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#### **Research Article**

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# Ian McEwan's Parable of Reading in *Black Dogs*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore Ian McEwan's vision of Europe in his 1992 novel *Black Dogs*. Published some three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, *Black Dogs* plunges its readers into a fictional experience that enhances their sense of an irrational fear and their apprehensions of evil forces haunting Europe's past and present and bursting out in the shape of a pair of menacing creatures in London, France, Poland and Germany. Taking the reader back and forth in time and space in a narrative of mobility, McEwan projects a complex vision of Europe, where memory plays tricks and sheds light upon an essential, albeit inscrutable truth at the same time. Feeling that he belongs nowhere, in particular, Jeremy, the narrator-protagonist, probes into the past to find the key to the present, which overarches the future of the continent. In order to do so, his mind sweeps over moments and places, projecting pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which only the reading process can fit together. Looking into McEwan's memory-oriented narrative strategies, the paper will focus on the emblematic role of the reader in a novel which is a parable of cultural, epistemological and literary reading.

Keywords: McEwan, writer, narrator, reliability, (post)memory, metahistorical romance

Louise M. Rosenblatt sees reading and writing as two stages of a transactional process. She starts from the idea that there are both parallels and differences between the two, which are connected by an involvement with texts. As far as differences are concerned, Rosenblatt argues that "writing and reading obviously differ in that the writer starts with a blank page and must produce a text, while the reader starts with the already-written or printed text and must produce meaning" (2).

I contend that Ian McEwan's novel *Black Dogs* systematically challenges and blurs the differences between reading and writing. Jeremy, the first-person narrator of *Black Dogs*, is a memoir writer who bases his writing upon his epistemological appetite, rendering it problematic from the opening of the book. Glossing upon his attraction to other people's parents because he lost his own early in life, Jeremy wonders, in the lines of the Preface: "Were all these parents attractive to me simply because they were not mine? Try as I might, I could not answer yes, for they were undeniably likeable. They interested me, I picked things up. . . . And if my parents had been alive, would I not be breaking for freedom like the rest? Again, I could not answer yes" (McEwan 12-13).

# The Character as Reader in the Contemporary Novel

The hero/ine of postmodern literature is emblematically a reader of signs. By positioning their characters in this stance, writers typify our essential condition as readers, upon which our whole being and our destiny seem to depend. One of the finest examples of this is Thomas Pynchon's novella *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), which engages the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, whose first name is symbolic, in a quest "to discover how and

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why to read the story in which she finds herself" (Bloom 250). As Harold Bloom argues, "Pynchon's Oedipa is not always a good reader, but she deserves her first name: like Sophocles' Oedipus she unceasingly seeks the truth" (250). So strong has writers' interest in this defining condition of their characters become that in 1980 another prominent novel came out to alert us not only to the importance of reading but also to its challenges, perils, and ultimately its inevitable failures. That novel is Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which invites its readers to take on William of Baskerville's task of interpretation, with all the uncertainties and difficulties that occur *en route*.

Texts like Pynchon's and Eco's opened up the wonder of reading and interpretation as ways leading towards a desperately sought truth in an age when truth has become increasingly hard to discern and to tell. McEwan's *Black Dogs* is yet another novel which casts the protagonist in a scenario where his quest for truth turns his task of reading and interpreting photographs and stories into a major goal. This scenario renders the conflict at the core of the novel between the protagonist's frustrated will to *know* and his fairly successful will to *write* into a drama of reading. *Atonement*, published in 2001, is a more recent attempt on McEwan's part to have the novel reflect on the process of writing and reading. Actually, the point of a novel within a novel, which is the case of *Atonement*, is to have the story framed by the reader's expectations.

