

*Escape into Innocence:
Ian McEwan and
the Nightmare of History*

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I love my work and my children. God
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.
Too near the ancient troughs of blood
Innocence is no earthly weapon.
GEOFFREY HILL, "Ovid in the Third Reich" (61)

DURING THE PAST twenty years, Ian McEwan has made a name for himself, amidst the rising generation of British novelists, as one of the more serious and unrelenting analysts of evil in our time. He appears to turn his back on postmodernism (in Fredric Jameson's terms, as a culture of pastiche, depthless intertextuality, and hermeneutic break with the real) to concentrate on the more unpalatable business of looking the beast of history straight in the eye. *Black Dogs*, McEwan's latest novel, includes a visit to the concentration camp in Majdanek, which possibly epitomizes the writer's long-lasting concern with the various categories of the depraved and the fallen. Ever since the publication of his two volumes of short stories, McEwan's taste for the morbid has been noted, sometimes with a caveat about the obsessive nature of his fascination with the abyss; in *Black Dogs*, the least that one can say is that the dogs of the title (two demonic creatures, allegedly trained by the Gestapo to sexually assault human victims) attest to a measure of thematic continuity in the work. The novelty, however, may lie in the novel's ambition to achieve a wider purchase on society at large, to provide a panorama of some social and historical scope, which contrasts with the more domestic dramas played out in *The Cement Garden* (1978) or *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981). Thus with *Black Dogs*

McEwan's allegory of evil grows to incorporate its own distressing implications, since the story now sets out to assess, in the thickness of world history, the validity of its own founding metaphors. Hence the sense of referential expansion: from the suburban backyard to the Fascist death camp, evil is ascribed a further-reaching, ever-rippling—perhaps cosmic—resonance.

Yet McEwan's rejoinder to the charge of philosophical defeatism consists of pointing to the dialectical dynamic of his material, in which there is "a projected sense of evil . . . of the kind whereby one tries to imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good" (McEwan, "Points of Departure" 20). This amounts to a declaration of intent that might lead one to consider the writer's concern with evil in a new, instrumental perspective that may have been anything but self-evident thus far. In other words, McEwan alerts one to the presence in his work of a positive field of force that counterbalances evil, however elusive (and possibly spurious) this other force may turn out to be.

In this respect, *Black Dogs* again may represent a significant breakthrough, owing to the manifest ambivalence of its leading metaphor, which differs from McEwan's earlier, seemingly monologic topoi of violence and power, whether this be sexual sadism (in *The Comfort of Strangers*), manic necrotomy (in *The Innocent* [1990]), or else good old Uncle Incest (in *The Cement Garden*). In *Black Dogs*, the donkey-size dogs grazing quietly on a scraggly hillside in the south of France first strike the onlooker as an unmistakable manifestation of evil, quite in keeping with their predecessors in McEwan's *oeuvre*; it is in this sense that "they [exude] meaning" (McEwan, *Black Dogs* 144) and induce in the viewer "a confusing thought of something medieval, of a tableau both formal and terrifying" (144). The scene's further connotations remain unspecified, but the point seems to be that the "mythical beasts" (144) have strayed from a wondrous tale of anomalies and monsters modelled on Cerberus or stolen from Conan Doyle. On the other hand, this magic aura is dispelled when it appears that the dogs mean realistic business with June, the young woman whom they stalk, aroused as they are by the scent of human flesh. The ambivalence sets in, then, when June gets the upper hand in her single combat with the beasts,

and when she discovers within herself, in this moment of extremity, an unsuspected resourcefulness that is cloaked in the vestment of the divine:

June whispered, "Please go away. Please. Oh God!" The expletive brought her to the conventional thought of her last and best chance. She tried to find the space within her for the presence of God and thought she discerned the faintest of outlines, a significant emptiness she had never noticed before, at the back of her skull. It seemed to lift and flow upwards and outwards, streaming suddenly into an oval penumbra many feet high, an envelope of rippling energy, or, as she tried to explain it later, of "coloured invisible light" that surrounded her and contained her. (149-50)

June survives her confrontation with the dogs to find her life transfigured ever after, suffused as it is with the afterglow of "this extraordinary light" (151), which counterpoints the dogs' otherworldly blackness. In other words, evil though they may be, the dogs are invested with a heuristic value that June acknowledges as an important liberating principle crucial to her perception of herself in later life: "I haven't mythologised those animals. I've made use of them. They set me free. I discovered something" (59). Here, more clearly perhaps than anywhere else in McEwan's work, the writer's programmatic urge to "get hold of the good" seems at long last to come to fulfilment, since his concern with evil shades off noticeably into a glaring apprehension of its opposite. This realization calls for further inquiry; indeed, it might point to a lost dimension in McEwan's fiction, to the presence of antimatter for the stuff of despair, which has gone unnoticed and needs to be examined.

