporary review, penned by Eliot Fremont-Smith, the novel is criticised for creating suspense but not delivering the horror. McEwan's *fatal* error, he said, was to use "alert, lean, lucid prose" for an "upscale beach read" and to encourage moral cogitations using the suspense-horror genre. Ultimately, "it is not the purpose of suspense-horror to make us feel bad. . . . If there's one thing the genre can't survive, it is explanation" and "McEwan's very efficiency ('admiring the machine, his craftiness [and our art-appreciation of it]') does him in" (Fremont-Smith, 1981: 32).

The success or failure of McEwan's work is often measured by his moral stance or writing skills, thus when further probing reveals his moral position to be slippery or his arguments tendentious, it is often his technical skill and masterful prose that takes centre stage. I will focus on the latter in this paper as it is my belief that McEwan has not only mastered the art of writing, but is practicing it in such a way as to perfect the distribution of moral responsibility.

To examine why McEwan's most luridly provocative novel to date has not been dismissed as mere titillation but is so often approached with mysterious reverence, I would like to look at some of its *performative* aspects; in short, the role of violence in the novel, what McEwan delivers as a writer and the active contributions expected from us to make the whole reading experience a coherent, powerful and meaningful one. Although the ideas overlap and are integral to each other, it is possible to categorise violence in the novel in three ways: as literal portrayals of violence, violence as literary device, and the psychological repercussions of violence. Ultimately, I would like to argue that these combined "acts" of violence contribute to our appreciation of the novel not separately as a lesson on morality or as an appraisal of literary skill, but as parts of a unified and wholesome performance that successfully initiates a moralistic self-questioning.

I. Performance

Richard Schechner's *Essays on Performance Theory: 1970-1976* deals exhaustively with the long history of performance. Although it may be said that the boundary between everyday life and acting is arbitrary, it is still possible to identify different types of performance and it is very interesting to explore the social and cultural significance behind certain performances. When does an activity fall into the category of play and when is it ritual? Do these

different types of performance execute different purposes and, if so, how does that change in different cultural contexts?

According to Schechner, the idea of performance underwent several evolutionary stages beginning with more inclusive ritualistic events and growing into more theatrical and playful performances. “The drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including the audience and performers (technicians too, anyone who is there)” (1977: 39). Due to this development, which resulted from the increasing sophistication of the written language, a performance could easily be repeated and transferred from place-to-place or time-to-time. Still, without constant re-enactment to ensure its existence, a performance that is repeated to a later audience understandably loses much of its urgency and significance. In fact, it can be argued that this transition is responsible for precipitating the divide between what were socially necessary performances from what were purely aesthetic ones. Plays today are often staged to entertain rather than to correct a social ill; an actor becomes just another person when he leaves the stage and the stage is a place where any type of occurrence can be enacted, if only to allow the spectator some time to reflect on events that may never be encountered directly. I will examine how McEwan has adapted the novel, not only to stage a very controversial social issue, but to compel the reader question his own active role in the whole performance. To that end, I will be referring frequently to the basic concepts and definitions of performativity, though not I will refrain from delving too deeply into the theories.

A performance is commonly described as “the physical presence of trained or skilled human beings” whose “public demonstration” of their skills constitutes the performance. However, it is possible to define performance at another level as the “awareness” of carrying out an activity and a discerning of the distance between self and behaviour: “we may do actions

unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this brings in a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance” (Carlson, 2006: 3-4).¹ Thus a performance may require an audience to give the actors a sense of theatricality, or simply an ability to dissociate oneself from one’s actions, which provides a good opportunity for the performer to understand the *motives* or *effects* of his actions. It is possible to approach *The Comfort of Strangers* as a performance in several ways. Firstly, all the characters perform in one way or another in a text that resembles a script. Secondly, as Judith Seaboyer has so aptly observed, the story may be called a psychodrama as it is carried out in a psychic space with an invisible script (1999: 957). Thirdly, even the writer-reader dynamic created by the question of morality is suggestive of a performance.