# Reading Microexpressions and Photographs as "Postmemory" and "Psychic Phantoms"

Part One of *Black Dogs*, "Wiltshire," opens with Jeremy's careful reading of an old photograph of his parents-in-law June and Bernard Tremaine. The passage throws his own reading skills into serious question when he confesses that "it is barely possible to discern in the snapshot the old face" of his mother-in-law, which was, at the time when he got to know her, "benignly wreathing into welcome when one entered her private room" (McEwan 25-26). The reading of the snapshot is described as a complex activity involving acts of inference, like the reading of a text. When it comes to reading the two faces, in turn, the degree of difficulty differs: Jeremy discovers that reading Bernard's is easy. In 1989 Bernard has basically remained "the same clumsy beaming giant [as he was] in 1946," but June's face, which "veered from its appointed course much as her life did" (McEwan 25), is hard to make out. What makes the reading even more difficult is the time that has elapsed, which has altered destinies and faces to varying degrees.

At the same time, the snapshot connects 1946 with 1989 in very subtle and tricky ways, which Jeremy takes pains to account for. He lets us know that in 1989 the photograph hangs in the kitchen of his and his wife's house in the Languedoc, and he also says he has often studied it, usually when alone, because his wife is annoyed by his fascination with her parents. Jeremy describes this as an intense activity in which he draws his face close to the photo, trying to predict the future life and also the future face of his mother-in-law, who had the courage to break up her marriage and cope with life on her own. While focusing on it, Jeremy is aware not only of the difficulty of the task but also of its interpretative nature. Like any interpretation, it is relative, partial, biased, and virtually wrong: "Perhaps I am only imagining the hardness beneath the smile, buried in the line of the jaw, a firmness, a fixity of opinion, a scientific optimism about the future" (McEwan 26). What Jeremy tries to discern when he examines the snapshot so punctiliously is a set of microexpressions, which are brief, involuntary expressions detectable on the faces of humans. They usually occur in situations when people have something to lose or gain. While regular facial expressions can be concealed, microexpressions are difficult or even impossible to hide. In *Black Dogs* Jeremy scrutinises the snapshot with the obvious intention of making out minute and flickering details of his in-laws' facial expressions that would be indicative of very subtle changes in their approaches to life.

McEwan's interest in the compelling activity of reading faces continues a long line in world literature which delves into the connections between characters and their physiognomy. In *Anti-Portraits: Poetics of the Face in Modern English, Polish and Russian Literature*, Kamila Pawlikowska argues that this interest underpins many scientific and artistic projects. As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Empedocles suggested in his *Poem on Nature* that there is an inextricable connection between "a type of character" and "the constitution of the body" (Pawlikowska 2). The idea that the face encodes knowledge and meaning in what Pawlikowska

calls "a readable flesh" (1) inspired Greek and Roman myths. Writers from Homer through Chaucer to the present day have explored it. In the 19th century, novelists believed that they could reveal hidden traits of their characters and that readers could, therefore, make out those traits by reading the portraits drawn in writing. Nevertheless, a sense of the self as either unreadable or as a depthless surface started to run contrary to and even reverse the idea that characters are readable at all. Quoting La Bruyère's *Les Caractères*, published in 1688, which he takes as a motto, and opening his sketch "The Man of the Crowd" with the phrase "er lässt sich nicht lessen" (the phrase refers to "a certain German book" and is translated by Poe into English as "it does not permit itself to be read"), Edgar Allan Poe deliberately engendered the modern self as unreadable. Poe's strategy in "The Man of the Crowd" is to lure his readers into the idea of the inscrutability of his text, and hence the inevitably problematic nature of reading itself. I would argue that just as the man's face in Poe's story is inscrutable, Poe is implying that so is modernity, the city at large, and the text generated by them.

What writers may find appealing when they focus upon physiognomy is the assumption that the face is the best indicator of a person's emotions. Interestingly, Oscar Wilde aestheticised this assumption by having his protagonist's portrait take on the model's emotions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The shocking effect of Wilde's inverted relation between life and art is that the painted portrait (art) is gradually disfigured by the character's nasty actions (life), while the character keeps his youthful looks, untarnished by life's roughness. Thus, Dorian Gray becomes a walking portrait, while his painted portrait grows old and ugly instead of him.

