German occupation of Southern France. Her mystical values form a depoliticised equivalent to the idealistic counterculture of the sixties, such as the anti-psychiatry movement led by R. D. Laing. Bernard and June's separation while remaining married symbolises the polarisation of British culture into fixed ideological positions by the mid-seventies.

As we saw, McEwan emerged during this period as a writer, but rather than just being a symptom of cultural and social polarisation, Jeremy attempts to hold the opposing sides together in his consciousness. Like McEwan's description of himself as a writer, Jeremy lacks any beliefs, but tries to form a structure of values by acting as Bernard and June's go-between. McEwan's writing mirrors this triangular relationship, inviting the reader into a morally and politically decentred space between polarised values. In the persona of Jeremy, then, McEwan attempts to reconstruct a marriage, however estranged, of the contending values ofBritish society, and the centre which holds this marriage together is love for his wife, first consummated after their visit to Majdanek. The Holocaust represents the Fall of European culture as a whole, but it is also a place from where Britain and Europe's future can begin anew; following the Cold War between world powers, and between Bernard and June, McEwan claimed to write for an age of unity which tolerates ideological and personal diversity.

By the time of writing *Black Dogs*, then, McEwan had completely reversed the terms of his original critical reception by arguing that "an act of cruelty is ultimately a failure of the imagination" and through literature "our imagination permits us to understand what it is like to be someone else." (Louvel 1995: 4) Where before he had found himself indulging in violence, seduced by the power of his literary imagination,

now the imagination could counter the ignorance underlying violence. He shrugged off political commitment as a diversion from this "investigation or free inquiry." (Casademont 1992: 44)

However, the ideological freedom of McEwan's writing, and his optimistic historical vision, must incorporate the destructive abject which also threatens them. This is where McEwan is most controversial, and most indispensable to us. More than exposing us to the reality of others, his most important achievement lies in exposing us to the otherness within ourselves; he disarms our moral defences, forcing us to recognise in ourselves what we repudiate in the world. Hereinlies the morality of his moral detachment. The scene at Majdanek is a crucial example of this: we sympathise with Jeremy and Jenny's life-affirming passion for each other, while repudiating the circumstances in which it takes place. What, then, do we learn of ourselves in this scene, and what do we learn of McEwan's achievement as a novelist?

## 4. "Not quite" survivors

During his walks in southern France with June immediately after the war, Bernard passes a mason carving names of the dead on a monument a woman whose husband and two sons had been killed watches the mason. This sceneprovokes in Bernard what is perhaps the most important moral insight of *Black Dogs* :

> As [Bernard and June] drank from their water bottles, he was struck by the recently concludedwar not as a historical, geopolitical fact but as a multiplicity, a near infinity of private sorrows, as a

> boundless grief minutely subdivided without diminishment among individuals who covered the continent like dust, like spores whose separate identities would remain unknown, and whose totality showed more sadness than any one could ever begin to comprehend; a weight borne in silence by hundreds of thousands, millions, like the woman in black for a husband and two brothers, each grief a particular, intricate, keening love story that might have been otherwise. It seemed he had never thought about the war before, not about its cost. He had been so busy with the details of his work, of doing it well, and his widest view had been of war aims, of winning, of statistical deaths, statistical destruction, and of postwar reconstruction. For the first time he sensed the scale of the catastrophe in terms of feeling all those unique and solitary deaths, all that consequent sorrow, unique and solitary too, which had no place in conferences, headlines, history, and which had quietly retired to houses, kitchens, unshared beds, and anguished memories. This came upon Bernard by a pine tree in the Languedoc in 1946 not as an observation he could share with June but as a deep apprehension, a recognition of a truth that dismayed him into silence and, later, a question: what possible good could come of a Europe covered in this dust, these spores, when forgetting would be inhuman and dangerous, and remembering a constant torture?

