

The Dead Speak:

Aspects of Narrative Technique in Ian McEwan's *The Innocent*

by

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(Received September 30, 1995)

I

One of the most striking characteristics of Ian McEwan's narrative in *The Innocent* (1990) is the subtle way in which man and things, the living and the dead are connected. We can juxtapose the physical entity in the scenes alongside the emotional situation of the characters, and compare quite usual things to unusual states of mind. In this paper, some examples of this juxtaposition and comparison will be analysed. Close attention will be paid to the way the author portrays human psychology by describing the relationship of a character to the things around him. I will also consider how the microcosm of the descriptions of some critical scenes reveals the main themes of the whole novel. I will mention some of his other works as well to illustrate the analysis.

II

First, let us examine the relationship of the main character and his field of work. While they are driving through Berlin, Glass mentions a radar station. Leonard feels uneasy and tells him that 'he knew nothing about radar. His field was telephones.' Glass says that the radar station has 'an advanced receiver. The Soviets have an airbase close by at Schönefeld. We'll be picking up their emissions' (11). His field is telephones: but actually he has hardly used the equipment in his everyday life. When he must make his first telephone call to his American boss,

He knew how he wanted to sound. Relaxed, purposeful, *Leonard Marnham here. I think you've been expecting me.* Straight away a voice rapped out, 'Glass!' Leonard's manner collapsed into the English dither he had wanted to avoid in conversation with an American. 'Oh yes, look, I'm terribly sorry I ...' 'Is that Marnham?' 'Actually, yes. Leonard Marnham here. I think you've been ...' 'Write down this address. Ten Nollendorfstrosse, off the Nollendorfplatz. Get here tomorrow morning at eight.' The line went dead while Leonard was repeating the address in his friendliest voice. He felt foolish. In solitude he blushed. (4)

This passage shows some of the main themes of the novel. We see here the first of a series of rather ironical observations of the cultural differences between the English and the Americans. This is a comedy (and at the same time a tragedy) of international incomprehension.² Then we can also find here a shy, immature young man struggling to adjust himself to a new situation. This telephone call is the beginning of his many mistakes and hardships. He will have a hard time finding the right way to behave among Americans, the right distance to keep between business and friendship, and at last, the right method to dispose of a corpse. He eventually finds the appropriate answer to each and the hardships serve as his rite of passage. This novel can also be seen as a *Bildungsroman*.³

We can compare Leonard's life not to a telephone but to a radar station. In the following passage, what the two characters are doing is almost the same as what the two radar stations would be doing in the

war. Leonard meets his downstairs neighbour George Blake for the first time:

Early the next morning he was descending in the lift when it stopped at the floor below. The man who stepped in nodded and faced away. He was in his early thirties and carried an attaché case. His beard was trimmed neatly in the naval style and he gave off a scent of cologne. Even Leonard could tell that the dark blue suit was well made. The two men rode down in silence. The stranger allowed Leonard to precede him out of the lift with an economical movement of his open palm. (101)

The attaché case, neatly trimmed beard, the scent of cologne, and the well-made suit: these are the eloquent signals if the receiver can discern their significance. The men do not communicate verbally, but still they can know the social status of each other exactly. They are making 'the automatic, barely conscious appraisal of manner, appearance and voice by means of which one Englishman decodes another's status' (69). They already know each other's social status when they meet for the second time. When Leonard asks Blake if he makes much noise, Blake 'looked from Leonard's face to his shoes and said in a neutral way, "Carpet slippers would help" (101). Clearly, this is the way a person in a higher social position speaks to his inferior. Leonard could only say 'Well, sorry.'

Just as a radar is basically a receiver, Leonard primarily receives information and rarely gives any signal of his own. A radar measures the distance between you and your enemy and gives you the direction of the enemy. It is a receiver. Though it emits electromagnetic waves, it does not carry any messages nor does the reflection bring back any signals from the object. You can only know relative position and direction of the object by knowing where and when the reflection comes back from it.

Mrs Blake makes the situation much clearer:

Over the month that followed he occasionally saw Mrs Blake about the place. She had a beautiful face and a very straight back, and although she

smiled at Leonard and said hello, he avoided her. She made him feel shabby and awkward. He overheard her talking in the lobby and thought she sounded intimidating. (102)

Leonard doesn't talk with her. He *overhears* her talking. He receives signals but doesn't communicate with her. Leonard always tries to know the relative positions of people around him. He cannot begin to move until he knows exactly where they stand. That's why Americans, above all Glass, perplex him. They don't have the same kind of social class system Leonard has been used to.