What unreadability suggests in Poe's text is the essentially ungraspable nature of modernity as a cultural paradigm. By having Jeremy open his account of the Tremaines' story of love and estrangement with what he himself deems to be a rather dubious approach, McEwan is implying that his narrator's task is difficult, and the result unreliable. In "The Man of the Crowd" Poe's narrator-character walks in circles through the labyrinth of 19th-century London to discover that a countenance which "arrested" and "absorbed" his attention cannot be read. This throws into question the surface-depth paradigm argued by Caspar Lavater and George Combe (qtd. by Pawlikowska 9-10), which assumed that a person is comprehensible (i.e. "legible") to others. As a matter of fact, Poe's man of the crowd is not a self but a particle of a larger body—the crowd, which swallows him up. The 20th century, with its larger and larger cities, exacerbated this sense of one's self-erasure. In Berlin, one of the settings in Black Dogs, Jeremy has the extreme experience of the havoc caused by unruly crowds on the night the Wall was pulled down. In the opening paragraph of Part One, he scrutinises the faces of June and Bernard as they are captured in the snapshot, which allows him to analyse the subtlest shades and the tiniest details of their emotions. Putting his face up close to the photograph in a gesture of scrutiny, just as Poe's narrator had subjected the passing crowd to a careful examination, Jeremy gives us the most minute hints of June's features in the snapshot, commenting on how they developed in time. This is surely a moment of rapture, of maximum concentration, when Jeremy becomes aware that he is involved in a difficult act of reading, which may eventually fail to lead him and us to the truth so desperately sought.

Jeremy's act of reading the work of fate and history in a photograph is an instance of what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory", by which she means that the past (in the case she is referring to, the past of the Holocaust) is preserved in photographs which elicit from their viewers reactions to a memory that precedes their existence. According to the theory of the "crypt" developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Tőrők, a traumatic experience can be felt by a descendant of the traumatised person like a box inherited and unopened, since the ancestors' silence may be more powerful than if they had told the story. Being dissociated from and outside the person's own experience, the traumas occupy a blind-zone from which they seem to cause psychic and somatic symptoms. Nicolas Abraham calls these effects "psychic phantoms", and he goes on to explain that:

What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left in us by the secrets of the others ... The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the parent's unconscious into the child's ... In no way can the subject relate to the phantom of his or her own repressed experience. *The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other.* (171-175)

Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" and Abraham and Tőrők's theory of the "crypt" can be extrapolated to the condition of any individual or community that "remembers" a trauma which occurred before they were born. This kind of trauma is actually the point of the whole novel *Black Dogs* in which Jeremy embarks on the most significant quest of his life, a quest for an elusive truth of a recent past, which may shed light on an equally unidentifiable truth of the present. The events are traumatic, but the source of the trauma is shrouded in mystery. It is significant that the trauma Jeremy is trying to trace and account for is a post-war trauma, embodied in a pair of ferocious dogs which seem to choose their victims to haunt. That post-war trauma, experienced by June, and implicitly by Bernard, becomes a postmemory for Jeremy, who takes it as his task to deal with and write about it.

Writers of the last decades are particularly keen on exploring the effects of postmemory. McEwan does it in Black Dogs when he has Jeremy the narrator plunge into a careful scrutiny of the photograph. In an astonishingly similar manner, Salman Rushdie opens his essay, "Imaginary Homelands," written in an autobiographical first person, with the description of an old photograph "of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born" (9). The "time of its taking" is 1946, the same year evoked by McEwan in Black Dogs. As Rushdie accounts for it, the old photograph, which gives him an eerie sense that the continuity it claims is reality, becomes the metaphor of the postcolonial writer's task of dealing "in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (11). Despite the fact that "the mirror" is broken, the memory it restores is incredibly rich, and "it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me" (Rushdie 12). What Rushdie calls "shards of memory" (12) play a fantastic role in a job which can be seen in analogy with archaeology: "fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities" (12). Likewise, in The Book of Whispers, a novel published in 2009 focusing on the Armenian genocide of 1915, Varujan Vosganian, a Romanian writer of Armenian origin, uses a family photograph taken before he was born as the cover illustration, while in the text of the novel photographs acquire the important role of being the only code which the Armenians deported to the USSR could use in order to get their messages through.