Something of the same, bright opening in the overcast canopy of humanity's sky can be pinpointed in another of McEwan's texts, *The Child in Time* (1987). This is the story of Stephen, whose three-year-old daughter Kate is stolen from him in a London supermarket. Stephen consequently becomes estranged from his wife Julie and finally sinks into a trough of helpless despondency. One amazing feature of this book is that Stephen never asks himself the metaphysical question, why? This is perhaps because the technical question, as to *how* the child-snatcher managed to carry out his or her misdeed so surreptitiously, proves to be mind-boggling enough. Nevertheless, the protago-

nist's easy acceptance of "the absolute, bitter truth" (McEwan, *The Child* 23) may indicate a degree of willing submission to the existing scheme of things, which is at one with the novel's ultimate realism. It is interesting to note the subtle mismatch between the reality conjured up in the novel and the world "as we know it": the setting seems to be London in some impoverished, Thatcherite future in which beggars must obtain a professional licence and the countryside has been all but urbanized out of existence. The point, however, is that the book approaches neither the art of science fiction nor the condition of dystopia; the reader's sense of imaginative recognition is never called upon to decipher this hyper-realistic world, where novelty is only an extension of the familiar. It is in keeping that Stephen's phantasmic day-dreaming about his daughter purports to imagine her as she would have been, in time, years after the abduction, in order that even his wildest imaginings somehow attempt to keep true to the given, inalterable, ineluctable reality of the child Kate. In other words, even though Stephen experiences the loss of his daughter as a catastrophic landslide at the heart of his life, in the last analysis the novel appears to obey not a logic of discovery but one of confirmation. Catastrophe, here, is no catalyst of change, for McEwan only goes through the motions of suggesting an alternative reality, locked as he appears to be in the expression of what is.

This is all the more striking because the reader has been led to expect some kind of release from the ruling order of things, especially in view of Stephen's conversations with his friend Thelma, a woman physicist rather keen to remind him that "[t]here is no absolute time, . . . no independent entity" (14). Sure enough, the disruptive event that shatters Stephen's life seems to open up a breach in the tight fabric of reality and to pave the way for a context where "something could be risked, a different life unfolded in which his own unhappiness could be redoubled or eliminated" (63). Once again the book flirts with the conventions of science fiction to suggest the possibility of a rupture in the temporal continuum, and beyond this the potential existence of parallel worlds. Not only does Stephen achieve an existential awareness of mutually exclusive possi-

bilities, "equally weighted, balanced on a honed fulcrum" (63), which require of him the ability to tip the balance in the desired direction, but he seems to be sidling along backwards, in time, towards an apprehension of the genesis of fact, when "nothing was nothing's own" (60) and existence still had to be determined into some sort of defining shape. Interestingly, this sense of absolute commencement is bound up with the beginning of subjective experience, with Stephen's birth as a human being, as he mindlessly blunders into a familiar landscape that "was in another time" (58), with a feeling that

[h]e fell back down, dropped helplessly through a void, was swept dumbly through invisible curves and rose above the trees, saw the horizon below him even as he was hurled through sinuous tunnels of undergrowth, dank, muscular sluices. (60)

This passage, which combines an imagery of (re)birth with a sense of powerful shift across space to a world of enlarged possibility, hints at the regenerative potential inherent in the fact of catastrophe. The point, however, is that *The Child in Time* belongs to what a writer such as Wilson Harris would call an "art of frustrated momentum" ("*Scented Gardens*" 94), in which the promise of transformation tantalizingly aborts. In this, McEwan evinces a deep philosophical conservatism, which is commensurable with his aesthetics and which deserves further comment.