Most critics find *The Comfort of Strangers* disturbing because of its graphic depiction of sado-masochism. But sado-masochism only effectively permeates the novel because—reinforced by the characters’ actions—it is more than simply a subject of fantasy. The story begins with Mary and Colin going on holiday in an effort to revitalise their boring life where sex has become routine. When they meet Robert and Caroline, a couple who seem to have an unusual relationship, they are subconsciously influenced and their sex-life takes on a sado-masochistic twist. Mary and Colin find themselves fantasising about violent sex involving handcuffs, amputation of arms and legs, being locked in a room to be used exclusively for sex, being rented out to friends, and, in Mary’s case, being put on a steel machine that “would fuck her not just for hours or weeks, but for years, on and on, for the rest of her life, till she was dead and on even after that, till Colin, or his lawyer, turned it off” (McEwan, 2002: 82). These terrible desires for subjection and humiliation are realized when Robert and Caroline drug Mary and kill Colin in front of her. Through Mary, we are

¹ Carlson uses an actor and the role he plays on stage to exemplify this point. For example, even if an action on stage is identical to one in real life, on stage it is considered “performed” and off stage merely “done.”

vicariously forced to watch this scene:

[Robert] drew the razor lightly, almost playfully, across Colin's wrist, opening wide the artery. His arm jerked forward, and the rope he cast, orange in this light, fell short of Mary's lap by several inches. Mary's eyes closed. When she opened them, Colin was sitting on the floor, against the wall, his legs splayed before him. Curiously, his canvas beach shoes were soaked, stained scarlet. (122)

The imagery is both vivid and dramatic; reading the scene produces a sense of shock and distaste akin to one's reaction to a successful performance. As McEwan has been writing plays and scripts throughout his career, and a couple of his novels have been made into films, it is not surprising that *The Comfort of Strangers* reads like a performance. The language he uses reminds us constantly of the theatre and invites us to view the protagonists in this context. Symbolically, Mary and Colin are directly linked to the theatre: Mary was part of an all-women's theatre before losing her job and Colin had plans to become a singer before turning to acting. Colin has dreams of "appearing before a seated stranger" and Mary describes her surroundings as "a distant screen" (10). Each night, they dress carefully "as though somewhere among the thousands they were soon to join, there waited someone who cared deeply how they appeared" (11). Their annoyance with each other, which is conveyed through subtle acts such as hair-brushing or caressing, is described as "a state of play" and a trivial aspect of what happens in their "little drama" (16).

Very much like Hamlet's play within a play, Mary and Colin not only perform for us but also, in a more complicated manner, for another audience. Robert and Caroline are also spectators acting like off-screen directors within the novel, seeing but not seen, a fact that is confirmed at the end by the collage of photographs on their bedroom wall. Robert is frequently pictured carrying a camera, and when he appears to Mary and Colin for the first time it is as if he is joining them in the limelight: "as if

summoned, a squat figure stepped out of the dark into a pool of street light” (25). Robert’s roles as spectator and actor are not clearcut. We learn that he has been stalking Mary and Colin for three weeks, since the day they arrived, but only makes an appearance a week before they leave. He interacts with them and is responsible for luring them onto his staged set. Unlike Caroline, who is a masochistic victim and remains a spectator, Robert is a sadistic perpetrator who cunningly switches between two roles. His upbringing as a diplomat’s son seems to explain the importance of putting on a show: he cares about his external appearance, like his father who used mascara to blacken his moustache, and he recalls his sisters dressing up like “American film stars” and being punished in his father’s office as though in “a silent film” (34). Caroline, who is housebound because Robert broke her back, sees the world vicariously through Robert or from her fifth-floor balcony. When Mary meets her for the first time, Caroline’s expression is ghostly, like that of an audience member watching from the darkness of a theatre.

Mary held her breath, a small pale face watching her from the shadows, a disembodied face. . . . It continued to stare at her, unblinking . . . then it moved backwards and sideways into the shadows and disappeared. . . . Caroline stared at Mary as though she herself could not be seen; her eyes moved steadily from Mary’s hair, to her eyes, to her mouth, and on down to where the table obstructed the view. (59-60)

Caroline is said to watch anxiously, closely and fixedly, every detail and movement that passes before her. She is fixated on Colin’s beauty and admits to watching him and Mary while they slept naked in their beds. When Mary glances at a biscuit on the side table she is quick to interpret this and offer sandwiches too. Caroline is so used to being the observer that she performs poorly herself. For example, she finds it difficult to converse with Mary, and when Robert returns she quickly escapes into the kitchen to

carry out her duties behind conspicuously closed doors.