During his research for the memoir of Bernard and June, Jeremy finds that the monument was inscribed in Latin quotations, not the names of the dead, and that none of the locals recalled the woman. These facts give the incident a purely metaphysical significance, ironically since "Bernard was to remember this moment for the rest of his life." (McEwan 1992: 139-40)

Bernard's reflection mirrors the conscience of Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" in *Theses in the Philosophy of History* :

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But astorm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1992: 258)

Benjamin, of course, tragically closed his wings, only to join the dead amongst the wreckage of history; he committed suicide in 1940 on the French-Spanish border, with the manuscript of *Theses* in his luggage. Caught between the terrible dilemma where "forgetting would be inhuman and dangerous, and remembering a constant torture," Bernard spends his life like Benjamin's Angel: he lets himself be propelled by progress, unable to answer his own question of "what possible good" could come of this Europe; instead he works towards a "postwar reconstruction," leaving behind the "near infinity of private sorrows." By comparison, June devotes herself to the "feeling" caused by historical catastrophe, establishing a home near to the site of her own epiphany with the black dogs; in another sense, though, she absconds from the Angel's responsibilities by withdrawing into a private world of spiritualism, while the "black dogs" of history roam elsewhere throughout the world.

Jeremy and Jenny have inherited Bernard and June's dilemma. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe continues to struggle with the question of "what possible good" can come of itself. Old historical conflicts persist with the problems of uniting East and West; further, there is the question of how to establish national and cultural unity as the EU upon the economic ties as the EEC (Jenny, at least, stands for election in the European Parliament). The dilemma is rooted in the Second World War, which is why their visit to Majdanek holds so much importance: returning them to the historical moment of Bernard and June's ill-fated love and optimism in 1946, it presents them with their own departure point from the war, one from which they can redress the previous generation's failures.

However, Jeremy and Jenny have a double relationship with the past, of escape and entrapment, which they experience intensely at Majdanek. In this respect they are linked toone of the most poignant examples of Benjamin's Angel, Primo Levi. As a survivor of Auschwitz he spent the rest of his life both free of and entrapped within the past. His case shows the profoundly ambivalent condition of the survivor, like the Angel caught between the wreckage of historical tragedy and the storm of progress, or life. Indeed, in betraying the memory of the victims of Majdanek, we can see that Jeremy and Jenny actually re-enact the experience of the survivor.

Robert Jay Lifton explains the limitation of the death camp survivor's "knowledge of death": "the survivor has lived out the mythology of the hero, but not quite. And that 'not quite' is the tragic dimension of it, that you see, well, in the story of Primo Levi, who seemed to have mastered it to a degree that moved us, even thrilled us. And then killed himself, as an elderly man, for reasons that we don't fully understand. "

(Caruth 1995: 135-36) These "reasons" are suggested in the absences of *If This is a Man*.

Levi's book, as Lifton says, is ultimately a work of profound affirmation of the human spirit. The more terrible circumstances it describes, the greater is the triumph of the few who survived it. Reading the book is like an act of historical exorcism. After the opening shocks from transportation to arrival and initial selections, the novel's architecture of suffering spans an upturned arch from a period of adaptation then life on the "bottom," the further selections, to eventual liberation. We follow Levi's testimony, empathising with his sheer terror, anguish, rage, and release. This is the "lesson" that Lifton mentions, but it comes at a tremendous cost, which Levi in his final years could no longer meet. That cost lay in the violation of a humane self that somehow survived the event, while being irreparably damaged by it. As Levi explains, survival demanded a residual core of humanityto sustain his will to live.Throughout the text he repeats the refrain that the system of the camp cannot be understood by its prisoners; this perspective distanced him from the horror to leave his human self intact. However, to survive the system, he also had to understand it, and even to actively participate in it. In this respect, he was forced to discard his humanity which he could never fully recover.

Throughout the text Levi continually attempts to rationalise the system of Auschwitz: "it is in the normal order of things that the privileged oppress the unprivileged: the social structure of the camp is based on this human law." He analyses the situation from the Germans' perspective. He explains how the prisoners were stripped of their independent will in preparation for their extermination: "One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face

of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand." Hemust understand the situation to avoid being a passive victim of it. However, understanding implicates him with the system; he betrays this by sharing the Germans' indifference towards the victims who were, as he puts it, already dead before being executed. Levi's most critical moment of identification with the oppressor takes place after he survives the second wave of selections. He is profoundly disturbed by the possibility that he was not chosen by mistake instead of the physically healthy Ren in front of him. Levi would be haunted by the guilt of this possibility for the rest of his life, but to survive it psychologically he appeals to the logic of the camp: "The important thing for the Lager is not that the most useless prisoners be eliminated, but that free posts be quickly created, according to a certain percentage previously fixed." (Levi 1987: 50, 135) After all, he feels profound relief, and even gratitude that this system has allowed him to live. Partly in repudiation of his own self-justification, he directs his hatred not upon the Germans but upon another inmate, Kuhn, who thanks God for not being selected.