An interesting feature of this novel is that Stephen's brushing "against the mutually enclosing envelopes of events and the times and places in which they occurred" (McEwan, *The Child* 63) involves a wartime meeting with his own, then-unmarried parents, whom he observes through a pub window as they are/were contemplating the possibility of an abortion and, therefore, a posteriori, of erasing him out of existence. Significantly, Stephen's mother also catches a glimpse through the window of "the face of a child, sort of floating there" (175), such that she feels claimed by the future and decides to keep her baby. The upshot is that McEwan's fiddling with the conventions of realism—as he allows past and present to collide inexplicably—serves to reinforce, not to undermine, the validity of the novel's realistic frame. This ontological confirmation extends to Stephen's temporary reunion with his wife Julie (which is felt to be one possi-

bility among many), when they fall into a passionate embrace and yield to the urgency of the moment—as time “assumed purpose all over again because it was the medium for the fulfilment of desire” (64). Although Stephen will later regret this absurd matrimonial lapse, which only enhances the pain of being separated from Julie, at the time he is overwhelmed by the necessity of an action that continues his earlier dream-like vision of his parents: he senses “a line of argument . . . being continued” (63) through him, despite his disorganized attempts to inflect his own fate. The irony is that the novel indeed sustains “a line of argument” that cannot be curbed, since it turns out that Stephen’s moment with Julie contains the seeds of the book’s inevitable denouement. Thus Stephen returns to a life of loneliness and misery, to two hundred pages of inner confusion spent “in a chaos of wasted days” (156), little suspecting that there had been “a deeper patterning to time” (213) all along—since (unknown to him) Julie was pregnant with his child. The last chapter then releases this potent news (along with a burst of amniotic fluids), which puts Stephen’s investigations into perspective, in so far as his free meanderings between competing orders of existence turn out to have been secretly “enclosed within meaningful time” (211) from the very beginning.

It is difficult not to feel that this enclosure depends in turn on the strait-jacket of realism, which, despite the occasional outburst of surrealism, keeps the novel in its grip. There is something altogether too glib about this ending, perhaps because the sense of satisfying resolution (the happy end) does not quite make up for the feeling of loss that follows on the abrupt restoration of an authoritative storyline. In other words, the enabling gap in reality opened up by Kate’s disappearance is plugged somewhat too neatly by the long-plotted birth of the new child, such that in the last analysis the novel’s routine impulse to rehearse new forms and new ontologies is defused prematurely.

This has important implications with regard to the novel’s politics. Indeed, *The Child in Time* is in many ways a political novel that deplores the condition of England under the leadership of some (unnamed) female prime minister, whose strong-willed policies have failed to alleviate “the filth on the streets, the dirty

messages on the walls, the poverty" (177). Yet, for all his rhetoric of indictment, there is a sense in which McEwan's dedication to an aesthetic status quo extends into a form of political non-intervention. This becomes apparent at the heart of the novel's love scene, in which Stephen and Julie unthinkingly slip back into their "uncomplicated roles" (64) as husband and wife with a feeling of triumphant homecoming:

Later, one word seemed to repeat itself as the long-lipped opening parted and closed around him, as he filled the known dip and curve and arrived at a deep, familiar place, a smooth, resonating word generated by slippery flesh on flesh, a warm, humming, softly consonanted, roundly vowelled word . . . home, he was home, enclosed, safe and therefore able to provide, home where he owned and was owned. (64)

This is an ethos of ownership and belonging that also underlies Stephen's confrontation with deviant realities since, for obvious reasons, he considers the possible world where his mother willingly has terminated his own existence as a time/space nexus in which he does not belong, for there is "nowhere to go, no moment which could embody him" (60). Therefore, he implicitly subscribes to an ontological hierarchy in which the established conjuncture ranks highest. His successive encounters with his mother and his wife thus have in common "the innocent longing they provoked, the desire to belong" (63); hence his impulse to home in on the most conventional of realities and to take phallic possession of his own lost fate. This is a move that Stephen underwrites with an apolitical rationale; in bed with Julie, he wonders

how anything so good and simple could be permitted, how they were allowed to get away with it, how the world could have taken this experience into account for so long and still be the way it was. Not governments, or publicity firms or research departments, but biology, existence, matter itself had dreamed this up for its own pleasure and perpetuity, and this was exactly what you were meant to do, it wanted you to like it. (64-65)

However metaphysically appropriate this may be felt to be, and however much one may wish to rejoice at Stephen's recovered sense of happiness, this hardly constitutes a response to the novel's background of poverty and political machination.