Another instance in which the novel resembles a performance lies in the novel's settings, which are described very much like stage directions. For example, consider Robert's description of his father's study before his sisters were beaten:

The windows and the deep red velvet curtains went right up to the ceiling, and the ceiling had gold leaf and great circular patterns. There was a chandelier. . . . He was sitting behind his enormous desk which was covered with papers, and my two sisters were standing in front of him. He made me sit on the other side of the room in a great leather armchair. (34)

The details of the room, the arrangement of the furniture and the positions of the people are all introduced in such a way as to produce a stage effect. Later, in another scene where Mary and Colin are sitting talking to each other:

The view was dominated by a low, walled island, half a mile out, which was completely given over to a cemetery. At one end was a chapel and a small stone jetty. At this distance, the perspective distorted by a bluish early morning mist, the bright mausoleums and headstones presented the appearance of an overdeveloped city of the future. Behind a low bank of pollution haze, the sun was a disc of dirty silver, small and precise. (43)

The exact items, the precise distances and the specified lighting again have a quality much like stage directions. Descriptions like these appear frequently throughout the novel, particularly before some form of action occurs.

There are also a few examples of dialogue in the text that would be more effective if performed. When Robert speaks of his childhood nightmares and how his mother at his bedside would comfort him, he says, "Then she kissed me on the head here, and immediately I was asleep" (38). The effect of the word "here" is

lost when we cannot see exactly where Robert is pointing. Similarly, as Caroline is telling Mary about her relationship and asking if she understands, Mary suddenly “pulled away a dead leaf and let it drop into the courtyard below. ‘Now,’ she announced, but did not finish her sentence” (113). What exactly did she mean? If we could have seen her expression or watched her interaction with Caroline it would be easier to decipher what exactly is on her mind. Some other examples of speeches that would benefit from being acted out, or actions that would be more effective or simple if performed are: Colin’s intonation when he says, “Wait...” (52); Mary’s expression when she repeats Robert’s sentence, “You... look...well” (69); when Colin attempts to catch Mary’s eye; when Caroline “lifted her forefinger theatrically” (63); when an annoyed Colin, whose expression we would love to see, comically “looked away, over Caroline’s head towards a bookcase piled with newspapers and magazines” (74). All the above persuade us to become spectators, to observe carefully each act and to remember that we are part of a carefully synchronised performance.

II. Violence in the Literary Context

McEwan’s blatant portrayals of sado-masochism may be objectionable, but he tries to explain that violence has its place in literature.

[P]eople accuse me of being too graphic in my depictions of violence, my response is, “Well, either you *do* violence, or you sentimentalise it.” If you’re going to have it, you’ve got to show it in all its horror. It’s not worth doing it if you’re simply going to add it there as a little bit of spice. . . . If violence is simply there to excite, then it’s merely pornographic. . . . I think [sentimentality] is the recurring element of popular culture’s treatment of violence. [Thus t]here are no consequences. Someone gets hit over the head with a bottle and they fall, the camera moves on, the plot moves on. (Noakes, 2002: 22-23)

When he started writing about this (still widely regarded as) taboo subject, he was not, as some feared, perverted or obsessed, nor simply attempting to be controversial, but was rather seeking to interact with his audience in a different way. Nowhere does McEwan lecture in his works, yet his concern for society's well-being remains a large part of his treatment of violence.

Interestingly, as Stephen Prince notes in his *Savage Cinema*, the stylisation of violence can be seen as an attempt at aestheticisation with a purposeful message. Using the early screen violence in American director Sam Peckinpah's films as examples of stylisation, Prince explains that they were intended to

wake people up to violence in a culture whose brutality had anaesthetised them to bloody death. . . . [P]eople had become inured to violence through the medium of television, which domesticated the violence of the Vietnam War and, by sandwiching it between commercials, insinuated it into the daily routines of consumer life. . . . [B]y heightening violence through the artifice of style he could break the cycle of consumption. (1998: 49)

McEwan's purpose is comparable to Peckinpah's in that he also hopes to overthrow the normalised images of violence, to reveal some of the psychology and consequences behind violent acts, and possibly to put moral sensitivity back into the visualisation of violence. Works like this are not necessarily didactic but may have that effect because the author, in attempting to provide a better understanding of violence, may seem more insistent or aggressive regarding social concern.