In a word, though his 'field' is telephones, he is more like a radar than a telephone. He is a receiver, not a sender, of signals. Here we must note the fact that his job in Berlin is to eavesdrop on the Russian telephone communications and record them. He would never talk back to the other party on the line. Later Leonard lets the Russians know that they are being tapped. It is the only way left for him to dispose of the body of Otto. So he talks back⁴ only to let the other party cut the line of communication. The communication ends the communication itself. We can therefore identify communication as one of the main themes of the novel. Leonard's strange proximity and distance from the equipment can also be seen as revealing one aspect of his character in which childlike fascination and childish fear coexist.

III

During the Christmas season, Leonard returns to his home in England to see his parents: 'Now the old familiar life engulfed him. He was suddenly a son again, not a lover. He was a child' (125). Is he however, really a grown-up 'lover' even when he is with Maria? Maria says to Leonard when they find Otto in their room: 'I've had men screaming at me, hitting me, trying to rape me. Now I want a man to look after me' (150). Does he really look after her? When her skirt catches flame from her cigarette just after these words, he manages to rescue her from the fire. However, he cannot save her from her violent ex-husband; on the contrary, it is Maria who rescues Leonard from Otto's attack. Leonard is not a grown-up protector, but a protected child here. A

child likes to hide behind the skirt of his mother. When the flame has destroyed Maria's skirt, Otto attacks Leonard and tries to squash his testicles. It is then that Maria hits Otto with the cobbler's last and kills him. The mother has protected her son from the imminent danger to his sexuality.

Leonard does not actually hide behind her skirt, but he likes to crawl under the blanket in Maria's bed. He likes the semi-darkness there, and he likes 'to press his cheek against her belly, taut from all that cycling, or to push the tip of his tongue into her navel as intricately convoluted as a sunken ear' (78). He is exploring this terra incognita in the semi-darkness. We can regard Leonard's passion for the tunnel of the Operation Gold as almost the same as his passion for Maria's navel and vagina. When Leonard is exhausted after his struggle to dispose of the corpse, he wants 'to go there [to the tunnel] and be soothed' (204). The tunnel is not only a workplace but also, for him, a place to 'be soothed,' just like the imagined womb of the mother hidden beneath the skirt.

'His two secret worlds' (77), his secret mission in the tunnel and his love for Maria, are connected by the image of the womb.

He had spoken to no one about her at work, and he could not talk to her about what he did. He was not certain whether this time spent travelling between his two secret worlds was when he was truly himself, when he was able to hold the two in balance and know them to be separate from himself; or whether this was the one time he was nothing at all, a void travelling between two points. Only on arrival, at this end or that, would he assume or be assigned a purpose, and then he would be himself, or one of his selves. (77)

He is not sure of himself because he is just a fetus in a womb, which is without any 'purpose' at all but to grow and to be born. If Maria is his mother, his father is Glass. Glass is sometimes very strict and severe about his job, about security, and about the woman he is in love with. At other times he is quite kind to Leonard: He gives him a Christmas present; he saves him when the young man loses his temper

in public and nearly discredits himself. This figure is almost like a father trying to let his son grow up. Leonard gradually feels that 'there was no one apart from Maria, who cared so much [as Glass] about what Leonard did or said' (124). At the end of the story, when Leonard is leaving Berlin, Glass comes and stands with Maria on the observation deck of the airport. 'They both waved, like parents to a departing child' (228).

Leonard finally leaves the dismembered body of Otto in the tunnel. Death is thrust through the vagina, into the womb. Death is put inside the vessel of birth. Life and death are quite near to each other in the dark secret tunnel.⁵

IV

Another major characteristic of Ian McEwan's works is the strange mixture of eeriness and beauty. The author presents us with things that are usually dismissed as dirty rubbish or a filthy mess, or things that we routinely pretend do not exist.⁶ We cannot look aside though we hate what we are looking at. This love/hate attraction is not only because the reader desperately wishes to know what will happen next, but also because he finds beauty in the description of the dirtiest, filthiest, and the most abnormal things and behaviour. Where does this beauty come from? If one finds beauty in what one has always regarded as far from it, then either the seer's concept of beauty has somehow changed or the way it is presented to him contributes to this attraction. In McEwan's novels, the fact that the reader keeps on hating what he is strongly attracted to suggests the latter.