Levi's release, and ours as readers, is more a product of editing out the fate of the innumerable victims than of an actual improvement in the situation that he records. From previously describing the camp as a whole, he becomes the hero of a story of personal survival, and regained humanity. The exterminations are only described in passing: as the Russians advance, "prisoners 'reclaimed' from all the camps in east Poland pour into our Lager haphazardly; the minority are set to work, the majority leave immediately for Birkenau and the Chimney." Meanwhile, he and two other inmates have been promoted as chemistry specialists: "So it would seem that fate, by a new unsuspected path, has

arranged that we three, the object of envy of all ten thousand condemned, suffer neither hunger nor cold this winter." Then theGermans leave with the healthy inmates who have "eyes like those of terrified cattle" all of them vanish, and Levi remarks with a complete absence of conviction, "perhaps someone will write their story one day." (Levi 1987: 145-46, 161)

The camp becomes a carnivalesque space of life and death in which Levi regains a sense of humanity, while ignoring the fate of the dead. Like adolescents, he and the other survivors smoke cigarettes made from herbs in the kitchen. His renewed impulse to live demands a callous disregard for the dead, as when he explores the former surgery:

> Not a bottle intact, the floor covered by a layer of rags, excrement and soiled bandages. A naked, contorted corpse. But there was something that had escaped my predecessors: a battery from a lorry. I touched the poles with a knife a small spark. It was charged.

Amidst corpse and excrement, the battery's spark signifies life. "Cheerful and irresponsible," he explores the SS camp, drinking the mugs of beer left on the tables; half an hour later the SS return, finding eighteen Frenchmen there, whom they kill "methodically, with a shot in the nape of the neck, lining up their twisted bodies on the road." The ground is too frozen to bury the corpses, which are visible from his window, overflowing a trench. The patients are so benumbed by cold and hunger that no one notices when they die. A Hungarian chemist, Smogyi, mechanically repeats the word "Jawohl" as he lays dying; Levi concludes that "I never understood so clearly as at that moment how laborious is the death of a man." The corpse is left on the floor, "the

shameful wreck of skin and bones, the Smogyi thing": "The living are more demanding; the dead can wait. We began to work as on every day." (Levi 1987: 168, 171, 177-78)

In this incredible concluding sequence we follow Levi through a re-emerging sense of humanity, juxtaposed with a sense of benumbed powerlessness, and a will to live that pitilessly ignores the dead. Levi struggled from out of the wreckage of history, aware that if he attempted to reawaken the dead he would only join them; as Benjamin's Angel he forced himself upwards, trying to catch in his wings the storm of progress or rather, whatever lay at hand, to return himself to life. His omission of the human loss of the victims locateswhere, as Lifton pointed out, he failed to recover from his experiences of Auschwitz. We can presume that their persistent haunting of his life thereafter contributed to his eventual suicide.

At Majdanek Jeremy and Jenny share an analogous experience with Levi, in starkly differing proportions. Their inability to empathise with the dead, in Dori Laub's terms, testifies to their empathy with the survivor. Like the piles of bodies outside Levi's window, the piles of shoes crush Jeremy's sense of pity. Consequently, he is "drawn insidiously to the persecutors' premise, that life was cheap, junk to be inspected in heaps," echoing Levi's benumbed indifference towards the dehumanised victims. Mirroring Levi as one of the selected chemistry specialists, Jeremy is "on the other side." He can "no longer bear the victims," and turns with "inverted admiration" to the oppressor's achievement in creating the system. This becomes his imprisonment, and he and Jenny leave Majdanek with a sense that they "have been released from long captivity." They talk of trivial things, such as the attractiveness of Lublin (described earlier as "matter" to Majdanek as

"antimatter") and Jenny's Polish friend who studied cooking in Paris (McEwan 1992: 87-90). Still, their dissociation fromthe tragedy of Majdanek continues to align them with a survivor like Levi who smoked kitchen herb cigarettes and drank the Germans' beer in the midst of corpses and excrement.

