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## Non-Human Grievability: Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*

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The theme of Ian McEwan's 2019 novel *Machines Like Me* may have surprised some readers as the novel addresses artificial intelligence, as represented by intelligent, sentient machines. In fact, when Charlie, the narrator and protagonist, buys Adam, a humanoid robot, he decides that he is going to set his basic personality parameters in collaboration with Miranda, his neighbour, whom he is falling in love with, so much so that Adam will become their child. The plot complicates, and the three protagonists become embroiled in judicial matters. At one point, Adam, who has garnered a great deal of autonomy and has inflexible moral convictions, explains to Miranda that he intends to send compromising evidence to the police and that she may land in jail. This is when, with Miranda's complicity, Charley kills Adam by cracking his skull with a hammer, leaving just enough time for the humanoid to save his personal data and deliver a final speech.

The narrator's gesture raises the issue of the **human subject's sovereignty**, i.e., of his/her capacity to decide who should be killed and who should/can be mourned. In fact, the capacity to kill an intelligent, sentient critter—which Adam is shown to be throughout—without any judiciary consequence, ties in with situations when the law is suspended to be replaced by a **state of exception**. In the world of *Machines Like Me*, while some characters have the capacity to be

grieved, some others, with a prominent narrative position, are not allowed to be. From this point of view, it seems to me that the novel raises a series of questions which were formulated by **Butler in *Precairous Life*: “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives, what makes for a grievable life?”** (Butler 2006, 20). In this presentation, I show how the novel addresses Butler’s triple question by concentrating first on ungrievability, then on grievability. I end up addressing the issue of literature’s power to anticipate and shift the norms of grievability.

### **Ungrievability**

Examples of grievability are to be found in *Machines Like Me*. Mariam, Miranda’s best friend who committed suicide after being raped, is mourned, intensely so, by her friend and by her family. Mariam’s private mourning is also presented against a wider framework which is that of national mourning as the speculative novel rewrites the history of 1982, when the action takes place, so that the Falklands war ends up in disaster, which gives rise to an official bout of national mourning, in conformity with the rules of **the official allocation of grievability**.

Such is emphatically not the case with Adam’s demise. One could expect this to be normal as, after all, a robot is not supposed to be mourned. Still, Adam is a special humanoid and, above all, **a literary machine**. Besides, being a learner and being programmed to garner experience and knowledge, he is a **round character**. His feelings are recognised by the other characters and his **frailties** put him somehow on a par with the human protagonists who are characterised by

a great deal of vulnerability themselves. Clearly, the fact that Adam should be a character caught in a narrative of fiction grants him an ontological status that is comparable to that of the other characters, and this is the main reason why, in the end, he is considered as a **subject**, with a life of his own by the scientific and moral authority of the novel, Alan Turing who, in the alternative experience of 1982, is still alive and has contributed to the advance of knowledge in the field of AI.

For these reasons, the scene of Adam's execution comes as a shock. As Charley slips behind his back and deals him a powerful blow on the head, the narrator specifies: "The sound was not of hard plastic cracking or of metal, but **the muffled thud, as of bone.**" (McEwan 2021, 278) After this event and Adam's final confession and last orders, the body is hidden in a cupboard, only to be retrieved one year later and brought to Turing for scientific investigation. When **transposing to the individual sphere the categories that Agamben, Butler and others** have applied to their analysis of states, it appears that Adam here is the representative of **bare life as "unconditional capacity to be killed"** (Agamben 85). This is made possible by a state of exception that suspends the law—with the difference that, in *Machine Like Me*, the speculative, anticipatory nature of the narrative plunges the characters into a situation when there is a gap as to the judicial status of intelligent, sentient humanoid robots. Still, we are presented with what Agamben defines as "life [that can be] killed without the commission of homicide" (Agamben 159). This in turn refers to Charley's (and Miranda's)

accession to **sovereignty**, a capacity that emerges when the law is suspended, that can decide about the state of exception, and hence is instrumental in determining who is the bearer of bare life (Butler 200§, 60). In his analysis of contemporary society as that of enmity **Achille Mbembe** takes examples from the field of colonial history to consider the origins of what he calls ‘**necropolitics**.’ He defines sovereignty as “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (Mbembe 66) and, even more strikingly, as “exercising a power outside the law” (Mbembe 76). This is justified and confirmed by the narrator: “It wasn’t a murder, this wasn’t a corpse.” (McEwan 2019, 293) The narrative presents a character who escapes the frames that allow for the perception of grievability, let alone its recognition. From this point of view, it demonstrates that Adam does not qualify as a grievable subject. Clearly, *Machines Like Me* addresses the issue of the differential allocation of grievability (Butler 2006, xiv) and answers Butler’s triple question detailing that Adam falls short of the three categories.

**Still.** In the scene when Adam is retrieved from his year-long sojourn in the entry hall cupboard, Charley has to catch him “in an awkward embrace” (McEwan 2019, 294), which reminds the reader of his initial fascination for Adam’s anatomy, in the early scene when the latter was charging up prior to what is presented as his awakening (McEwan 2019, 25–27). He realises there and then that even if Adam’s body is generally flexible, his legs remain bent—“[a] form of

**rigor mortis** perhaps,” the narrator pointedly adds (McEwan 2019, 294). As often in the novel, the **strict binaries** opposing such categories as life/death, human/non-human, organic/artificial, etc. are problematised in such passages, when a sense of **doubt as to Adam’s status** is allowed to hover over the text.