In *Black Dogs* Jeremy muses: "It is photography itself that creates the illusion of innocence. Its ironies of frozen narrative lend to its subjects an apparent unawareness that they will change or die" (McEwan 37). Thirteen pages later, Jeremy holds the picture for June to look at and notices that while Bernard's life has been "a steady progression," hers has been "transformation" (38).

Roland Barthes's *La chambre claire/Camera lucida*, first published in 1979, may serve as a theoretical background in this context. Barthes focuses his interest on the effects of photography on the viewer, as distinct from the photographer, and also on the object photographed, which in Barthes's terms is a *spectrum*. The Latin etymology of the word relates it to its essentially visual nature, but the adjective "spectral," derived from it, further relates it to a ghostly appearance, which invites an association with Abraham's "phantoms". Indeed, Barthes dwells on the lasting emotional effect of at least some photographs, which act both on our bodies and on our minds. Out of the twin concepts scrutinised in the book, it is *punctum* which denotes the potentially traumatic detail that establishes an unmediated connection with the person within it, that may shed further light on "postmemory" novels such as those mentioned here.

#### The Unreliable Narrator and the Active Reader

It is no wonder that critical assessments of the novel find Jeremy an unreliable narrator, in Wayne C. Booth's sense of the word. In his ground-breaking, albeit contentious book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, first published in 1961, Booth inaugurated a reader-centred approach which distinguished between reliable and unreliable narrators. The critic argues: "I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (Booth 158-159). Jeremy is neither a liar nor a fraud; on the contrary, he craves truth, and it is truth he aims to *uncover* (rather than discover) when he takes on his reading-writing task. I suggest that what makes Jeremy unreliable is his persistent self-doubt, which is endorsed by the other characters. Throughout the novel, Jeremy is caught in a tug-of-war between being a reader, trying to fix or know what truly happened and

"who" June and Bernard are, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, being a writer, an action he is in control of and which as it were consoles him for the impossibility of reading.

Jeremy's unreliability makes him emblematic of the predicament of the reader in general, and of the confused reader of the last three decades or so in particular. Indeed, the novel's focus is not on the approaches to reality in which June and Bernard clash, but on Jeremy's aim of finding a meaning in their clashing views. From the narrator, this anxious search for answers is transferred to the novel's reader, through empathy. A word of Greek origin [(from  $\varepsilon v$  (en, "in, at") and  $\pi \dot{\alpha}\theta o \varsigma$  (pathos, "passion" or "suffering")], "empathy" is a rather elusive term, which is broadly understood as the ability and willingness to share another person's emotions. With the concept of catharsis, which established fear and pity as the two interlaced affects lying at the core of our relations to the other, Aristotle's Poetics (c. 335 BCE) paved the way for the understanding of our relationship with the other based on identification. We are inclined to identify with the characters in the texts that we read because we find our own desires, feelings and emotions there. A sense that adds to identification is that of "expanded" lives.

Reading the novel in which Jeremy uncovers a plot of evil forces, we discover and become aware of our own sense of fear and insecurity. Our identification with Jeremy is possible in a space of simulation, i.e. the novel, where nothing exists in a palpable form, yet everything feels real by a leap of imagination.

The more unreliable the narrator, the more active the reader. As Dominic Head notes,

The competing testimonies of Bernard and June are combined in a fictional projection authored by a character who was not present.... Another dual response is demanded which invites us to perform, through our reading, the dialectic that orders the book: at a rational, intellectual level, we have to question the way in which these second-hand memories have been dramatized; but at a more intuitive level we engage with the power of the story, the kernel of the novel which, established as another level of fiction, acquires a mythic status. (117)

In McEwan's novel, Jeremy performs the reader's role. He moves backwards and forwards in time, across Europe in space, and from one source of meaning (June) to another (Bernard) in order to "disentangle" the "true" meaning of the story. Jeremy frequently reflects on his role as "a bearer of messages and impressions" (McEwan 48), mediating between the conflicting accounts of June and Bernard.