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, violence is performed but also has a role to perform. It is through violence that the characters interact and have an effect on us. McEwan's masterful appropriation of violence strategically creates uncertainty and fear from the very start so that it is possible to argue, when violence does make its appearance, that the audience has been warned and the shock justified. The precarious balance between titillating

violence and the more aesthetical purpose is pre-empted at the very start of the book in the title—*The Comfort of Strangers*. From what we are taught about strangers at a young age, the idea of receiving comfort from strangers is a fraught and understandably dangerous one. Instead of the comfort that familiarity usually suggests, strangers and strangeness are more likely to induce fear because they carry with them unpredictability and the unknown. Artistically, the title encapsulates the novel and suggests an elaborate play on the psychology behind Freud's *heimlich*: "It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context. It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomey at the heart of the hearth and home" (Royle, 2003: 1). According to Freud, the familiar can be frightening because it brings comfort based on a deep-rooted but also concealed trust. We are comforted by the familiar yet should also question it because we never completely understood it. Approaching this concept from the opposite perspective, McEwan's novel suggests that the stranger is all too often comfortably dismissed as unfamiliar, when in fact he can be inexplicably "familiar" for a similarly deep-rooted *dis*-trust. Thus the title itself performs a significant psychological function by instilling a hopefulness that is at the same time sinister because it could be highly deceptive.

The concept of the uncanny can be further used to explain how taking Venice as the setting offsets the fear and actualises the violence in the novel. Since the uncanny represents a state of liminality, a co-mingling of the familiar and unfamiliar, Venice serves two purposes: it reflects the internal struggles of the individual and the more external struggles of different groups. According to Seaboyer, Venice is the perfect metaphorical stage for the protagonists' psychic disintegration because it is "alternately a clearly articulated space, all sunlit, glittering . . . and an illegible labyrinth, confusing and sinister as it collapses back into a womblike enclosure of narrow streets and canals" (1999: 961).

Mary and Colin are deceived by the compact buildings, believing they can navigate what appears to them to be only small areas. In their wanderings of the labyrinthine streets of Venice, scenes of everyday life suddenly appear to them in a displaced and frightening light. The people they see, including the children, become more menacing or unreal and ghostly. Venice thus becomes a theatre of dreams wherein realities seem fantastical and nightmares linger in every corner. The lack of communication between the tourists and the locals means that each seems to move like a sleepwalker to the other, with each doing things incomprehensible to the other. The constant flux of tourists resembles a tide of apparitions coming and going, ghosts of time who are different and yet also the same. These internal tensions spill into the outer world and Venice as a psychic space becomes ripe for the enactment of violence not only within the individual psyche but also between the native and the foreigner.

As Royle suggests, the uncanny is a feeling of apprehensiveness about what is within but not of oneself, and the fear that oneself may, in fact, be part of an Other: “a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself *as* a foreign body, the very estrangement of inner silence and solitude” (2003: 2). The novel’s epigraph by Cesare Pavese shows that no-one is in a better position to understand the vulnerability of being a foreigner and experience the precarious state of longing and non-belonging than the traveller: travelling “forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off-balance.” To travel is to face physical, emotional and mental disorientation and thus to be constantly exposed to possible harm. As tourists Mary and Colin occupy the liminal space of the uncanny and exhibit traits of the foreigner/Other: they cannot speak the local language, they look different, they get lost and, consequently, they are even unable to sleep properly. They are looked upon differently by the maid at the hotel who treats them like messy children, by the fisherman at the quay who waves them away with “special dispensation” and by waiters who blatantly

ignore them. Furthermore, having arrived in a patriarchal society, Mary finds her feminist views redundant and Colin's sensitivity is regarded as effeminate. Very quickly, they start to yearn for familiarity and things they can understand, and a new sense of dependency forms, drawing them to each other again, but this turns out to be highly detrimental because the affection thus formed is unnatural and forced. As the scenes alternate between intense passion and inexplicable irritation, moments of tenderness and sadistic play, their senses are dulled to the surroundings and its dangers. It is when they are completely lost and most vulnerable that Robert ominously appears from out of the dark. If they had not been tourists, if they had not been so desperate for help, if they had not quarrelled, if Mary had been more sensitive to Colin's reactions, maybe then they would not have fallen so blindly for Robert's false offer of stability: "they began to experience the pleasure, unique to tourists, of finding themselves in a place without tourists, of making a discovery, finding somewhere *real*" (29, italics mine). Conveniently for Robert, Mary and Colin colluded in their own demise.

