

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

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In McEwan's *Black Dogs* (1992) the narrator, Jeremy, courts and seduces his future wife during a visit to the concentration camp Majdanek in Poland. He and Jenny are members of a cultural delegation; he is "in the race" with the other male delegates to seduce her, although his loss of appetite in her presence during the breakfasts indicates that he may be feeling more than just sexual desire. The passage begins with Jenny inviting him to travel with her to Majdanek:

At the beginning of our second week Jenny astounded me by asking me to accompany her to the town of Lublin, one hundred miles away. She wanted to visit the concentration camp of Majdanek in order to take photographs for a friend who was writing a book. Three years before, in a previous job as a television researcher, I had been to Belsen and promised myself that I would never look at

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another camp. One visit was a necessary education, a second was morbid. But now this ghostly pale woman was inviting me to return. At the time we were standing outside my room, just after breakfast. We were already late for the first appointment of the day and she seemed to want an immediate answer. She explained that she had never visited a concentration camp before and preferred to go with someone she could think of as a friend. As she arrived at this last word she brushed the back of my hand with her fingers. Her touch was cool. I took her hand and then, because she had taken a willing step towards me, I kissed her. It was a long kiss in the gloomy, un-peopled emptiness of the hotel corridor. At the sound of a door handle turning we stopped and I told her that I would gladly go with her.

In this paragraph McEwan evokes an uncomfortable array of sensations in the reader, of sexual voyeurism and moral gravity: the characters kiss in a gloomy, deserted corridor while arranging to visit a concentration camp. The scene resonates with gothic undertones: is the kiss itself forbidden in the old hotel, or does it only seal a forbidden pact?

The bad faith of their intentions, blatant in terms of her appealing to him as a “friend” then sharing a long kiss with him, is suggested on a broader scale with his assumption that a second visit to a camp would be only “morbid”. His perception of her as a “ghostly pale woman” with a “cool” touch could suggest her spirituality, or the sexual frisson of her perverse invitation.

Their subsequent “date” at Majdanek immediately leads to seduction on their return to Lublin:

liberated from the usual constraints of selfhood, I did something uncharacteristically brilliant. I stopped Jenny mid-sentence and kissed her, and then I told her simply that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever met and that there was really nothing I wanted more than to spend the rest of the day making love to her. Her green eyes studied mine, then she raised her arm and I thought for a moment she was about to slap my face. But she pointed across the street at a narrow door above which hung a faded sign. We trod on gold nuggets to get to the Hotel Wisla. We spent three days there, having dismissed the driver. Ten months later, we were married. (McEwan 1992: 85-86, 90)

They are both “liberated” from the concentration camp, and their own inner constraints, to have sex for three days. Aside from the inappropriate use of the word “liberated” here, and the irony implied in the practical detail of dismissing the driver, McEwan points to the lack of appropriateness of Jeremy’s proposal in his expectation that she will slap him. But in the moment of studying his eyes she makes a moral judgement, weighing up the Holocaust against their mutual desire; this judgement leads to their marriage and, it is implied, lays the foundation upon which future generations will be raised.

The question that I wish to address in this paper is how we read this juxtaposition of sexuality and the Holocaust in *Black Dogs*. Does his and Jenny’s act of treading “on gold nuggets” to the hotel implicate them with the Nazis who extracted gold fillings from the teeth of their victims? Or does the “faded sign” of the hotel link them to the historical time of Majdanek, which their lovemaking somehow redeems?

This scene is not merely “peculiar”, or “perverse”, but profoundly disturbing, and correspondingly McEwan is very courageous in writing it. Marc Delrez comments on how it “possibly epitomizes the writer’s long-lasting concern with various categories of the depraved and the fallen” (Delrez 1995: 7) McEwan is well aware of this, since elsewhere he has Jeremy describe the Holocaust as “our universal reference point of human depravity”.(McEwan 1992: 15) As we shall see, the Holocaust lies outside historical narration, since its scale and quality of brutality and suffering cannot be described in the way that other events are. The historian Christian Meier writes: “It is precisely this threshold to ‘mere history’ that the twelve years from 1933 to 1945 seem unable to cross. This past does not pale, but on the contrary, becomes increasingly important and global in nature; it overshadows our lives with undiminished intensity.”(Friedlander 1993: 38) This resistance to enclosure in narrative is even more stubborn in the case of fiction, whose efforts to describe the Holocaust are typically greeted with simultaneous acclaim and dismay.(Vice 2000)

