

Biting Divagations – Self-discoveries in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the position of Ian McEwan's novel *Black Dogs* (1992) within the corpus of his work. It attempts to show how this small in scale yet complex novel both follows and subverts the author's characteristic themes and narrative strategies. It will also argue that, as the novel's central concerns are the coming to terms with one's past and the role of memory in this process, it in many respects anticipates McEwan's most acclaimed work so far, *Atonement* (2001). Written soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, *Black Dogs* ranks among his most politically engaged novels. Therefore, a special focus will be put on the author's treatment of the theme of the often ambivalent relationship between private responsibility and public involvement that he touched upon in *The Child in Time* (1987) and later returned to in *Amsterdam* (1998).

KEYWORDS

Contemporary British literature, Narrative strategies, Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs*, memory, childhood, loss of innocence

The novel *Black Dogs* (1992) can be seen as representing a dividing line between Ian McEwan's earlier and later literary production. Compared to the author's early works, which are full of morbid, perverse and otherwise obscure action and imagery, and also to his late 1980s novels, *Black Dogs* is noticeably more ambitious since, "within the framework of a family dispute, it attempts to touch upon the clash of science and mysticism, rationality and magic, violence and love, and civilization and its abandonment. Within that same framework, it also delves into some of the major currents and events of the late-twentieth-century European history."¹ The novel develops the tradition already established in *The Child in Time* (1987) and engages the discourse and perspective of a psychological study and philosophical contemplation "in which different intellectual and moral positions are constantly in dialogue with each other."² Although it has some weaker points, namely the sometimes overtly schematised characters, *Black Dogs* does represent the beginning of the mature phase in McEwan's literary career, which culminated in his most acclaimed works so far, *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005).

Although in terms of length it does not exceed McEwan's previous works, *Black Dogs* is a complex novel since it explores the most characteristic themes and narrative strategies that appear in almost all his notable works: the theme of childhood, namely the childhood-adulthood transition and the consequences of neglectful or absent parents; the loss of innocence, not necessarily directly connected with the previous theme; strong and admirable female characters as opposed to their rather weak or pitiable male counterparts and, along with this, the fragility and preposterousness of patriarchal illusions; a related theme of the impasse of an exclusively rational approach to the world, mostly exemplified by the male protagonists; the belief that a single event of extreme physical, psychic and emotional intensity can fatefully alter and affect a life; a narrative strategy of escalated tension before the repeatedly postponed determining moment of

1 David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 132.

2 Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, 138.

action is described; a narration as if from the periphery of vision, from a detached, unconcerned perspective when something life-changing is happening; and a fragmentation of the narrative into separate moments of high intensity when plotline is abandoned in favour of the feelings and thoughts of a chosen protagonist. The novel not only employs the idiosyncrasies of its predecessors but also anticipates some themes of McEwan's mature novels and therefore can be taken as a bridge between the author's earlier and later work. The first of these themes is a concern with history, especially the period of and after the Second World War, which is, however, always seen through the prism of private anxieties and desires. Another important aspect is internationality, a state-of-the-person contemplation via a state-of-Europe narrative; compared to the author's earlier works the novel puts much stronger emphasis on the role and nature of personal memory in the process of coming to terms with the past; it is also the author's first metafictional work; and, written soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it ranks among his most politically engaged novels and as such it explores the theme of the often ambivalent relationship between private responsibility and public involvement and thus shapes "questions about moral responsibility for both a personal and a collective past."³ The aim of this article is to show that *Black Dogs* represents, thematically rather than stylistically, a crucial point in McEwan's career, one that not only synthesises his previous works but also anticipates his much-celebrated later achievements.