Their subsequent lovemaking is both a consequence of sympathy with the dead, and subsequent repudiation of the dead, who cannot be reawakened to life; only they can generate life with each other. Like Benjamin's Angel they cannot redeem the past, only abandon it to create a future together. Like Levi, they are forced to follow Blake's Proverb of Hell to "Drive your cart and plow over the bones of the dead." In terms of his personal life, Jeremy creates a family with Jenny, but is unable to save his niece Sally, the now drug addicted victim of his abusive sister and brother-in-law. When he does try to save her substitute in his conscience, an abused French boy, he finds himself almost kicking the boy's father to death, since his efforts have no effect in saving the original victim.

This inability to redeem the dead, or the original victims, is ultimately tragic for the survivor, as demonstrated by Levi's eventual suicide. This situation haunts Jeremy at the end of the novel while he relaxes at June's home in Southern France, "wondering at all the world historical and personal forces, the huge and tiny currents, that had to align and combine to bring this place into our possession," from a world war to June's personal sense of security there. In particular, he reflects upon the historical irony of the black dogs: "They trouble me when I consider what happiness I owe them, especially when I allow myself to think of them not as animals but as spirit hounds." He is thinking of them as the incarnation of evil that created the Holocaust, that also

made possible his marriage and his personal growth to maturity. The novel closes with the consequent foreboding that since his present happiness is owed to past evil, this evil will some day return, perhaps to take it all back from him: "they will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time." (McEwan 1992: 148-49)

Still, we should maintain our scepticism in reading the scene at Majdanek. In *Black Dogs* the characters are forced into sublime confrontations, in the Romantic sense, not with nature but with history. June's experience with the black dogs, which were trained by the Gestapo, combines nature with history. Paralysed by terror, a presence from outside her ego gives her the power to preserve herself against the dogs. She identifies this presence as "God," and lives by her knowledge of it. At Majdanek Jeremy feels helpless before the overwhelming violence of history; his sense of being "delivered" from it, though, may not be a sublime release from his ego but only relief to escape back into an everyday world of picturesque sightseeing, trivial conversations and sex. Perhaps he is worth comparing to the composer Clive Linley in Amsterdam (1998). Scornful of late Modernist music which disavows melody and harmony in the wake of the Holocaust, he walks through the Lake District in search of a sublime experience which will inspire him to write the crucial melody of his "Millennium Symphony." Convinced that his resulting melody measures up to Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy,' he chooses to write it down while on the mountain instead of saving a woman from being attacked by a serial rapist on the ground below. This "failed sublime," in its evasion of the true horrors in the world, may be a closer equivalent to Jeremy's response to Majdanek.

However we interpret the scene at Majdanek, it conclusively demonstrates the ambivalence of McEwan's fiction, and moral vision. As

I have shown, he is concerned with excavating a genealogy of morals, not with prescribing them. In this endeavour there is always the danger of making negative actions appear acceptable because they exist only within their peculiar circumstances. It would be wrong either to find a prescriptive moral in Jeremy and Jenny's actions, or, conversely, to denounce McEwan as having an amoral agenda. His morality is decentred: he chooses his subjects which are rife with contending values, and leaves the moral point to our conscience. Jeremy and Jenny's sexual passion on leaving Majdanek could have led only to an unseemly one-night stand; conversely, Jeremy's "reckless exhilaration" at the prospect of avenging an abused child leads to him to almost kick the father to death. McEwan draws our attention to our inability to judge our actions by any one criterion.

It is too simplistic, then, to dismiss the scene at Majdanek in terms of the philosophy that "an orgasm cannot lie," to quote from 'In Between the Sheets' (1978); it is obviously too disturbing to be reduced down to a prescription of hedonistic nihilism. McEwan articulates a far more complex vision than historical redemption through personal desire: instead he demonstrates our inextricable links to the past as we struggle to "progress" from it; while attempting to redeem the past, we find ourselves repeating its crimes. This struggle with the past, at the very least, links us to survivors suchas Primo Levi, and with it remains the danger of past violence returning to make us its victims.

## Reference

Adorno, T.W.(1973), *Negative Dialectics*, New York: Seabury Press.

Alexander, E.(1979), *The Resonance of Dust*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Benjamin, W.(1992), *Illuminations*, London: Fontana.