However, McEwan faces these problems by raising the stakes. The subject of the novel accords with Meier’s reflection on how the violence of the Third Reich bled into the postwar period, with its symbolism of the Gestapo trained “black dogs” which attacked Jenny’s mother in 1946. Their presence recurs throughout the novel: Jenny mentions them in response to the omission of the Jewish victims on the sign outside Majdanek; the Nazi skinheads, with their “loose wet mouths” attack a Turkish immigrant while the Berlin Wall is dismantled; even Jeremy is ordered “*Ça suffit*”, like a dog, while attacking the father of an abused boy. Published in 1992, *Black Dogs* asks whether the aftermath of the

Second World War which divided Europe can be finally overcome, through personal love. Jeremy's revelation of sexual desire after visiting Majdanek presents itself as the most ambitious, and morally ambivalent, appeal to personal love as McEwan's vision of the future. Jeremy reflects on "the thumbnail story of my existence, from the age of eight until Majdanek, and how I had been delivered." His loneliness and sense of homelessness since the death of his parents only end at Majdanek, where his "existence began. Love, to borrow Sylvia Plath's phrase, set me going." (McEwan 1992: 99, xxi) Majdanek is the hinging point of Jeremy's development, and consequently, of the novel's structure of values between love and violence. How we read this scene, then, is crucial to how we read the novel as a whole.

1. "A distanced, or allusive, realism"?

The only detailed analysis of the scene at Majdanek is in James Martin Lang's doctoral thesis, *Dialogues with History in Post-War British Fiction*. He admires how McEwan gives Jeremy, and by implication the reader, an emotional space in which to reflect upon his personal relation to the historical event. Specifically, Lang ascribes this effect to McEwan's use of what Saul Friedlander coined as "a distanced, or allusive, realism." (Lang 1997: 246-47)

In *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* Friedlander characterised the more effective artistic responses to the Holocaust in terms of "the exclusion of straight, documentary realism, but the use of some sort of *allusive or distanced realism*. Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory

(distances in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid.” (Friedlander 1992: 17) In *The Resonance of Dust* Edward Alexander argues from a similar position, that “some degree of failure or inadequacy is almost a precondition of success” (Alexander 1979: xiii) for a representation of the Holocaust, since its silence resonates with the unimaginable scale and extremity of suffering. These writers are following from Theodor Adorno’s now paraphrased slogan, “no art after Auschwitz.” Adorno implied that art, with its underlying principle of beauty, could only glorify the Holocaust while representing it. Later, in *Negative Dialectics* he advocated an “absolute negativity” in philosophy and art, since our feelings “balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate.”

Through Friedlander, Lang is following from a tradition of thought concerned with the representation of the Holocaust in literature. The Holocaust, an unimaginable brutality practised by human beings upon others, shatters the Enlightenment principle of a humanly measured truth. Adorno explains: “If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.” While the correlation between philosophical discourse and human values is disrupted, the artist’s claim to truth about his subject-matter, humanity, is also profoundly circumscribed. Adorno describes the experience of artists and their historical circumstances as “a sense of not being quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator.” (Adorno 1973: 361, 365) This detachment from their subject-matter does not signify a Modernist, all-seeing detachment, but a crippled

alienation from it, an art of “absolute negativity” as practised by Samuel Beckett: the artist explores the limitations, not power, of his ability to create a reality. Writing in the sixties, George Steiner commented how Beckett’s plays reflect that “the imagination has sipped its fill of horrors and of the unceremonious trivia through which modern horror is often expressed. As rarely before, poetry is tempted by silence.” (Steiner 1967: 25) Beckett conveyed this crisis in representation through the vulnerability of communication between characters. The pregnant absences of Beckett’s style are a model for Friedlander’s “distanced, or allusive, realism.”

As an example of this in *Black Dogs*, Lang singles out how Jeremy focuses upon the massive piles of shoes at Majdanek:

Through this simple depiction of shoes, and Jeremy’s commentary upon the exhibit, McEwan can both present a stark reality of the concentration camp – the numbers of the dead – and allow for some detached reflection upon it. This scene presents neither graphic descriptions of atrocities nor mind-numbing statistics; instead, it gestures towards both of these, with ironized considerations of our limited capacity to grasp the meaning of these phenomena.