# Writing or Being Written?

Jeremy is writing a memoir, and he is the author's writing hand or rather a "scriptor" (Barthes 230), but no sooner is it written than the writing writes Jeremy. His interest in his in-laws is ultimately an interest in himself, his own fears and his own dilemmas—and theirs, especially June's, which defy reason, become his own. The narrative plays on moments like Jeremy's impression that he encountered June's ghost in the Tremaines' house in France, which echoes June's encounter with the black dogs. His in-laws' past and the events they experienced are seen by Jeremy as keys to unlock some of the mysteries of his present. To some extent, the past sheds light upon the present, but there are gaps in the story of Jeremy's life. We identify with Jeremy in his search for the truth behind certain revelatory scenes in the past, but we are kept in the dark about what happened to his parents, what happened in his early youth, what happened to his younger sister, and so on. Perhaps the little we know may read as Jeremy's unquenched desire to know more about himself through the others, which in its turn is echoed by our desire to know more about ourselves through Jeremy. Bernard sees this very clearly, and in one of his encounters with Jeremy he explains it: "You're inventing us both, extrapolating from what you know. There's no one here but you" (McEwan 119).

The projection of the author's reading mind and writing hand is at the same time the reader's persona. Originally referring to a theatrical mask, *persona* is a projection of the self in fiction. It is through a *persona* that writers project their own selves as narrative voices through which readers identify with that projection. Thus we can remember or feel something we have not experienced, which may account for the truth of Bernard's remark that Jeremy starts from real-life characters and eventually re-shapes them as characters in his writing.

As a reader, Jeremy is muddled, and when he writes about the muddle, the writing portrays him. Turning a fresh page in his notebook, Jeremy listens to June's confession, in which she says: "it was always muddle, arguments, arrangements about the children, day-to-day chaos and growing separation and different countries" (McEwan 52).

# The Textuality of the Text in the Foreground

Barthes's notion of text is what Jeremy's narrative gives us a hint of. Barthes argued that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (230). Indeed, the sense one has while reading McEwan's novel is that Jeremy is the handwriting, in turn, June's and Bernard's story. Along with him, the reader discovers that there is no one story to be told but virtually as many stories as its generating sources. In other words, *Black Dogs* is a text drawing the reader's attention to its textuality and to an active production of meaning.

Any text is a fluid continuum in which writing and reading commingle; one needs to read signs and then devise a pattern. However, sometimes patterns are about the difficulty of making out signs, and so they meander around, looking for the particular spot where meaning lies. More often than not, meaning is slippery and elusive. In Part Three, Jeremy sets off along the Causse de Lazarac, where June saw the black dogs in 1946, in search of meaning:

As I occasionally did when I was happy, I thought about the whole pattern, the thumbnail story of my existence, from the age of eight until Majdanek, and how I had been delivered. A thousand miles away, in or near one house among all the millions, were Jenny and our four children, my tribe. I belonged, my life was rooted and rich. (McEwan 122)

On his way, sitting on "the great flat slab" peeling an orange, he tries "to re-create Bernard and June sitting here and slicing their saucisson" and "to catch them in love before the lifelong quarrel began" (McEwan 123). Nevertheless, this Woolfian "moment of being" fails to illuminate the past and expiate its evil, as the writer of this memoir may have wished: "My mind was full of my own secret schemes and projects. I was no longer available for a haunting. The voices had truly gone; there was no one here but me" (McEwan 123). What Jeremy realizes, like Lily Briscoe in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, is that the awareness of one's own achievement in the present is all there is to a revelation: "That was their way, mine was different—up to the old farm and back along the road; if I had to make a symbol out of an overgrown path, this would suit me better" (McEwan 123).

David Malcolm argues that "this narrative foregrounds the process of telling stories and giving accounts" (138). Not only is the reader constantly reminded of the process but what is equally important is its result, i.e. the text we are reading. As such, the novel teems with references and allusions to other authors and texts, and also, significantly, its title evokes Winston Churchill's metaphor of 'the black dog', 'as reminders of 'its made nature'" (Malcolm 139). Thus, the process, which is the narrator's reading-writing, results in an outcome which is the written text to be read by the reader. On the importance of reading, Malcolm notes: "Black Dogs, however, is not simply full of partial accounts of facts but also emphasises the process of the interpretation of any facts and how different interpretations may be" (147).

