

## The Belated Time of Reading, or Inconsolable Ethics

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As both an ardent reader all my life and a long-time student of Emmanuel Levinas's work, I found a deep resonance with Ann Chinnery's approach to reformulating the relation between moral education and literature. Drawn by the eloquent and quiet tone of the essay, I was especially thankful for her skill at tugging literature away from the sentimental grip of certain thinkers who seem to believe that what we have to learn from fiction can be reduced to rather trite formulations of identification, empathy, and compassion. It is not that such powerful emotions do not take place when we read, but to educate on the basis that they ought to happen because they lead us to a better engagement with the world suggests that we seem to know beforehand what kind of response is appropriate to any given text. The risk is not only that we lose a sense of the texture and diversity of possible responses, but that we turn literature into a mere purveyor of universal claims about the world, into a treatise rather than a work of art. As Thomas Hardy once wrote, "a novel is an impression not an argument."<sup>1</sup>

The examples in Chinnery's essay lend weight to Hardy's insight: that a work of fiction is an evocative and richly layered art form, and as such, like other books, it has the power to "do things" to us. Beginning with Jeannette Winterson's stark account of books bearing a certain gift of violence ("you can pick up a book, but a book can throw you across the room"), Chinnery then turns to the unwitting sagacity of Winterson's own book-burning mother, who guilelessly declares, "the trouble with a book is that you never know what's in it until it's too late." Through this troubling mother-daughter couplet, Chinnery points to the doubleness that lies at the heart of our reading: reading embodies both a surprising transformative force and a time of belatedness. That is, we do not know prior to our reading of a book what effect that book will have on us; nor can we predict how others will or should respond to that book. Although recognizing that emotional responses are at the core of reading practices, Chinnery's point is to sift out which responses can actually forestall the reader's temptation either to ingest the text into the self (the "omnivorous" reader) or to spew out one's self into the text (the "bulimic" reader). In arguing instead for a premodern posture of humility and respect, Chinnery shows that it is in the very gap between reader and text where an ethical attentiveness to the other might be found, and not in the collapse of that gap.

Indeed, this gap is created, for Chinnery, in the formal qualities of a text, rather than in its actual content. This shift away from "realist" fiction enables her to propose that it is texts themselves which can be resistant to the desires of the omnivore or bulimic. According to Doris Sommer, resistant texts embody barriers to transparency, and frustrate clear lines of identification, empathy, and compassion; as such they present us with an alternative picture of the reader, one whose competency for attending to the unbridgeable distance between her/himself and the book embodies

the potential for ethical engagement.<sup>2</sup> Chinnery sees that the promise of literature from the vantage point of moral education lies in its capacity to compel ethical relation across difference. This Levinasian stand — that I as reader have something to learn from the ways the otherness of the text evades my grasp — becomes the major thread that binds Chinnery's claims to humility and respect.

Although I agree with the shift Chinnery makes to the formal qualities of the text, I want to spend some time here reflecting on what is produced for the reader in the context of the gap that is experienced. For if resistant texts frustrate our appetite for identification and projection, then reading becomes, it seems to me, an inconsolable practice in which the reader must learn to live with the loss of control and omnipotence. This inconsolable element has, I think, its roots not only in the hindrance of desire but also in the anxiety or panic produced in the encounter with an inassimilable other. Let me explain this with an example.

In response to Chinnery's metaphor that reading resistant forms of literature is akin to not finding one's way into a party one so desperately wants to attend, I was somewhat painfully reminded of my encounter with Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Unconsoled*.<sup>3</sup> There, a famed pianist, Mr. Ryder, arrives in a shadowy, unnamed European city apparently to give the concert of his career, but has no recollection of why he is there or that he has even promised to perform. Upon his arrival, Mr. Ryder is drawn into a Kafka-esque dreamworld from which there is no escape. He wanders through the city, encountering family he seems to have forgotten, becoming embroiled in the private lives of new acquaintances, exhausted by the labyrinthian search for recognition and meaning. Written in first person narrative form, the text offers the reader no privileged standpoint; I, like Mr. Ryder, am barred from conventional time, existing in a space that violently disrupts my every expectation. Both the form and the content of the novel echo its title in its sheer refusal to give consolation to the reader. Such refusal not only made evident my own insatiable thirst for order that would give coherence to Mr. Ryder's seemingly aimless and painful wanderings but also, through its foreclosure of such resolution, became for me an acute source of apprehension and anxiety that echoed Mr. Ryder's own. I was indeed disturbed to the point that, even after three attempts, I was not able to read to the end, something that has not occurred with any other novel I have read.

This experience of the gap between reader and text as disturbance has, I think, profound transformative potential, for it is the encounter with an inhospitable and radically particular otherness that alerts the self to its own relation with/in the text. And the upshot is that this relation troubles the ego to the point of a restlessness that keeps it awake, drawing the ego instead out into a world that cannot be fully known and is not of its own making. As Levinas calls to attention, this wakefulness presents me with an inability to rest in my own solitude when the other is encountered; through my disturbance I am propelled toward an "otherwise than being," not toward other beings who are just like me.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I respond not to the content of the text, to its characters or their dilemmas and predicaments, but to the very resistance and challenge they pose to me beyond my sense of self. It is their discordant quality that provokes my response as reader. Henceforth, by virtue of this enduring resistance

to my own mastery, I am called upon to respond in ways that respect the divide that separates me from the text. The question becomes: how can I bear the weight of a response which requires me not to exert mastery, not to identify with the plight of others, not to put myself in others' shoes, and not even to take on their ordeals as if they were my own? And if I do bear it, what would it look like?

Levinas offers no positive answers to these questions in the sense of telling us what the content of a response should be. Instead, he is more concerned with delineating a quality of response that respects the other's right to be other, and this he designates with the term "welcome."<sup>5</sup> Now when we are speaking of texts, and not actual people, this welcoming would seem to slide into the very perils of identification, empathy, and compassion that Levinas (and Chinnery) seek to overcome. Are we not welcoming the other when we identify or empathize with her? On Levinas's account, such moves merely collapse difference into the time of the knowable present, whereas the possibility for ethics emerges in openness to an unknowable future that an encounter with the other inaugurates. Such an ethics, then, is itself inconsolable; it does not produce a unity with the other, or comfort us with an ideal of a shared humanity. Instead, it falls on us belatedly as, paradoxically, a remembrance of things to come.

Reading, then, is a vigilant wakefulness that keeps open the memory of our own future implication in attending to the otherness of the text. Since we cannot predict where a book will take us even as it throws us across the floor, our only resource seems to lie in our readiness to be transformed in ways we could not have imagined. And if such transformation can enhance our being in the world with others, which, as I see it, is a primary aim of moral education, do we not have an obligation to respond with humility, as Chinnery suggests, even when we are surprised by what we read?

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1. Thomas Hardy, preface to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 5th ed. (New York: Signet, 1980), 8.

2. Doris Sommer, "Proceed with Caution: A Rhetoric of Particularism" (Working Papers on Latin America, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1997), <http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/files/96-97-2.pdf>.

3. Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 49. See also Levinas's discussion on insomnia in *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 48.

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.