The shoes draw our attention to the absence of the victims who were the silenced witnesses of their own extermination. From helpless despair, Jeremy becomes numb. Paradoxically, in the guilt of acknowledging his alienation from the event, he develops an awareness of its unique quality, its resistance to being understood or redeemed: “Either you came here and despaired, or you put your hands deeper into your pockets and gripped your warm loose change and found you had taken

one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare. This was our inevitable shame, our share in the misery.”

The poignancy of this passage encourages the reader to see Majdanek through Jeremy and Jenny’s eyes, and to identify with their responses. In his role as narrator Jeremy comments on the proximity between the town and camp which consumed its Jews: “They lay side by side, Lublin and Majdanek, matter and anti-matter.” This implication of wider responsibility for the Holocaust is seconded by Jenny’s comment on the sign’s description of the victims’ nationalities, not their shared Jewish identity. She adds to herself, “The black dogs,” (McEwan 1992: 88, 87) invoking the symbolic description of Nazism running through the novel. In this scene the reader identifies with Jeremy and Jenny as retainers of the novel’s values.

However, what is most remarkable about this scene, and what Lang blatantly ignores, is how McEwan plays with the reader’s expectations and attitudes to the characters. Their status as the retainers of the novel’s values becomes extremely problematic when, after making poignant acknowledgements of the ungraspable suffering of Holocaust victims, they immediately leave for a hotel where they make love for three days.

2. “Survivors by proxy?”

Lang, through Friedlander, is following a late Modernist response to the Holocaust, one which came to a head in the eighties *Historikerstreit* on the event’s uniqueness. Conservative German historians questioned the specificity of Nazi crimes, arguing that the Bolsheviks were the

original perpetrators of global annihilations in modern history; Ernst Nolte, for instance, argued that Auschwitz was not primarily the result of anti-Semitism, but a reaction to the anxiety caused by the genocides that followed the Russian Revolution. By treating the Holocaust as only a subsidiary event, Nolte and others hoped to defuse the responsibility for it in terms of Germany's traditional national identity, and ultimately to neutralise its moral significance.(Friedlander 1993: 23, 31-35)

McEwan alludes to such historiographic dangers in *Black Dogs* where Jeremy's father-in-law, Bernard Tremaine, comments on the excavation of the old Gestapo headquarters in Berlin: "They're digging it up, researching the past. I don't know how anyone of my generation could accept that — Gestapo crimes neutralized by archaeology." However, Bernard is expressing "residual anger from a war only the old and weak could remember at first hand." (McEwan 1992: 70-71) His outburst takes place in the midst of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989; this event, and the subsequent reunification of Germany within the vision of a united Europe, triggered a collective yearning to reconcile with Europe's violent past. Compared to Gunter Grass' call in the fifties for artists to "keep the wounds open," the need for healing now prevailed.

Concurrently, trauma theory in historiography and literary criticism had emerged in the United States in the wake of the large-scale psychiatric treatment of Vietnam veterans. Adopted by writers concerned with the Holocaust, its emphasis on therapy and cure promised to contribute to Europe's long-awaited restoration to health. Instead of an insistent silence, trauma theory laid stress on what could be spoken in testimony to treat the survivors, as well as the later generations that inherited the cultural trauma of the Holocaust. This approach opened up the possibility of an affirmation of life out of death

which may offer an explanation for McEwan's scene at Majdanek.

Robert Jay Lifton describes the unique "knowledge of death" that Nazi camp survivors have: "It's a knowledge of death and therefore a knowledge of life, to bring back." (Caruth 1995: 135) Dori Laub makes a similar point, elaborating its cultural significance: "Within today's 'culture of narcissism,' which may itself be explained as a historical diversion, a trivialization, a philosophical escape from, and a psychological denial of, the depth and the subversive power of the Holocaust experience, the survivors, as *asserters of life out of the very disintegration and deflation of the old culture*, unwittingly embody a *cultural shock value* that has not yet been assimilated." (Felman and Laub 1992: 74) By "culture of narcissism," I assume that Laub is referring to the metanarratives of Postmodernism. Fredric Jameson complained how from Postmodernism's "faithful conformity to post-structuralist linguistic theory, the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts." (Nicol 2002: 322) In its zeal to undermine the authoritarianism of a "grand narrative" of history, Postmodernism undermines the cultural centrality, and even the historical certainty of the Holocaust. In so doing, it denies the possibility of a "redemptive historiography" which is imperative for our relation to the Holocaust. Trauma theory set out to counter this tendency by appealing to the inescapable ties of experience between our present and the victims of the past.