Although Barthes's argument in the late 1960s may seem less fresh now, it set out an approach that grants readers unprecedented credit for their creative endeavours. What McEwan's novel does is to propel the reader into what may be called an unresolved fictionality. In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, Richard Walsh argues that "awareness of fictionality is always involved in the reading of fictional texts" (148). This means that the readers of fictional texts accept the convention and let themselves be transported into another world.

<sup>1</sup> For decades before he admitted it, Churchill had avoided standing too close to balconies and train platforms. He named this his "black dog," following Samuel Johnson, who, like many great men, suffered from the disease of manic-depression. Throughout his life, Churchill had dark periods when his "black dog" would return, which alternated with periods when he would come out of his depression and be his normal self again.

The propulsion of the reader into the unresolved fictionality of *Black Dogs* is first and foremost Jeremy's doing: he is the reader-writer-actor of the plot we read. His (even if partial) failure as a reader is also his failure as a writer of the memoir in the sense that there are signs of fissure in the fictionality of his fiction, which is, of course, a construct. Jeremy claims he is writing a memoir, and therefore we are expected to read it in this mode. But is it a memoir? If we go by the definition, a memoir is an account of the personal experiences of an author. What we read in *Black Dogs* is not exactly that. It is true that it gives us glimpses of Jeremy's life, but the whole focus is on account of the black dogs, with its paranormal flares. The whole narrative is a patchwork of incongruous bits, and the writing-reading is about putting those bits together. The task of piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of the narrative in which the metaphorical image of the black dogs is central and recurrent is ultimately the reader's. What the reader gets in the narrative are traces (in Derrida's sense of the word) rather than meaning(s). June tells Jeremy the story of the black dogs, but the meanings attached to them are deferred to the very end of the book.

In an essentially postmodernist manner, McEwan's handling of meaning in *Black Dogs* follows the deconstructivist pattern described by Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena*:

The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace. . . . In this way, the metaphysical text is understood; it is still readable, and remains read. (156)

Jeremy's narrative strategy suggests that the moment when June tells him the story of the black dogs for the first time, which is the last time he sees her, is crucial and significant. She says she actually *sees* them in those moments of transition from wakefulness to falling asleep, which increases the sense of mystery and elusiveness that everybody associates with the dogs. June wants Jeremy to remember that the image of the black dogs comes in that moment when she is "still half awake" (McEwan 62). Jeremy feels that this is an essential revelation June wants to pass on as a warning, because "she knows they will return" (McEwan 62). The importance of the revelation, which is the kernel of the novel's story, puts Jeremy in a state of elation: "It was in my notebook, the short, unvarying, pre-sleep dream that had haunted her for forty years: two dogs are running down a path into the Gorge. The larger leaves a trail of blood, easily visible on the white stones" (McEwan 61-62).

This careful description of the image of the two dogs, one of which leaves a trail of blood on the white stones, makes Jeremy's writing its echo. Just like the larger dog leaving trails, Jeremy's writing leaves traces. Throughout the story, he follows the dog's trail in his own writing in an effort to trace the meaning the dogs carry. After June's death, Jeremy resumes her story obsessively, assuming that for June when she faced them, "they emanated meaning" (McEwan 144). He broods on what they might mean following June's description of them:

These creatures—giant mastiffs perhaps—were sniffing around a patch of grass by the side of the path. They were without collars, without an owner. They moved slowly. They seemed to be working together for some purpose. Their blackness that they should both be black, that they belonged together and were without an owner made her think of apparitions. June did not believe in such things. She was drawn to the idea now because the creatures were familiar. They were emblems of the menace she felt, they were the embodiment of the nameless, unreasonable, unmentionable disquiet she had experienced that morning. She did not believe in ghosts. But she did believe in madness. What she feared more than the presence of the dogs was the possibility of their absence, of their not existing at all. (144-145)