Bradbury, M.(ed.)(1977), *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, London: Fontana.

_____.(1994), *The Modern British Novel*, London: Penguin.

Caruth, C.(1995), *Trauma*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Casademont, R. G.(1992), "The Pleasure of Prose Writing Vs. Pornographic Violence: An Interview with Ian McEwan", *European English Messenger* 1: 3, 40-45.

Delrez, M.(1995), "Escape into Innocence: Ian McEwan and the Nightmare of History", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 26: 2, 7-23.

Felman, S. and Laub, D.(1992), *Testimony*, New York: Routledge.

Friedlander, S. (ed.)(1992), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.

_____.(1993) *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Hamilton, I.(1978), "Points of Departure", The New Review 5:2, 9-21.

Hayman, R.(1978), "Ian McEwan's Moral Anarchy", *Books and Bookmen* 24, 15-16.

Lang, J. M.(1997), *Dialogues with History in Post-War British Fiction*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University.

Levi, P.(1987), *If This is a Man and The Truce*, London: Abacus.

Lindman-Strafford, K.(1983), "Scream Quietly! Violence in Contemporary British Writing", *Three Lectures on Literature in English*, edited by Roger D. Sell Åbo, Åbo Akademi, 11-20.

Louvel, L., Ménégaldo, G. and Fortin, A.(1995), 'An Interview with Ian

McEwan', *Études britanniques contemporaines* 8, 1-12.
McEwan, I.(1998), Amsterdam, London: Cape.
_____.(1992), *Black Dogs* , New York: Random House.
_____.(1975), *First Love, Last Rites*, London: Cape.
_____.(1978), *In Between the Sheets* , London: Cape.
_____.(1978), *The Cement Garden*, London: Cape.
Nicol, B.(2002), *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Steiner, G.(1967), *The Language of Silence*, London: Faber and Faber.
Stephen, K.(1987), "The Bright Young Man Grows Up", *Sunday Times Magazine* , 16 August, 36-38.
Vice, S.(2000), *Holocaust Fiction*, London: Routledge.
Waugh, P.(1995), *Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and Its Background 1960 to 1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

원고 접수일: 2007년 3월 31일
게재 결정일: 2007년 5월 21일

ABSTRACT

# Romance at Majdanek: The Survivor's Dilemma in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

Krockel, Carl R.

This essay focuses upon a specific incident in Ian McEwan's Black Dogs in order to characterise his technique and ethical positioning. In the scene the narrator, Jeremy, goes on a "date" with Jenny to the concentration camp Majdanek. Unable to identify with the enormous suffering of the victims, he is relieved to be "liberated" from the camp; he makes a sexual advance on Jenny which is reciprocated, and results in three days of lovemaking at the nearest hotel, theneventually marriage and a family. I attempt to explain why McEwan presents such a morally ambivalent scene to communicate his vision of a future that promises to redeem historical violence through personal love. The scene blatantly transgresses critical thought on the Holocaust. For instance, Saul Friedlander advocates a "distanced, or allusive realism," following from Adorno's Negativity. McEwan follows this approach in describing the innumerable victims' shoes, not their actual suffering; however, this effect is subverted by Jeremy and Jenny's repudiation of the actual suffering by having sex. Neither does the scene accord with the more

recent trauma theory of writers such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who stress the communicability of suffering through testimony, and the consequent affirmation of life in the midst of death. Jeremy and Jenny's behaviour cannot be justified in these terms, since their affirmation of life follows a rejection of empathy for the dead.

This scene needs to be contextualised in terms of McEwan's whole writing career, which has been accompanied by controversy over his choice of violent and unpleasant subject matter. In turn, his career needs to be contextualised in terms of Britain's postwar period; in particular it is symptomatic of the dismantling of values in the wake of the war and Holocaust, which reached a critical point in the seventies, the beginning of his career. In McEwan's most successful and mature writing moral values develop arbitrarily from the characters' actions in response to their circumstances. He traces the conflict between the individual's unconscious impulses and society, and in so doing, he presents the abject within ourselves, shocking us into self-recognition of what we repudiate in others. This is hisachievement in the scene at Majdanek: he shows how in attempting to create a future we betray the past, even though we are attempting to redeem the past.