It can be argued that McEwan fails to articulate his protagonist's relationship to the outside world, perhaps because of his own commitment to a conservative, liberal-humanist ideology centred on the subject. It is in keeping that Stephen's political engagement with the Official Commission on Childcare, the meetings of which he spends in a day-dreaming daze dominated by nostalgia and self-indulgence, boils down to a story of repeated withdrawals and disaffections. Symbolically, Stephen turns down an invitation to lunch at Downing Street—indeed, he literally turns his back on politics to favour some more personal pursuits. The point is that the novel appears to endorse this move away from political activity in view of its disheartening narrative closure, which amounts to a validation of dystopian reality. This is clearest in the last chapter, where Stephen's and Julie's new lease of parenthood brings upon them a wild expansive mood in which they unpropitiously undertake "to heal everyone and everything, the Government, the country, the planet, but they would start with themselves" (215). Equally ominous is the fact that this self-centredness—together with the birth of the new child—is hailed as "a shock, a jarring, a slowing down" (218) attending the release into "dream time" (218). The novel thus desists from exploring the alternative ontological options previously envisaged, even as it forsakes belief in "quantum magic" (45) and comes to rest in "the beginning of time" (220), an ahistorical moment in which the protagonists can cherish their own snugness and immunity from "a harsh world" (220).

This may have to be qualified by acknowledging the difficulty of identifying McEwan's strategic location with regard to his own material. For example, it seems that a similar paradigm finds a different treatment in *The Comfort of Strangers*, a novel in which the protagonists maintain the same kind of *noli me tangere* attitude, but to more disastrous effect. In brief, Colin and Mary spend a holiday in Venice, where they keep losing their way and have to rely very much on their own resources. It is apt, then, that one of their fellow residents in the hotel should be heard singing, every evening under the shower, a duet from *The Magic Flute*: "Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann, Together make a godly span" (13); indeed, their only human contact with the outside

world is the hotel maid, "a stranger they rarely saw" (13), so that they live in closed circuit (and in relative harmony) within the "godly span" of their perfect couple. The irony is that Mary professes an interest in "the politics of sex" (79) as well as a feminist dislike of patriarchy, which she hardly brings to bear upon her own relationship with Colin. The point is not that Mary falls victim to the insidious powers of patriarchy, "the most powerful single principle of organization shaping institutions and individual lives" (79). Rather, her and Colin's love is felt to be immune to such principles and institutions, sheltered as it is within the self-sufficient microcosm of a blunted passion governed by "unhurried friendliness, the familiarity of its rituals and procedures, the secure, precision-fit of limbs and bodies, comfortable, like a cast returned to its mould" (18). The sense of completeness apparent here precludes any concrete involvement in the social realm—it entails a form of sexual, Edenic innocence that easily falls prey to the world's evil ways. The novel's ultimate irony probably lies in its tongue-in-cheek exposure of a politics of sexuality obviously based on a limited, selfish wish for personal self-fulfilment; and McEwan does not shirk a little bloodshed to prove his point. In the light of this novel's ending, then, readers might feel less inclined to endorse too readily the ideology of the family apparently advocated in *The Child in Time*.

It might be argued, in fact, that the teasing fascination exerted by McEwan's work derives from the disconcerting suspension of ethical judgement that characterizes an opus in which every new novel appears to cancel out whatever stance had been taken in the former. The writer seems to be making a virtue out of his own moral indeterminacy—a trait, by the way, already noted by some early commentators who pinpointed in *The Cement Garden* a rarefied aesthetic, a "deliberate idiocy" (Sampson 68) in the economy of the novel's style, which announced a form of "avant-garde realism" (Duperray 420) characterized by an extreme literality purged of all normativity. The paradox is that the novel has been called experimental despite its startlingly banal form—because the banal, when pressed to a parodic extreme, can bring about its own estrangement effects. The calculated, steely cool-

ness of McEwan's non-judgemental style might be seen to express a certain detachment that, in the face of his grossly shocking material, only echoes the seeming disaffection with society's traditional values exhibited by his protagonist Jack in *The Cement Garden*. In this sense, the aesthetics of the work can be said to play an integral part in scaffolding whatever shallow message still inheres in it; and if McEwan has any affinity with the ethos of postmodernism, it can be traced to this readiness to play about with hollow forms devoid of any philosophical inflection whatsoever.