The "cultural shock value" of Majdanek causes Jeremy to be "liberated from the usual constraints of selfhood." In being 'liberated' from a world of death, he is also freed from his personal and cultural inhibitions, since the only value left to him is life itself, which he celebrates in his desire for Jenny. All of his tenuously held values, and

uncertainties belonging to his age, are swept aside by the fundamental truth of suffering that he has indirectly witnessed. Majdanek marks for him a rebirth into a rooted existence, and deliverance from a Postmodern scepticism.

Yet for Majdanek to be a transformative experience, Jeremy and Jenny must achieve some empathy with the dead. Trauma, which the Holocaust was an example of on the largest scale, is an event that is too extreme to be consciously grasped by its victim. It is incessantly re-enacted by the victim in dreams and waking life as a belated attempt to grasp it consciously, and to regain psychic unity. Testimony provides a means of cure from the trauma, in which the victim breaks the solitude of his experience by communicating it to a listener. Laub explains:

the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. [...] The listener, therefore, by definition partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past. The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony. (Felman and Laub 1992: 57-58)

Lifton describes the listener as "a survivor by proxy" who must take his mind and feelings through what the survivor went through. (Caruth 1995: 145)

But at Majdanek only the piles of shoes testify to the trauma suffered by its victims. Shoshana Felman describes the Holocaust as an historical

event “without witnesses”: “Not only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime, but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims.” (Felman and Laub 1992: 80) For Jeremy and Jenny, the shoes are silent remnants of the victims. The shoes bear witness to the trauma in their silence, and the challenge is to find the meaning of this silence, to recognise the terrible limitations of memory where there are no survivors.

Instead of achieving an empathy with the victims, Jeremy is “drawn insidiously to the persecutors’ premise, that life was cheap, junk to be inspected in heaps.” He can “no longer bear the victims”, and feels “bleak wonder” at the persecutors’ achievement in constructing and maintaining the huts: “Such energy, such dedication. How could one begin to call it a mistake?” (McEwan 1992: 88-89) Surviving trauma demands a certain amount of numbing. But as a “listener” Jeremy enacts many of defensive feelings which prevent empathy with the victim: a sense of total paralysis from the fear of merging with the atrocities, total withdrawal and numbness, awe and fear. He even directs his sense of outrage against the victims rather than the persecutors; Laub attributes this response to the listener being torn apart by the inadequacy of his ability to respond, and inadvertently wishing for the suffering to be the victim’s responsibility and wrongdoing. (Felman and Laub 1992: 72-73)

In the light of trauma theory, then, Jeremy and Jenny’s celebration of desire is not a response to empathising with what the victims suffered. Instead, it links them to the persecutors: their inability to listen to the survivor’s “knowledge of life” turns the scene at Lublin into the fulfilment of a very dubious date at a concentration camp. Discomforted

by his sense of powerlessness in witnessing the vast, but pathetic, remaining trace of the victims, Jeremy identifies with the overwhelming power of their oppressors, and this in turn empowers him with the confidence to seduce Jenny.

3. The morality of moral detachment

In an early reading of *Black Dogs* Marc Delrez subscribed to this interpretation of Majdanek. He relates the scene to *The Child in Time* where Stephen redeems the loss of his first child through a sexual reunion with his wife, by conceiving their second child. Jeremy and Jenny's manoeuvre from the concentration camp to the hotel parallels that of Stephen and Julie, which, for Delrez, "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." Delrez is suspicious here of a prevailing liberal attitude from eighties Britain in which collective responsibilities were bypassed by personal choice. He accuses *Black Dogs* of appearing "to collude with the very evils it is supposed to circumscribe," since its only remaining option lies in advocating hedonistic nihilism. (Delrez 1995: 19, 16, 22)

Here we reach the crux of the issue regarding McEwan's treatment of the Holocaust in *Black Dogs*, and of the critical controversy that has spanned the whole of his career. Delrez's accusation is a common one made by critics and reviewers of McEwan as a "literary psychopath" (Casademont 1992: 41) (the author's chosen expression) for his apparently neutral, but meticulously detailed, representations of violence. Consistently charged with sensationalism, McEwan's writing

since the seventies has maintained its overriding concern with the abject, while developing in terms of how he has represented it. Delrez described Majdanek as a quintessential moment in McEwan's career, but perhaps more appropriately it can be regarded as a critical point, from which we can assess the author's overall achievements. Here I will show how these achievements can be understood in terms of the historical period in which he has written, and the postwar period in which he grew up.