In an interesting passage entitled "Slaves and Masters," Kristeva offers an interpretation of the violent tendencies in the native as opposed to the foreigner. Apparently, the native is equally susceptible to feelings of vulnerability in the presence of the foreigner. This explains to some degree why the former feels so strongly the need to enforce his own identity and sometimes, in the process of doing so, destroys that of the invasive foreigner.

Every native feels himself to be more or less a "foreigner" in his "own and proper" place, and that metaphorical value of the word "foreigner" first leads the citizen to a feeling of discomfort as to his sexual, national, political, professional identity. Next it impels him to identify—sporadically, to be sure, but nonetheless intensely—with the other. . . . Thus is set up between the new "masters" and the new "slaves" a secret collusion . . . but, especially with the native, arouses feelings of suspicion: am I really at

home? am I myself? . . . Such a habit for suspicion prompts some to reflect, rarely causes humbleness, and even more rarely generosity. (Kristeva, 1991: 19-21)

Robert, as the most plausible native, is indisputably the master. He is, additionally, an unchallenged chauvinist in his traditionally patriarchal world. Seaboyer has referred to Robert's behaviour as "a performance of masculinity" on a patriarchal stage (Seaboyer, 1999: 970). He is portrayed as commanding, influential and charismatic, but as he explains to Mary and Colin, he is the product of a quite traumatic and troubled past. This confession is the only glimpse of weakness that Robert allows, and it is not revealed without ulterior motives. Robert prefers to present a masculine image and to use force, as shown in the way he dresses and the way he handles his wife and "foreigners," but he knows when to employ his weakness to erect an empathic façade so as to lure Mary and Colin into a false sense of security. Because Robert is both attracted and repulsed by Colin's effeminacy, he starts off by desiring him but inevitably ends up having to destroy him. As a powerful native he feels a need to uphold traditional values and, being in the perfect position to manipulate others or inflict harm, Colin's death is a predictable if not a necessary consequence. Robert's violent behaviour and Colin's muddled compliance are not as shocking as they seem when viewed in the light of an age-old ritual being played out between the native and the foreigner.

Caroline provides an interesting diversion to this pattern, but her role as accomplice and in-between is not as complicated nor as original as it sounds. She is still a foreigner though she works for and *with* the native. Like Mary and Colin, she is from another country and does not speak the native language. Her desire to be accepted is stronger than that of a tourist because she lives in "permanent exile" and therefore strives all the more to please the native. As a foreigner she accepts imprisonment and as a wife tries to answer all of Robert's needs. Her movements are restricted in a

literal as well as a metaphorical sense. Not long after her back is broken, she leaves the apartment for a walk but finds herself unable to climb the stairs, so in punishment Robert leaves her to spend the night on the stairs. To this she says, "I have been a virtual prisoner. . . . I've spent a lot of time by myself. It hasn't been so bad" (112-113). Regarding Robert's chauvinism and sadism, she claims,

"I had to admit, though it took a long time, that I liked it. . . . It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it, and being reduced to nothing by it. It's pain in a particular context, being punished and therefore being guilty. We both liked what was happening. I was ashamed of myself, and before I knew it, my shame too was a source of pleasure. . . . I needed it. . . . [H]e whispered pure hatred, and though I was sick with humiliation, I thrilled to the point of passing out. . . . He made love to me out of deep loathing, and I couldn't resist. I loved being punished. . . . Of course, I wanted to be destroyed." (110-111)

Compare Caroline's explanation with that of Kristeva regarding the foreigner's advocating social and sexual extremes.

Eventually, the shattering of repression is what leads one to cross a border and find oneself in a foreign country. Tearing oneself away from family, language, and country in order to settle down elsewhere is a daring action accompanied by sexual frenzy: no more prohibition, everything is possible. . . . Exile always involves a shattering of the former body. . . . The foreigner who imagines himself to be free of borders, by the same token challenges any sexual limit. (Kristeva, 1991: 31)

Caroline clearly adheres to this notion of the self-appointed, debauched foreigner. Since she is resigned to her virtual prison, she questions why she need fear the disapproval of others and why she ought to feel ashamed of sexual deviance when she can embrace it as just another dimension of foreignness. Tellingly, it takes a long

time for her to *discover* that deep down she enjoys “being reduced to nothing.” To that end, she warps her reasoning in order to accept her cruel fate—believing that punishment for guilt is not as pleasurable as punishment that forces one to feel guilty.