The irreducible sense of childish unbelonging and unknowing idealism

One of the central themes of *Black Dogs* is childhood, namely the relationships between parents and their children, which are, typically for McEwan, dysfunctional for various reasons. The novel is in fact full of characters whose fate has been crucially determined by the absence or inadequacy of parental care: the narrator Jeremy and his sister Jean who lost their parents in a car accident when they were little, Jean's unfortunate daughter Sally who grew up in a strife-ridden household dominated by her violent, alcoholic father Harper, and Jeremy's wife Jenny who, like her two brothers, suffered from a lack of care from their separated and irreconcilable parents. In the Preface Jeremy describes his anxieties and frustrations as an orphaned child, the loneliness, "emotional void" and "the feeling of belonging nowhere and to no one,"⁴ his permanent search for a surrogate parental authority and his naturally developed capacity to get on well with his revolting schoolmates' parents, his hatred for the ruthless Harper and strong attachment to the abused little Sally. His traumatic childhood experiences cause Jeremy to mature early, though far from happily. He is haunted by his sense of guilt and betrayal for abandoning Sally when, insecure, aimless and restless, he went to study at Oxford. When he leaves university he goes through numerous jobs, addresses and love affairs in his futile search for a firm point in his life and thus "obscure [his] irreducible sense of childish unbelonging."⁵ On one level the novel can be read as the narrator's attempt to come to terms with the loss he experienced in his childhood, one that 'has not only created emotional disturbance but also a disorientation' leading him to "search for an answer

3 Anna Grmelová, "'About suffering they were never wrong, the old masters': An intertextual reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Litteraria Pragensia*, 17, no. 34 (2007): 154.

4 Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (London: Vintage Books, 1998), 18.

5 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 17.

that cannot be found: [...] the presence of evil in the world, leaving him oscillating between rationalist and metaphysical explanations."⁶

It is only when Jeremy realises that the easiest way to come to terms with the loss of one's parents is to become a parent and fate brings Jenny into his life that he can find mental balance. Moreover, in June and Bernard, Jenny's parents, he discovers longed-for parental authority and models as they are both strong personalities, independent, assertive and uncompromising. This happens much to his wife's annoyance since it is precisely these qualities that once divided the family and thus deprived her of her own happy childhood. She has therefore never forgiven her parents and is rather dismissive of her husband's literary project, a family memoir based on June's recollections and interpretations of her relationship with her husband. The fact that Jeremy dedicates the book to his wife and to his niece who, like him, still suffer the effects of their frustrating childhoods, suggests that *Black Dogs* represents an organic continuation of the central theme of *The Child in Time*, and as such can be read as an exploration of the delicate and often seemingly harmless intricacies, misunderstandings and misconceptions that can destroy a loving relationship and crucially affect adults' and, in consequence, their children's lives.

In *Black Dogs* McEwan adds a new dimension of child abuse to this theme, though he had already touched upon it slightly in *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Child in Time*. The narrator points out how difficult it might be for an inexperienced outsider to recognise even obvious signs of child abuse in a family, as well as to the lifelong consequences the abused child is doomed to bear. The short but emotional scene in the hotel in France where Jeremy encounters a family in which the parents abuse their son by chastising him severely whenever he breaks the 'rules' introduces a similar problem perceived from another perspective. The key questions here are who should intervene, in what manner and at which point as well as where does the borderline between the intimate inner mechanisms of a family and the public domain of a crime lie. McEwan underlines the delicacy of the situation by making his otherwise peaceful protagonist beat up the father mindlessly, though he eventually realises that "the elation driving [him] had nothing to do with revenge and justice,"⁷ and that his act, which results from a transfer of his own traumas rather than from a concern for the bullied child, has lowered him to the level of the parental aggressor. Although McEwan does not directly suggest any suitable solution, he makes clear that "one act of aggression leads inexorably to another, which may be concealed as political action, sexual passion or self-righteous anger."⁸ Horrified with himself, Jeremy understands the absurdity and futility of correcting violence with further violence.

A related theme McEwan repeatedly focuses on in his novels is that of the loss of innocence, which can, but does not have to, occur within the childhood-adulthood transition period. *Black Dogs* anticipates the author's later works by exploring the theme of the loss of innocence in both its infant as well as adult protagonists. Although all the aforementioned characters lose their childlike innocence prematurely due to the disturbing circumstances of their family situations, this theme is thoroughly explored in connection with the themes of political conviction and intimate relationships. Young, naïve and enthusiastic, Bernard and June join the Communist Party driven by an

6 Peter Childs, "Fascinating violation: Ian McEwan's children," in *British Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. Nick Bentley (London: Routledge, 2005), 129-130.

7 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 131.