The postwar vision of a British "National culture" united by the ideals of collectivist social reform had been articulated since the Fifties by a humane liberalism expressed in the realist novel. It bypassed the culture of Modernism and revived the Victorian concern with strong social implications, to depict man within a community, not a Bloomsburean coterie. (Bradbury 1994: 21) However, like a shadow, the presence of the War, and especially the Holocaust, loomed over this optimistic belief in social progress. Although these events had demanded a return to values of the liberal Enlightenment, the Nazis' totalitarian atrocity had eroded the belief in social planning that characterised the "National culture." (Waugh 1995: 60)

McEwan's career was launched with *First Love, Last Rights* in 1975; it was the eve of when, as Patricia Waugh marks it, the cultural diaspora of the Sixties combusted with the individualism and monetarist economics of the mid Seventies. The apparently unified ideals of collectivist social reform in the previous two decades were shattered. Unemployment was at its highest since the war, and the following year would see the three-day week, the oil crisis, inflation, racial tensions and inner-city breakdown. The National culture had fragmented into divisions of labour and capital, and into mutually hostile subcultures. (Waugh 1995: 13-14)

From the beginning McEwan's work stood in opposition to the realist values of the fifties and sixties. In an interview given in 1995 he reflected upon how he found his voice in his earliest stories by turning away from the middle-class novel of Angus Wilson and Kingsley Amis, and from the working-class fiction of David Storey and Alan Sillitoe: "I had to find a fictional world that was socially, and even historically disembodied." As "alienated figures, outsiders, sociopaths," his narrators reflected his personal dilemma of having "no clear idea of where I stood in relation to British society generally." (Louvel 1995: 3) He followed an alternative tradition in Modernism, especially Kafka: "He was the writer who enabled me to begin writing." Kafka offered an alternative to the social documentation and historical specificity of English realism. (Casademont 1992: 40)

Writing in the late seventies, Malcolm Bradbury observed the "signs of a distinctive new era of style." He understood it as a revival of the epistemological concerns of Modernism and, more specifically relevant to McEwan, a fascination with the chaos of history and troubled social orders. (Bradbury 1977: 8-9) Bradbury later recognised how the socially disoriented identity of McEwan's early writings encompassed the disordered psychic and social landscape of Britain in the Seventies. (Bradbury 1994: 391) Kerstin Lindman describes it as "a harder, tougher, more irrational, less coherent society than before, a society in which people have lost their traditional sense of place and have to grope for signals to understand one another." With sub-cultures such as punks and skinheads, violence became stylised as a form of social identity; (Lindman-Strafford 1983: 11) in his own way, McEwan was acting the role of the punk, as he later reflected finding "in the voices of adolescence a detachment, which was useful rhetorically." (Louvel 1995: 1)

The question that I want to address is whether McEwan has aestheticised violence and unpleasant subjects such as present-day diffidence towards the Holocaust, merely reflecting British society, or whether his depiction of these offers a moral perspective which we can apply to the scene in *Black Dogs*. In an interview from 1978 he observed: “I think there’s a projected sense of evil in my stories which is of the kind whereby one tries to imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good. ... Yet in a nightmarish way I could indulge in it, in the idea of it.” (Hamilton 1978: 20) In this early admission he touched on the profound ambivalence that would characterise his writing career: violence is a form of negativity through which he can grasp its opposite, and yet there is a tendency to aestheticise the violence, and in so doing celebrate it. This thin line bears upon Adorno’s consideration of art and the Holocaust: there is the need for art to express an alternative to the pervasive violence in modern history through negativity; there is also the danger of art turning this violence into something aesthetically palatable. McEwan has struggled with this dilemma over the course of his career, in his early fiction, and crucially in the “worst thing possible” that he has dealt with, the concentration camp of Majdanek.

This dilemma lies on the surface of his earlier work. In ‘Butterflies,’ from *First Love, Last Rights*, we enter the mind of a paedophile while he murders a child. In this imagining of “the worst thing possible,” McEwan inserts a moral point. Through observing the corpse of little Jane, the paedophile reaches an insight about the value of life: “A corpse makes you compare living with dead.” (McEwan 1975: 78) With this jarringly inappropriate moral point from a psychopath, McEwan attempts to counter the danger of defending murder through the

rhetoric of the narrative. Seduced by the power of his ability to “imagine the worst thing possible,” he has “indulged” in it at the risk of making murder aesthetically palatable.