Let us see how and what the narrator describes when Leonard and Maria begin the dismemberment of Otto.⁷

They were together now, side by side. He took up the saw. It was finely toothed and was sheathed for safety in a fold of cardboard held in place by a rubber band. He got that off and started into the crook of Otto's knee. The trousers were black cotton and shiny from wear. He held the saw in his right hand, and with his left he held Otto's leg just above the ankle. It was colder than room tempera-

ture. It drew the heat from his hand. (175)

The narrative is completely without sentiment. If we didn't know the situation, Leonard and Maria might seem to be trying to take a sewing machine to pieces. As Kiernan Ryan says, 'Squatting at the heart of this tale is the appalling spectacle of the demystified body....'⁸ The demystification of the body is manifest here where the body becomes just an extremely repulsive object to get rid of. Otto had been repulsive, but he might have walked away from the room; the body wouldn't go away by itself.

Words are precise, mechanical and minute. What the narrator is elaborately describing are only the material objects and physical movements. He tells us of what could be recorded through a video camera lens. He doesn't go into the deep darkness of human psychology. We have instead, the cold precision of telling and the physical fact of showing. 'Finely toothed,' 'sheathed,' and 'safety': the words seem to be doing nothing but describing an object, and yet they send signals of edge, sharpness, separation and danger. Ian McEwan's narrative makes things themselves speak to evoke the reader's sensations.

'They were together now, side by side.' This sentence is apparently a simple description of everyday life. Two people stand side by side. Just that. Yet it also tells us considerably more. The last sentence before the paragraph quoted above is: 'He did not want to do it alone.' And in the same page we hear Leonard's inner voice say 'but it was important that they were together in this.' A simple sentence describing how a man and a woman stand is, at the same time, a statement of psychological alliance. Leonard's lack of experience, fear of being left alone, need for mental support and the physical presence of an accomplice — they are all here. The man and woman standing *together* are carrying out the dismemberment, and the separation happens in a place where the unifying of two bodies, namely those of Leonard and Maria, took place. There is a bitter irony here. The description also makes us aware again of the repeated situation where Maria is always the one who takes charge. Maria is, as shown above, the maternal figure to Leonard.

The last two sentences of the paragraph quoted provide still another example. 'It [Otto's leg] was colder than room temperature. It drew heat from his hand.'⁹ It is again just a description of everyday experience. You don't even need elementary physics to know this: if you touch something colder than your hand, it takes the heat away from the hand and you feel the coldness of the surface. The heat is moving here, however, from the living to the dead. We witness a strange communication. The dead leg affects the living by drawing energy from the living hand. We must notice that the narrator does not say 'the heat moved from the leg to the hand,' but 'it drew the heat from his hand,' as if 'it' has its own will. Here, I quote Kiernan Ryan's words again, this time in full: 'Squatting at the heart of this tale is the appalling spectacle of the demystified body, the black hole in the text through which meaning itself threatens to bleed away.' If we think of the term 'black hole' in a strictly scientific sense, we can add an observation to Ryan's words. According to the dictionary, a black hole is 'an extremely small region of space-time with a gravitational field so intense that *nothing can escape*, not even light'¹⁰ (my italics). A black hole absorbs and traps everything that comes near it. It is just like death which will surely catch every one of us sometime in the future. We can never escape from it. The dead body tries to catch and trap the energy of the living. Even the weight of Otto's body, which is a mass in the gravitational field, expresses its own will and tries to drag the man down to earth. Leonard suffers from its weight while he is trying to find a place to leave the corpse. 'Before opening the front door, he lifted the cases experimentally. It was more than weight. There was a pull, an elemental, purposeful earthward pull. Otto wanted to be buried, he thought' (197). Gravity produces both the real weight and the voice of mortality. This is yet another example of a simple physical fact conveying vaster reality of life.

Which are we more afraid of, death itself or its effect on the living? That may depend on how one sees death. The dead, after their disappearance from the membership of the living, can sometimes have greater power over the lives of the living than while

they lived.¹¹ This legacy is the last communication between the living and the dead. The communication is, however, one-sided. The leg does not give back the heat to the hand. The hand can only cut up the leg. Dismemberment cuts off the line of communication, but at the same time the act sends a message that the living must protect and preserve themselves.