What McEwan is referring to here is a long line of thinking originating in the idea that there is a host of monsters produced by the sleep of reason lurking under the thin surface of civilisation. These monsters may take any shape: for Goya, who imagined himself asleep amongst his drawing tools, his reason numbed by slumber and led astray by creatures prowling in the dark of the night within and without, these monsters took the shape of owls and bats. Goya's nightmare, which he expressed in a series of etchings, translated his vision of a Spain between 1797 and 1799, which he saw as mad, corrupt, and deserving of ridicule. Goya perceived those monsters as ghostly, and those apparitions, which are signs of madness, fared in time and space to haunt T. S. Eliot, where they are the marks of the landscape in *The Waste Land*, E. M. Forster

in *A Passage to India*, where they become an elusive echo in the "Caves" section, Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, where they take the shape of winds tearing the hanging wallpaper in the Ramsays' house, the riot of weeds, the flies weaving their web in the rooms in "Time Passes". In McEwan's novel, they take the shape of two black dogs, whose exact meaning the unresolved fictionality explores but never fixes. Missing the point of the black dogs is the point of the story. Bernard has his own account, which he explains to Jeremy when they part ways at Berlin airport in 1989. Bernard tells Jeremy that he was actually the one who told June about Churchill's black dog, speculating that Churchill took the expression from Samuel Johnson:

So June's idea was that if one dog was a personal depression, two dogs were a kind of cultural depression, civilisation's worst moods. Not bad, really. I've often made use of it. It went through my mind at Checkpoint Charlie. It wasn't this red flag you know. I don't think they even saw it. You heard what they were shouting? 'Ausländer 'raus.'

Foreigners out. The Wall comes down, and everybody's out there dancing in the street, but sooner or later... (McEwan 104)

Bernard's pending thought is a trace echoed by Jeremy in the novel's closing sentence, which suggests that the black dog—that is, June's personal depression—recedes from her and joins another black dog, and the two black dogs "move into the foothills of the mountains from where they will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time" (McEwan 174), a very unsettling thought.

Reading Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) as what she calls "a metahistorical romance", Amy Elias argues that its narrative, which 'portrays history as an aggregate not only of simultaneously existing narratives but also of simultaneously existing times', is as much about history as about the protagonist, "for in this novel, the personal and the cultural, or subjectivity and history, reflect and shape one another" (182). McEwan's novel *Black Dogs*, which is about Jeremy's desire to heal traumatic experiences and about his attempts to recover "a sense of wholeness and being in the world" (Elias 182) fits Elias's formula. Instead of being a memoir, the novel becomes "a metahistorical romance" in which Jeremy relates the experiences of other characters, who have conflicting views of those experiences, to his own. Searching for the truth and also for the exact meaning behind the recurrent terrifying image of the black dogs and deferring it throughout, the narrative draws attention to its unresolved fictionality, expecting the reader to get involved in it. Developing Elias's argument, Timothy Gauthier considers that "fiction thus becomes the means of perpetuating both faith and desire and, in the process, of opening alternate modes for thinking about our lived existence" (14).

Do texts about writing written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have the same function as they did in the latter half of the previous century? Margaret Atwood's *Blind Assassin*, which came out in 2000, is to a large extent a meditation on the pathways and quick sands of fiction. Truth in fiction is tackled in Atwood's novel, which implies that the only way truth can be written is when one assumes that what has been set down will never be read, that one hand writes and the other erases what has been written. Thus, Atwood plays upon the old ambiguity of authorship and on the author's absence and invisibility, reviving an interest in a modernist poetics of impersonality. As a matter of fact, the arguments of this poetics are self-contradictory: the effort to eliminate personality reinstates it in a different guise.