In the seventies McEwan recognised this potential problem in his style. He acknowledged the “confusion” in his early works where “the narrators are fools, and yet at the same time you want them to be fairly perceptive people.” (Stephen 1987: 18) The perceptiveness was required for a moral point to be communicated to the reader. So, for instance, in the story ‘First Love, Last Rights’ the narrator Adrian kills a female rat, whose pregnant womb is exposed; his lover Sissel places the womb back inside the rat’s body. In response to this experience of death which they are unable to reverse, they develop a new appreciation of their own lives, and decide to act decisively to give value to their lives. The grotesque scenario, which closely anticipates the experiences of Jeremy and Jenny at Majdanek in their affirmation of life from their inability to reverse death elsewhere, shifts uncomfortably into a generalised moral regarding the value of life.

This insertion of morality, though, is at odds with the structure of McEwan’s mature style of novel writing where the moral norms develop arbitrarily out of the characters’ circumstances. He conceived his first novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978), as where “a number of characters would have to work off each other, develop, change. That made it, as far as I am concerned, a novel rather than a short story.” (Hayman 1978: 15) In this world action can precede morality, as in the coincidence of Jack’s first orgasm and the death of his father:

My father was mixing the cement himself. Then it happened, it appeared quite suddenly on the back of my wrist, and though I knew

about it from jokes and school biology books, and had been waiting for many months, hoping that I was no different from any other, now I was astonished and moved. ...

My father was lying face down on the ground, his head resting on the newly spread concrete. The smoothing plank was in his hand. I approached slowly, knowing I had to run for help. For several seconds I could not move away. I stared wonderingly, just as I had a few minutes before. I did not have a thought in my head as I picked up the plank and carefully smoothed away his impression in the soft, fresh concrete. (McEwan 1978: 18-19)

In many senses the scene at Majdanek is a reordered and recontextualised version of this passage. Both describe a moment of sexual development in the midst of death. Jack is “astonished and moved” at both his first orgasm and his father’s death. His masturbation is partly responsible for his father suffering the heart attack, from having to shovel the cement alone. The connection between the two events stops Jack from calling for help or trying to save his father; instead he wipes away the memory, or “impression” of his father in the concrete. Similarly, Jeremy is sexually liberated by his estrangement from, not empathy with, the Holocaust dead. He feels a power in his masculinity that he had imagined in the persecutors. He wipes away the “impression” of the dead in his consciousness by seducing Jenny.

Since the late eighties McEwan has tried to reverse the former image of himself as a “literary psychopath,” or literary punk even, by appealing to a moral rationale for the moral detachment of his writing. In an interview from 1987 he made a first, somewhat hesitant case:

People who say my stories [have been] all about incest, masturbation, bodily excrescences and so on the “good copy” list miss the fact that I’m probably more than anything [he pauses] a moralist, and although that doesn’t mean I’m interested in handing out punishments and rewards to characters, I am interested in the way people’s unconscious brings them into conflict with their social structure or the gap between people’s presentation of themselves in the outward world and the inner world. (Stephen 1987: 38)

McEwan’s “morality”, then, lies in exposing the conflict between our unconscious impulses and society, as it is manifested in the moral dilemmas of the conscious self which tries to mediate between these two extremes.

In the process of offering a revisionary perspective of his writing, McEwan also revised the narrative of his personal development as a writer. He reflected upon how his depictions of social outsiders had been an expression of his “ignorance, profound ignorance of the world,” (Louvel 1995: 3) which by implication, he had since overcome. In *Black Dogs*, through the persona of Jeremy, he offers an alternative version of his personal and cultural background. As an outsider, this narrator is desperate to construct a lost identity through the discarded parents of his rebellious friends in the sixties. His father- and mother-in-law, whom he eventually claims as surrogate parents, personify English culture since the war. Bernard Tremaine stands for the rationalist social planning of “National culture” as a Labour MP then the “voice of reason” for the media. His wife June rejected politics in the wake of her traumatic experience of two black dogs in 1946 – a legacy of the

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 of British 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. Herein lies 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 scene provokes 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 concluded war 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 a storm 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 to one 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 humanity to 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.” He must 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 the Germans 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 locates where, 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 from the 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 such as Primo Levi, and with it remains the danger of past violence returning to make us its victims.

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ABSTRACT

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

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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, then eventually 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 his achievement 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.