Communication (or the lack of it) is one of the main themes of the novel. We saw one aspect of this theme when we examined the relationship between Leonard and telephone. Here, in a restricted smaller area, but not without cold and crystalline emphasis, we have the communication between death and life. It reminds us of the later episode of the dog barking at the cases that contain Otto's dismembered body. The scent of Otto invited the dog. The dead calls the living.

V

It is one of the main characteristics of the narrative technique of Ian McEwan to make simple material description work on two levels: the real and the figurative. The telephone, the tunnel and the leg have their own places and roles in the physical description of the fictional world, but they are also used to convey thematic patterns of the whole novel. When the author makes the dead speak to the living world, the two levels touch and mingle. In the character of a telephone specialist who is more like a radar station, we can see themes of communication and growing up. The tunnel which accepts both corpse and child shows the proximity of life and death. Glass can be seen as the father figure to Leonard along with Maria as the mother.

Then the heat flows from the living hand to the dead leg. The absorption of the energy is a message from the dead to the living: you too are destined to be cold someday. But Leonard is too young to die. He has just begun to grow up. Therefore he refuses to accept the message. Communication between the living and the dead is always unilateral. He just cuts up the body to forget death, only to be kept reminded of it for the rest of his life.

McEwan never lets the reader look away from the simple narrative of the weird world, and he forces us

to become painfully aware of the ice-cold underworld of man's fear. We are at his mercy in this beautiful hell.

NOTES

I would like to express my gratitude to Peter Kemp who showed me how to appreciate contemporary novels. I would also like to thank Mary Taylor and David Butler who read my manuscript and gave me invaluable suggestions and comments. Needless to say, any remaining inadequacies are mine.

1. Ian McEwan, *The Innocent; or The Special Relationship*, (1990, London: Picador, 1990), p.12. Hereafter all references in the text are to this edition.
2. Leonard later misses 'the near rudeness of the American's speech, the hammer-blow intimacy, the absence of the modifiers and hesitations that was supposed to mark out a reasonable Englishman' (124).
3. After some time with Maria, Leonard feels 'settled, proud, *truly grown-up at last*' (117) (my italics). We see here a popular motif of a love story: a young immature man is given a lesson in love by an older woman.
4. He does not directly talk to the Russians in fact; he gave the information to a German spy.
5. Examples of the proximity of life and death are readily noted in other works by Ian McEwan. For example, in *The Child In Time* (1987), Charles's death occurs right before the birth of the new baby, while in *The Cement Garden* (1978), a boy experiences his first ejaculation at the same instant his father has a heart attack and dies.
6. This is most prominent in his early works, notably in some of the short stories in *In Between the Sheets* (1978) and in *The Cement Garden*.
7. Disposal of the corpse seems to be one of Ian McEwan's obsessions. Earlier in his career, in *The Cement Garden*, he describes minutely how children dispose of their mother's body in a chest with cement and what happens to it later.
8. Kiernan Ryan, *Ian McEwan (Writers and Their Work)*, (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p.60.

9. McEwan has used almost the same image of heat flowing from the living to the dead in his earlier novel: Stephen is carrying the cold body of his friend over his shoulders. 'It drew the heat from him greedily, as if they might soon change places and the corpse, warmed to life, would carry Stephen's cold body to the cottage.' *The Child in Time* (1987, London: Picador, 1988), p.198.
10. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
11. In *The Cement Garden*, the decay of the mother's body corresponds to the deterioration of the lives of the children. In *The Child in Time*, the disappearance of a daughter gives the parents a great deal of pain.

「死者が語る — イアン・マキューアンの『イノセント』
における語りの技法の考察」

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(平成7年9月30日受理)

本論は、現代イギリスの作家イアン・マキューアンの長編小説『イノセント』（1990年）を論じたものである。この作品においては単なる即物的な情景描写が同時に登場人物の心理描写となり、かつまたそれが作品全体のテーマをも提示している事を示そうと試みた。作品から、「電話」「トンネル」ある人物の「足」などを取り上げて具体的に分析し、「物」があたかも意志を持った存在であるかのように語り始めている叙述をマキューアンの語りの技法の特色として示した。