It is not difficult for Robert to bear what he does, as apparently it gives him some status amongst his drinking friends, but for Caroline, she needs to convince herself that she enjoys what is happening in order to live with it and to continue to please her master/native on his terms. Her sexual liberation is induced by external circumstances and slavish obedience is the price. To ensure that Caroline never escapes, Robert not only terrorises but also isolates her. He breaks her back so that she cannot leave the house nor socialise without his permission; this causes her to rationalise without external influences and to accept her situation as desirable or even normal. Jack Slay’s interpretation only partially explains Caroline’s reasoning: “Robert destroys her spirit, leaving her spineless. Caroline’s injury is a direct consequence of her masochistic desires, [but more so] an indirect consequence of her society’s patriarchal demands” (1996: 85). Indeed, she may convince herself that her suffering is acceptable because it gives Robert status in a society that condones wife-beating. The patriarchal tradition is partly responsible for Caroline’s servitude but not more so than Robert’s self-loathing, which stems from the extreme practice of his father’s laws of masculinity and his idea of a confident native. His desire to kill Caroline is genuine and accurately reflects the violence inherent in the native-foreigner relationship. He wants to kill her, but she is his most reliable masochist. Therefore, in order to exterminate the Other he targets more “foreign” foreigners and in so doing assigned her to the role of accomplice. Violence in this respect makes a significant contribution to the native-foreigner psychological rubric.

The events of *The Comfort of Strangers* culminate with Colin’s violent death and force us to ask why Colin needs to be murdered? If Robert and Caroline were simply looking to excite themselves, we might conclude that Colin’s death was unfortunate

and gratuitous: he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. If this were the case, it would make sense to side with the critics who hold that McEwan threw in elements of violence for shock and entertainment value. But surely, things cannot be so simple. After all, Robert put a lot of energy and planning into capturing Colin, who was also carefully chosen from a crowd for his beauty. This should give us enough reason to delve deeper into Robert's motives. Caroline was the intended victim, yet it was Colin that died. Why the sacrificial substitution?

Mankind has a long history of violence that is most justifiable when linked to sacrifice. Sacrifice has an important function in society and is often defined as a deliberate act performed on a chosen victim in order to dissipate pent up tensions and rivalries within a community.

The victim is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individuals, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence. (Girard, 2005: 8)

The sacrificial victims have to bear some resemblance to the object they replace in order to be effective as they are expected to resolve an unhappy situation for which the causes have already been identified. Often the victims are marginal individuals who stand outside or on the fringes of society—foreigners, enemies or servants—“between these victims and the community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance” (Girard, 2005: 13). Colin is a modern victim in a long sacrificial tradition. He is certainly a foreigner—vulnerable and disposable to the society in which he finds himself—and he possesses many qualities of the original female victim, including beauty and a certain feminine weakness. However, he is sacrificed

to save a couple's marriage and to preserve a patriarchal society of dubious value. Under these circumstances, the question that arises is whether his death can be justifiable.

Derrida argues that dying is not necessarily a wretched act, but rather the moment of death is when one can seek or attempt to weigh the meaning of life; death is the moment of awareness, a summation of one's life: "a history of secrecy as history of responsibility is tied to the culture of death. . . . Between putting oneself to death and dying for another [one can ask] what are the relations among sacrifice, suicide and the economy of this gift? (1995: 10)" Thus there are two interesting ways of interpreting Colin's death. On the one hand, he may have died to prevent a domestic incident from affecting the whole community; as it is, his death raises only a few eyebrows at the police station. On the other hand, he may not be as conventional a victim as we initially think: perhaps he offered himself up to the inevitability of death because there certainly were many times when he sensed that something was wrong and could have made decisions that would have saved his life. For example, his dislike of Robert from the very start could have been taken as a warning to avoid him, his sense of powerlessness when he thought Mary was drowning in the sea was a reminder of their vulnerability, he does not tell Mary when Robert punches him without reason, and when Mary finally tries to share her fears with him he falls asleep. Colin may have failed to heed the signs around him because he was disorientated, but perhaps he secretly welcomed the idea of dying. This slight twist brings a whole new dimension to the ethical and aesthetic reasoning behind Colin's death. Actually, according to Girard, the repression of violence in so-called more civilised societies has promoted the abolishment of sacrificial rites and the resulting *sacrificial crisis* blurs the distinctions between what was *purifying violence* and what can be seen as *impure violence*. Without a legitimate process of purification to provide an outlet for violent tendencies, the unjustifiable forms of violence take precedence. This type of violence is not only less discerning but also more

virulent and destructive. Although it is tempting to demonise Robert and martyr Colin, McEwan brings into relief the discrepancies between purifying violence and impure violence. The ethical threads that we need to carefully pick out forces us to question even more the evolution of violence and remind us of the social role violence may play. Just as the stage is a place for performances that help us face terrible and frightening situations in our society, under McEwan's management the novel begins to serve a very similar purpose.