To this extent, McEwan's art appears to collude with the very evils it is supposed to circumscribe. This point certainly applies to *Black Dogs*, notwithstanding the writer's claim to the contrary—he declared in a recent interview that he found himself involved of late in the throbs of “a search for value” (“The Pleasure” 44). This is a novel in which the analysis of evil serves to delimit some sort of space exterior to it, glimmeringly apprehended by June as a new “peace and spaciousness” spreading inside herself (McEwan, *Black Dogs* 169). However, this gives rise to a number of problems that the novel fails to address, let alone solve. The first has to do with the mystical perception of such issues as evil and goodness, which June pins down to interiorized realities, as “something in our hearts” (172) that “no amount of social theory could account for” (172). This brings with it a naturalization of evil that in effect absolves one from the necessity of political action. It is significant that June's accession to the joys of spirituality should go hand-in-glove in *Black Dogs* with a simultaneous retreat from the spheres of political activity, as embodied in her husband Bernard, who remains active as a left-wing ideologue until late in his life. It may not be the least disturbing aspect of the novel that religion and spirituality consistently are presented not only as antinomic to political commitment but also as a source of necessary alienation both from public life and, at least in the case of June, from the family values so ardently vindicated elsewhere in McEwan's work. If only for this reason, then, it seems that the writer dismisses religion out of hand, after the most perfunctory attempt to assess what it has to offer in response to the reality of violence in the contemporary world.

Once again it can be argued that the very form of the novel prevents the writer from charting a spiritualized world that would in any case surpass the limits set by his (psychological) realism. McEwan has indicated the extent of his dedication to writing as a technique deployed wholly "at the level of sentence construction, of shaping sentences and shaping paragraphs, and shaping parts of characters and making chapters" (McEwan, "The Pleasure" 40). In the case of *Black Dogs*, the wish to remain true to character seems to have played a predominant part, as is apparent from the constraining role ascribed to Jeremy. It may well be that first-person narrators usually impress a story with the hallmark of their personality; but Jeremy's impact on this particular narrative takes on unusual importance in so far as he effectively undermines whatever information he pretends to relay. This is the consequence of an uninquiring cast of mind, quite at ease with the axiom that "there [is] simply no good cause, no enduring principle, no fundamental idea" (McEwan, *Black Dogs* 18) with which to identify or to recognize as a "transcendent entity" (18). It is through the lens of this scepticism that Jeremy undertakes to examine the beliefs held by his parents-in-law, June and Bernard, thus supposedly embarking on a search for meaning whose premises, it must be said, hardly can be called promising: "Rationalist and mystic, commissar and yogi, joiner and abstainer, scientist and intuitionist, Bernard and June are the extremities, the twin poles along whose slippery axis my own unbelief slithers and never comes to rest" (19). Clearly the schematic presentation of his material allows McEwan to set up Aunt Sallys, caricatures of the real thing (June largely comes across as a mystic guru; Bernard as a naive idealist), which overbalance into "extremities" encompassing the whole of belief—which Jeremy can then reject wholesale. The outcome is this most paradoxical of objects, a novel of ideas with no ideas in it, since only the husks of ideas have been preserved in the book's rhetoric. It is in keeping with this aesthetics of emptied form that the novel displays a broken storyline, a fashionable refusal of linearity, which compels the reader to go through the motions of a search for meaning when there is none on offer. Thus, under cover of philosophical scrutiny, *Black Dogs* ultimately confirms

the semantic vacuity of a world in which each of the grand metanarratives of history (Marxism, Christianity) increasingly is coming to grief. Again, then, there is a troubling circularity to an enterprise that ends up laying waste to the old, already-tottering edifice of human thought and belief, thus providing a perfect breeding ground for the very evils that set it going in the first place.