# Jeremy's Consciousness in Search of the Space of History

Indeed, what McEwan seems to do in most of his novels is to capture a moment in history, and then explore it through his characters' reactions and responses to its cultural, political and ideological context. McEwan's undeniable interest in history and its multiple layers typifies the stance of the late twentieth-century postmodernist writer, who is obsessed with the legacy of a recent traumatic past and who has therefore acquired and developed a post-traumatic consciousness. McEwan's approach to history in *Black Dogs* is essentially restorative in its attempt to connect the past with the present, and thus bridge the gaps and heal the wounds. The narrative moves us back and forth in time and space across decades and countries, and the effect this meandering itinerary has upon us is that the whole effort is to make events and destinies connect. Connection is not a purpose *per se*, but a means to an end, which is comprehension: Jeremy reads

the signs of history and writes his "memoir" for us to read and make sense not only of the signs and clues, which more often than not elude our comprehension but of the larger plan he is setting up for us.

Equipped with Elias's concept of "metahistorical imagination" as post-traumatic, in which the West has to establish and assess its identity in the wake of a traumatic past, Timothy Gauthier shows that "as a product of a traumatic history, the metahistorical romance presents an anti-narrativist approach to that history, one reflecting its own fragmented and unstable condition" (14). According to Gauthier's reading, the supernatural or paranormal recurrence of the black dogs in McEwan's novel indicates a rather paradoxical need of the metahistorical post-traumatic conscience to know and at the same time "to repress the truths of the past while pointing to the impossibility of satisfying either urge completely" (15). In Gauthier's account, three contemporary British novelists, A. S. Byatt, Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie, attempt to deal with "the ambiguity of history and our ability truly to know it by allowing historical fact and fiction to merge, overlap, and create a new whole" (19-20). Starting from the idea that these three novelists play with the assumption that history is a construct, Gauthier argues that they deploy their fiction "to bring us closer to what they believe are significant values and truths" (20). In his reading of Black Dogs the critic shows that the two terrifying creatures haunting June (especially in those moments before she falls asleep and reverberating in other moments, decades later) signify a legacy of the past, when a moral line was crossed, which lingers in Europe's present and possibly in its future. Looking at Jeremy as a reader "who tries to disentangle the significance of an event that happened before he was born" (22), Gauthier invokes the other crucial necessity that urged him to write the story we read. What Gauthier means is "empathy in any historical reconstruction, an empathy that must extend to all the participants in the drama, not simply those with whom we share an emotional affinity" (22). It is through the fictional construct that empathy can be reached: in Jeremy, and in his dilemmas, anxieties and frustrations, we recognise ourselves as readers and our reading efforts. The gaps, fissures and uncertainties of the narrative signal our own difficulties of comprehension. Despite and somehow beyond these, we perceive the novel as a restorative construct.

#### **Conclusion**

Jeremy, the protagonist and narrator of McEwan's *Black Dogs*, typifies the postmodern character, who is essentially and emblematically a reader. More often than not, at various stages in the novel, Jeremy follows traces of meaning, which are there in the trail of blood left by one of the two black dogs. The traces are the tracks, paths and signs the other characters (mainly June and Bernard) gradually reveal to him. In order to carry out his task of writing what he calls a "memoir", Jeremy knows that he has to base his interpretations, which he himself always doubts, upon June's and Bernard's interpretations, which he equally doubts. Maybe what McEwan's novel suggests is that the predicament of the postmodern individual is always to be a frustrated reader of mediated meanings, thus further and further removed from their source. A more unsettling scenario, suggested by Derrida's concept of the trace, may be that there is no fixed meaning, and its deference is a narrative strategy, engrained in the language itself.

Black Dogs weaves its circular yarn around Churchill's metaphor for personal depression, which is possibly Samuel Johnson's expression. Bernard speculates that one black dog stands for personal depression, and two for collective depression. It can be argued that the fear modernity, and later postmodernity, developed in response to the terror of history has taken many shapes. From Goya's bats and owls, through T. S. Eliot's arid landscape, E. M. Forster's echo, Virginia Woolf's winds and weeds to McEwan's black dogs, the monsters produced by the sleep of reason visit and haunt us when we least expect them to. Whatever shape they may take, we always recognise them as ghosts (i.e. absent presences or present absences). Reading the novel, we are left in limbo as to what the meaning of the black dogs is, and that may mean that the novel's aim is to tease and take us out of our comfort zone to make us alert readers, while at the same time drawing our attention to the perils of the enterprise.

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