III. Redeeming Violence

It is possible to read violence as symptomatic of textual agitation. Take the setting again for example. Although critics agree that it is Venice, names and direct references have all been conspicuously repressed by the author. The labyrinthine streets, the famous views, the museums and cathedrals, even the nuns and the old man muttering in a "foreign language" first invite speculation and then frustratingly elude identification. Similarly, the intertextuality in *The Comfort of Strangers* appears seamless but upon further probing is liable to fall apart. Many in-depth comparisons of the novel to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* are complimentary. But, as Slay has discovered, likely echoes of John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, Charles Dickens' *Pictures from Italy*, Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*, Mary McCarthy's *Venice Observed* and even Lord Byron's *Childe Harold* have made some critics wary of McEwan's originality and, on occasions, come close to accusing him of plagiarism (Slay, 1996: 73).² On the one hand, McEwan's literary collage may be taken as a postmodern attempt at portraying disruption, repetition and fragmentation; on the other hand,

² Seaboyer offers another comparison between the novel and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1999: 959). See also Pile (1981: 32e).

critical consent on his lack of originality and plagiarism could ruin his credibility. This anxiety underlies his bid for innovation and his treatment of morality regarding violence.

In an age measured by economic gain, aesthetic production is commodity production and novelty pays; hence aesthetic satisfaction and innovation increasingly involve the treatment of taboo and unusual subjects for the pleasure of the public. As Fredric Jameson has observed, postmodernity contains offensive features varying from “obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance” (1991: 4). To interpret this trend positively, it can be argued that capital has made possible a higher tolerance towards difference and otherness—in theory a greater objectivity—but capital has also become the power of institutionalisation. If everything is money-driven can the end results be purely objective? Globalisation and multi-nationalism advertise progress in equality, but in fact both are business-driven and cater to the needs of the wealthier parties. Similarly, postmodernism advocates multiple perspectives or objectivity, but because it caters to a broader public taste, which has underlying market value, this removes the possibility of a “critical distance.” For Jameson, it would be this critical objectivity that a writer needs in order to produce works that do not conform to commercially-institutionalised standards and it would be what a reader needs in order to gain an independent but viable perspective, without either of which literature becomes prone to self-defeatism and demoralisation.

If the ethic behind the ideology of critical distance is authorial innovation without economic goals and reader appraisal without economic bias, when McEwan pioneered sexual explicitness and psychological depravity were his motives purely literary? Were his readers not already primed for the release of a shocking literature? Unfortunately, there are no obvious answers to these questions. But, it may be perceived that McEwan’s appropriation of taboo subjects has evolved over time, becoming evermore sophisticated. And, with the luxury of hindsight, shock literature has proved to

be very marketable indeed. What McEwan applies to his work on violence is a type of literal “critical” distance, especially in terms of moral ethics.

In interviews McEwan promotes the duty of the intellectual and the writer to mediate in the face of atrocities. He believes that both have the responsibility to give voice to the unspeakable and to speak for those who have suffered but may be unable to represent themselves. Especially after writing about the abduction of children in *The Child in Time* and airing his views on the 9/11 terrorist attack in a newspaper article and the novel *Atonement* (2001), McEwan has, in person, shown a greater tendency to draw moral lines. However, the moral questions concerning his works, and particularly his early works such as *The Comfort of Strangers*, are still much debated. Since moralising works are not popular nowadays, it is much more difficult to employ violence for didactic purposes; it is often easier to believe that conscientious artists will treat violence with respect and wield it objectively. As David Malcolm observes,

The characters are what they are and they do what they do. Even the most horrible of crimes and acts that would usually be categorised as perverse are *recounted without a breath of moral censure*. Any moral judgement seems left to the reader. *The Comfort of Strangers* is complex in this respect. Robert and Caroline are sexually perverse murderers, but there is a *lack of overt condemnation* of their acts from the protagonists and the narrator. The loss of Colin, however, is *surely meant to* sadden the reader, although one is also perhaps meant to have a sense that he has partly brought his death on himself. (2002: 16)

Inevitably, we are tempted to question the intentions of the writer and the effect on readers of handling taboo subjects without imparting any moral lessons. If a writer takes the time to graphically conjure a sado-masochistic world, should there be a message when the cruel perpetrators escape punishment and the victims are accused of colluding in their own demise? Some

interpreters put the onus of a moral interpretation on the writer and others it on the reader.