8 Childs, "Fascinating violation," 129.

ambition to make the world a better place. Moreover, after the war they get married and nothing seems to stand in the way of their future together. All this is captured in a photograph of them from this time, one which insulates their naive happiness by taking it out of context and thus creating the illusion of a guilt-free past. Jeremy acknowledges effect of this when he cannot help feeling overwhelmed by certain

nostalgia for the brief, remote time when Bernard and June had been lovingly, uncomplicatedly together. Before the fall. This too contributed to the photograph's innocence – their ignorance of how much and for how long they would be addicted to and irritated by each other.⁹

In its deceptive tranquility the photograph represents innocence that is soon to be smashed into pieces. Blinded by their political and emotional idealism, the unknowing young couple are to set off on their separate journeys in different directions

The theme of lost innocence in relation to politics already appears in *The Child in Time*, but in *Black Dogs* McEwan develops it by making it inseparable from the sphere of the characters' intimate lives. Bernard and June's uncritical devotion to communist ideals in fact prevents them from seeing both the atrocities committed by the Stalinist regime in the name of the Party, as well as the apparent and incongruous differences in their own personalities. June is the first to reveal a flaw in the seeming perfection – not only does she leave the party earlier than Bernard, discouraged and disappointed by its dogmatism and lack of concern for real people, but she also sees the potentially disruptive effect such political idealism could have on their marriage. She comes to realise that idealistic politics not only make the world theoretical, but also detach one from the reality of the present in favour of the hypotheticality of the future.

We couldn't free ourselves into the present. Instead we wanted to think about setting other people free. We wanted to think about their unhappiness. We used their wretchedness to mask our own. And our wretchedness was our inability to take the simple good things life was offering us and be glad to have them. Politics, idealistic politics, is all about the future. I've spent my life discovering that the moment you enter the present fully, you find infinite space, infinite time, call it God if you want...¹⁰

The innocence June decides to abandon is a noncommittal position that disguises an inability to face up to one's personal problems with an often hysterical concern for the welfare of abstract masses. McEwan stresses that an unwillingness to attend to the present, which Bernard denotes as self-indulgent, may at best result in impracticality, at worst in an indifference and cruelty towards those closest to oneself.

⁹ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 45.

¹⁰ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 42.

Spiritual truth or well-established fact?

A significant theme of *Black Dogs* is the disparity between male and female views of the world, connected with a criticism of the cursory rationalism that often dominates the male perspective. June follows the tradition of exceptional and independent women characters already exemplified by Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) and Julie and Thelma in *The Child in Time*, and to be continued by Cecilia in *Atonement*. June is strong enough to defy and challenge her husband's rational approach to life and eventually set herself free in order to start her own quest to discover the spiritual in herself: "It was a search. She didn't claim to have all the answers. It was a quest, one she would have liked everyone to be on in their own way, but she wasn't forcing anyone. [...] She had no interest in dogma or organised religion. It was a spiritual journey."¹¹ McEwan typically uses an event of extreme physical and psychic intensity – here June's encounter with the black dogs – to make his protagonist realise a missing dimension in her life and incite her spiritual awakening. The traumatic experience thus becomes, above all, an epiphanic moment of June's self-discovery, one that in effect separates her from her husband for good.

I haven't mythologised these animals. I've made use of them. They set me free. [...] I met evil and discovered God. I call it my discovery, but of course, it's nothing new, and it's not mine [...] – that we have within us an infinite resource, a potential for a higher state of being, a goodness...¹²

She claims that she has discovered that human life contains more than meets the eye and thus more than can ever be expressed in terms of the political theories and scientific findings Bernard so eagerly espouses. As Peter Childs notes, "the book challenges the reader to take sides, to hold opinions and defend convictions, while at the same time asserting that there are no definitive answers to moral problems, only perspectives, positions, and further questions."¹³ Through the character of June, McEwan expresses his belief that the personal process of inquiring and finding possible truths is far more enriching and formative for an individual than an automatic acceptance of universally acknowledged assumptions and rational facts.

Bernard is in many respects his wife's diametric opposite – not only has he been pursuing an active political career his whole life, he also embodies a devoted belief in the doctrine of rationalism. Unlike June, he has retained his determination to put his political views into practice by becoming a Labour MP. Moreover, his scientific training has taught him to rely exclusively on unquestionable facts and empirically verifiable data when making decisions. It is understandable that both politics and rationalism have left indelible traces on his personality. As a prominent and therefore much exposed political figure he has developed a capacity to distinguish between his public image and private self, the first gradually affecting and comprising the latter. Consequently, he has assumed the habit of making all his utterances, regardless of context, into miniature speeches or lectures, thus transforming every conversation into a well-balanced political debate in which to demonstrate his argumentative skills. Instead of partners he requires

¹¹ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 91.

¹² McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 59-60.