This impression is buttressed by an evocation of his face: “He looked healthy. In repose, the face was thoughtful rather than cruel.” (McEwan 2019, 294) With these words, it seems **as if Adam were granted human status**, at least post-mortem. In fact, as Butler reading Levinas reminds us of, the **face** of the other, exposed in its vulnerability and defencelessness, is what makes the subject responsible for the other and that which is at the root of the ethical and non-violent relation with the other which, in Levinas’s idealistic conception, defines the ethics of alterity (Butler 2006, 131). This theme builds up into the last vision of Adam, lying on a stainless-steel table, in Turing’s laboratory, when Charley leaves the great scientist’s house. He lays his hands on Adam’s “stilled heart,” and looks down into the “sightless cloudy green eyes” before catching himself doing something totally unpremeditated: “Sometimes, the body knows, ahead of the mind, what to do. [...] Hesitating several seconds, I lowered my face over his and **kissed his soft, all-too-human lips.**” (McEwan 2019, 306) Charlie’s gesture retrospectively grants Adam something not unlike human status, which is mediated by the **body**, this seat of vulnerability that is common to all living beings, human and non-human.

In other terms, Charlie's **precariousness**, in the acceptation used by Butler in *Frames of War*—i.e.: implying the subject's own exposure or vulnerability and his/her *dependency* on the other (Butler 2009, 14)—, is displayed and fully solicited, so that his grief may be expressed, as a **corollary** of his attachment to Adam, sealed by the post-mortem kiss. In *Machines Like Me*, then, subjectivity is not validated by autonomy or sovereignty as the capacity to make independent decisions on account of powerful reckonings that emulate an enhanced rationality. It is rather dependent on **the capacity to feel and to generate emotions in others**—overwhelmingly positive ones here, ultimately. It is not because he is intelligent but because he is *sentient* that Adam enters the frame of visibility or rather allows it to shift so as to take him into consideration.

Adam's life, like those of Mariam and the Falkland victims (on the British side at least), is grievable, eventually, on account of a **redefinition of the frames of perception and production of grievability that is indexed on a logic of emotion**. The definition of subjectivity is thereby dependent on a conception of the individual as embodied, embedded, or ectic, vulnerable.

The novel takes care to build up a great deal of **proximity between humanoid robots and humans, Adam and Charley, they and us**. This proximity is mediated through the figure of the **double** that crops up from the beginning as Charley decides that he is, somehow, Adam's father. Likewise, Adam substitutes for Charley on one night, when he has sex with Miranda, which

give a very concrete incarnation to the idea of the double indeed. But the theme is given a good airing before as, very early on, Charley gives Adam a set of clothes of his own, making him another Charley (McEwan 2019, 27). Besides, Charley is mistaken for Adam at least twice in the novel: by Miranda herself and by her father.

In the end, even if *Machines Like Me* does not literally present the reader with a **cyborg**, the novel **blurs the frontiers between human and non-human** in a fairly destabilising way, at times. This is why Donna J. Haraway's comments on the function of the cyborg myth that favours "transgressed boundaries" may be applied here (Haraway 154). More precisely, it seems as though, in the novel, "the human [were standing] on a line between the human and the non human" (Weil 84), and *vice versa*, of course, **as the same precarious position is also associated with the non-human here, as if the two were compounded of each other**, in some sort of an "embodied being with" that does not shy in front of a use of technology. In fact, the novel reminds us, in Rosi Braidotti's terms, that, "embedded and embodied, we are deeply steeped in the material world" (Braidotti 2019, 39), and that this material world is not always strictly organic or "natural," but made up of artificial compounds that make the **hesitation between organic and non-organic, sentient and non-sentient, human and non-human resonate**. Because of the hesitation on grievability and on the final assertion of its possibility, the novel not only contributes to the shifting of its frames of perception, recognition and intelligibility but also to the displacement and the

fashioning of the same frames. Despite some reviewers' opinion that *Machines Like Me* ultimately buttresses an undiluted humanistic message, I would argue that, **even though it does not forsake humanism it also puts forward an anti-humanistic vision** in which "subjectivity is associated with otherness" (Braidotti 2013, 15) and which promotes a relationality that expresses an "ethics of becoming" (Braidotti 2013, 49) which is at the heart of posthuman aspirations. By offering a complex, nuanced vision of grievability based on a specific practice of characterisation, the novel clearly considers human humility and recommends it even while it **exposes the myth of exceptionalism and stands "against the arrogance of anthropocentrism"** (Braidotti 2013, 66). Granted, *Machines Like Me* attends to the complexity of the human heart and to the "godawful messiness of being human" as most literary fictions do (Giles n.p.), with the difference that such a vision is allowed to enter in a dialogue with another one, i.e. with the messiness of what it is to be non-human, expressed here in terms of grievability and showcasing the vulnerability of all types of lives: human, non-human, considered separately or jointly.