From Jürgen Habermas' point of view, the novel is a "theoretically constituted perspective" that offers participants the opportunity to consider, interact and reach a mutual understanding about their "lifeworlds"—the existent society and the world of their fantasy.

The paradigms of mutual understanding is, rather, the performative attitude of participants in interaction, who coordinate their plans for action by coming to an understanding about something in the world. . . . The lifeworld forms a horizon and at the same time offers a store of things taken for granted in the given culture from which communicative participants draw consensual interpretative patterns. (Habermas, 1987: 296)

The writer in this instance would be offering a version of the "given culture," which is likely to be tainted with his own understanding, but the reader is also approaching the protracted lifeworld with the intention of reaping something from it. The text is then active, it *performs* a purpose, and whoever interacts with it joins the performance whether it is the writer who may have left a message or the reader who seeks it. The main objective of the performance is to enable the participants to reach a "mutual" understanding, the result of which will be "the propagation of cultural traditions, the integration of groups by norms and values, and the socialisation of succeeding generations" (Habermas, 1987: 578).

The idea that a piece of work is responsible for the transmission of traditions explains why McEwan's non-committal textualisation of violence engenders disapproval as well as enthusiasm. But his reluctance to take sides is not a signal to us that we should not do so. In fact, the objectivity McEwan achieves is through his appeal for interaction: "it's operable, it's something that works on the reader. You're asking the reader to step inside a

mental space which has a shape. That's very much like someone stepping inside a modern building, going to look at it and deciding whether they like it or not" (Noakes, 2002: 15). *The Comfort of Strangers* is arguably *objective* in that it actively seeks our response. It invites us to be critical and to make our own moral judgements. This open-endedness is best expressed by Kiernan Ryan, who says that *The Comfort of Strangers* stages an "unfinished dialogue" using epigraphs that carefully incite us "to wonder whether this book is about to broach matters that lie beyond the reach of historical understanding and social critique" (Ryan, 1994: 38). In attempting to make us "see" meaning in violence for ourselves, the novel succeeds in implicating us in the performance for which our own decisions on morality matters as much, if not more, than what the writer is capable of delivering.

Through the examples of Mary, Colin, Robert and Caroline, who enact the importance of seeing and being seen, we are encouraged to both see and perform. According to John Berger, "soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen" and the eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of a visible world (1972: 9). Through successful reader-writer interaction, the crucial dialogue between verbalising what one "sees" and discovering what the other "sees" is established. Reading *The Comfort of Strangers* as a performance, if only skimming the basics of performance studies, lends it a new light that goes a long way to redeeming McEwan's much-criticised violence by inviting us to personally take a part on the moral stage.

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展演暴力之倫理與美學：
論伊恩·馬基文的《陌生人的安慰》

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摘 要

本文聚焦於伊恩·馬基文的《陌生人的安慰》一書中的暴力之運用。論文研究本作品之批評接受史，接著仔細檢證作品中所呈現的複雜的美學技巧與倫理考量。其讀法大率植基於文本踐行層面，但過程中亦借用茱麗亞·克麗斯蒂娃之土著／外國人之辯證，並探討後現代倫理／美學之議題。本文試圖理解為何人們時常帶著尊重而非厭惡的態度研究馬基文這本恐怖刺激的小說。一個可能性是：小說中暴力之角色似乎不像是那麼無緣由，它引發一種頗為主動的自我質詰之形式。運用暴力作為焦點，的確可以辯稱馬基文不僅只是精通書寫藝術，而且其於從事藝術創作之際已完成一種相當錯綜複雜的道德意識形式。質言之，藉由讓讀者參與連貫、強力和深富意義的閱讀經驗，《陌生人的安慰》提供一種特殊的道德質詰形式。

關鍵詞：暴力、展演、道德、美學、後現代主義