However, Jeremy stands in line with some of his predecessors in McEwan's work because he finds a sanctuary, on this scrapheap of otiose philosophies, in the essential kernel of the family. It is significant that his resistance to teleological, messianic creeds such as Communism or Christianity springs from an inability "to yield up the defensible core of selfhood and see it dissolve in the warm milk of universal love and goodness" (60). The point seems to be that human love is in short supply and should be apportioned accordingly, between selected recipients; otherwise, there is no possible understanding of Jeremy's statement of "belief in the possibility of love transforming and redeeming a life" (20). *Whose* life is very much the moot point here, of course, for it goes without saying that love, taken as the highest human value, yields a world view that consistently elides issues of sociopolitical concern. Jeremy's particular brand of love ranges only just far enough to include his wife Jenny, his children (though they remain strangely absent from the novel), and, in the best of worlds, his niece Sally (whose history of violence and alcoholism, however, turns her into another borderline case). Actually, the fate held in store for Sally provides a tell-tale illustration of the hypocrisies built into Jeremy's system of value; and it is significant that she will come to focalize the guilt brought into play by his successive breaches of solidarity. Legitimate though it may have been, his early abandonment of her for the sake of a career condemns Sally to a spiral of violence that continues into several disastrous marriages, which only replicate the disaster of her battered childhood. The expanding violence and suffering at work in Sally's life encourage Jeremy to universalize these principles and to consider all evil in the world as an extrapolation on her private pain; not only does he feel that "her unhappy life was [his] responsibility" (68), then, but he also sees in Sally

an accessible, close-at-hand lever on the rest of history. This is why Jeremy is prone to envelop with meaning his one decisive action in the novel, his taking to task a violent father for beating his child, thus acting out some kind of vicarious revenge for the wrongs suffered by Sally. The universal import of the incident is thoroughly underlined, since the boy's misery is likened to "the condition of the world" (128), while Jeremy gets "a brief ennobling sense of [himself] as one of those obscure French citizens who blossom from nowhere at a transforming moment in their nation's history to improvise the words that history will engrave in stone" (130). He manages to reconcile this with a smug feeling that the whole drama "seemed to be enacted for [him] alone" (124); this proves true enough since Jeremy has to be restrained in his murderous impulses in order that he develop a convenient insight into the conundrum of violence, which will exempt him in the future from further steeping himself in the blood of history. In the meantime, of course, the real Sally must fend for herself, for "the strain on family life" (68) imposed by her presence has been found too great for her to be allowed to stay.

Sally is thus used (and abused) as a universal scapegoat, apt to be sacrificed for the greater good of family life. By the same token, Jeremy's love affair with Jenny seems to be rooted in a private-individualist ethos that implies utter disregard for the body politic. In this respect it is probably no coincidence that Jeremy comes across as a nervous, easily intimidated young man who only finds himself and propositions Jenny after a joint visit to one of Poland's concentration camps—in apparent flight from what he perceives as an intolerable "disease of the imagination and a living peril" (110). Also, their first move as a couple is to turn their backs on barbed wire and to withdraw to the closet afforded by a local hotel, where they spend three days of unbroken love-making. The symbolic configuration of space here suggests a separation between the public and the private (or between history and a forgetful present) as well as a shift of focus towards the latter—a shift that devalues the notion of a political project and promotes a view of ethics as entirely bound up with the ideal of self-fulfilment in love. Throughout McEwan's work,

this move is presented as a matter of philosophical necessity, perhaps of survival, in a postmodern age in which the old systems of value have ceased to command any credence; on the other hand, it can be argued that a novel such as *Black Dogs* fails to act upon its best insights because, as I suggest, it also includes a resigned awareness of its own forced complicity with evil.

The point is that the retreat from the political that forms a leitmotif in McEwan's work is burdened with a mesmerizing sense of guilt, which is the price to pay for this commodity called innocence. In other words, the escape into the sheltered domain of personal self-fulfilment is preceded and forestalled by an awareness of its impossibility, since this kind of post-Holocaust innocence is always already overshadowed by guilt anyway. This is perfectly clear in *Black Dogs*, where Jeremy discovers in the concentration camp that his only protection against despair would lie in a deliberate suspension of sympathy—an attitude that consists of jiggling one's change in one's pocket and then finding out that you are "drawn insidiously to the persecutor's premise" (110), or that you have "taken one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare" (111). This is the realization that sanctions an approach to human endeavour fundamentally premised in the fact of disbelief. The originality of *Black Dogs*, as compared with McEwan's previous novels, is that it seeks to anchor such disbelief within the historical context of a twentieth century characterized by the disintegration of value; in this, however, it stands in line with McEwan's earlier books only in that it continues a form of "avant-garde realism" that remains enthralled with a shrunken, crippled "reality" inherited from the Holocaust.

It seems symptomatic that the post-Auschwitz generation of novelists in England (among them Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Christopher Hope, Martin Amis), without necessarily being Jewish, keeps returning to the Holocaust, in a quest for spiritual adjustment to this most defeating landmark in world history. It perhaps can be argued that McEwan's attempt to escape into political innocence finds an echo in the hedonism of Graham Swift (in *Out of This World*) or D. M. Thomas (in his "Russian Nights" quintet)—a hedonism that constitutes a kind of stock

response to the meaninglessness of history that the Holocaust seems to signify. This makes perfect sense (so to speak) if one considers, with Adorno, that history only registers progress in the technological sense that it "leads from the slingshot to the megaton bomb" (Eagleton 343), such that in the last analysis "[t]he One and All that keeps rolling on to this day—with occasional breathing spells—teleologically would be the absolute of suffering" (Adorno 320). In Terry Eagleton's paraphrase, "[f]or a Jew like Adorno, there can only be the guilty mystery that one is still, by some oversight, alive" (343), since "there can be no real history after such an event [as the Holocaust], just the twilight or aftermath in which time still moves listlessly, vacuously on, even though humanity itself has come to a full stop" (343). By this token, the crisis of civilization is not so much encapsulated in the Holocaust itself as in the fact that civilization nonetheless continues.

Something in this trend of thought also applies, on the plane of aesthetics, to an art that insists on existing even though the Nazis used to listen to classical music. Like the fiction of most of the novelists cited above, McEwan's fiction is constrained by the reality of the Holocaust to the extent that its universe has been emptied of belief—belief in any kind of cause with the result that simply to refer, for it, is to collude automatically with that to which it points. It may be objected that this need not be the case, at least not if the novel's contents were to make room for the possibility of discontent. In a book such as *Black Dogs*, after all, Jeremy is neither McEwan nor even necessarily his spokesperson, and the author should not be held morally accountable for what his narrator fails to do or say. However, it is characteristic of McEwan's habitual neutrality of tone that the novel accommodates neither the distance of irony nor the depth of critical thinking. McEwan may not be identical with his narrator, then, but he persistently ducks behind his back in a provocative game of philosophical hide-and-seek. Undecidability, in this context, seems rather too close to the brand of nihilism on which the novel expatiates.

My suggestion has been that the peculiar strength of nihilism in a novel such as *Black Dogs* derives from its implication in a

narrow realism entrenched in what Wilson Harris once called a "grave of history" (Harris, *Scented Gardens* 92). The voice of history audible in the book tends to invest in itself as "obsessively newsworthy" (95) until the shipwreck of civilization on which it broods comes to appear as inevitable and absolute "within achieved sculptures and institutions of mankind beached in time and space" (95). To a postcolonial writer and critic like Harris, the authority in which this narrative of historical doomsday attempts to wrap itself makes it liable to the sin of cultural hubris, in that it tends to "reinforce eclipses of otherness within legacies of conquest that rule the world" (Harris, *The Womb* 55). There is need, therefore, for a wider, cross-cultural perspective that would not restrict the scope to decline and sterility, or to hypocrisy and a self-seeking disengagement from the mess. The despair that is rampant in post-Auschwitz Europe may well constitute a self-indulgence that the long-standing subjects of history, some of them former victims of genocide, cannot now countenance or afford. In this perspective the cramped imagination that governs McEwan's guilt-ridden world may have to "be creatively disrupted by pressures of infinity within the womb of space if . . . realism is to yield insight into 'inverted' metamorphoses as threshold to a higher aesthetic factor in pawns of spirit" (Harris, *The Womb* 65). In so doing, McEwan's work would only respond to its own in-built pressures, since it does bring into play a repressed lucidity that could be subversive of its very self-confirming premises. In the meantime, owing perhaps to the lack of a cross-cultural perspective (singularly missing in the contemporary English novel), McEwan sticks to a strategy of writing that precludes the apprehension of political meanings and values that do persist, *pace* postmodernism, in the world at large.

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