¹³ Peter Childs, (ed.). *The Fiction of Ian McEwan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 103.

an audience and opponents for his “habits of private conversation had been formed by years of public debate,”¹⁴ as Jeremy notes with annoyance. The absence of a private self is what, according to June, has transformed Bernard into a shallow person unable to reflect, not only on his own acts but, above all, on other people’s needs and desires. In Bernard McEwan portrays his favourite theme of western rationalism as a perspective ultimately intolerant of any alternative way of approaching the world. Bernard bluntly rejects June’s understanding of what is good or true as a fictitious construction and therefore irrelevant and misleading:

My wife might have been interested in poetic truth, or spiritual truth, or her own private *truth*, but she didn’t give a damn for truth, for the facts, for the kind of truth that two people could recognise independently of each other. She made patterns, she invented myths. Then she made the facts fit them.¹⁵

His disdainful insistence that there is only one truth that sooner or later must be apprehended by all sensible individuals makes Bernard a rather pitiable character, one whose ego is cloistered in the cushioned cell of his self-delusion. However, McEwan humanises his protagonist by allowing him to respect the sincerity and earnestness of his wife’s viewpoints, which enable her to see “her life as a project, an undertaking, something to take control of and direct towards, well, understanding, wisdom – on her particular terms. [...] I hated the nonsense she filled her head with, but I loved her seriousness.”¹⁶ Although he will never be able to accept June’s point of view, he at least appreciates and admires her capacity to devote herself fully to what she deeply believes in, something he has been apparently lacking in both his professional and private lives.

Although June undoubtedly ranks among McEwan’s admirable woman characters, he does not spare her certain criticism for giving up her responsibilities as a mother too early. Her daughter Jenny can never forgive her mother’s lack of concern for her adolescent children when she decided to live alone in her cottage in France “in pursuit of a life of spiritual meditation,”¹⁷ a decision that caused an irreparable alienation between them. However, the main criticism, bordering on mockery, is aimed at Bernard and his conceited rationalism during his and Jeremy’s visit to Berlin during the fall of the Wall. Still grieving for his late wife, Bernard has assumed the habit of looking at young women’s faces in order to find some traces of June in them, a superstitious act he hates himself for but which he finds impossible to abandon. Eventually Bernard spots a German girl in the street whose face bears a striking resemblance to June’s, but she disappears in the crowds of the bustling city. When the very same young woman rescues him from getting beaten up by a right-wing extremist rioter, a scene whose mysteriousness and ferocity by far transcends the level of the everyday, he does not even notice her face. When Jeremy points out her identity, Bernard’s “guardian angel, the incarnation of June,”¹⁸ Bernard dismisses it as a mere coincidence. This event symbolises Bernard’s attitude to any alternative interpretation of events – even though he subconsciously feels that there are occasions which can not be explained by reason, when he actually

14 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 72.

15 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 86.

16 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 93.

17 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 109.

18 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 100.

comes face to face with such an event he dismisses it from his mind by calling it ridiculous or pretending such things do not exist.

The spectres of family lore

One of McEwan's favourite narrative strategies is a deliberate escalation of tension before something crucial happens, which creates "for the reader a sense of the very ordinary and familiar as possessed of something potentially discomfiting."¹⁹ The effect of this strategy is that a single event, often one of short duration yet of immense negative consequences for those affected, is repeatedly postponed in the narrative. This intensifies its impact, so that "what really turns the screw on our moral condition is the mood of imminent catastrophe in which we have learned to live."²⁰ Jeremy admits that a similar fate also awaits his book, since from the beginning "it began to take another form; not a biography, not even a memoir really, more a divagation."²¹ He realises that in order to fully depict such a determining moment from a more complex perspective, the narrator has to first go through many digressions and seemingly irrelevant episodes. McEwan soon mentions the centrality of the eponymous animals in an understanding of the novel, but he strives to create an air of mysteriousness around Julie's encounter with them by almost mythologising the beasts and endowing them with a mystical dimension:

It was a family lore, a story burnished with repetition, no longer remembered so much as incanted like a prayer got by heart. [...] It was a story whose historical accuracy was of less significance than the function it served. It was a myth, all the more powerful for being upheld as documentary.²²

Although the author lets the reader learn about the symbolic significance of the black dogs within the family's history, he uses this significance merely as a pretext to describe everything that has succeeded the event as well as to relate details from related characters' lives. The motif of the beasts ominously recurs in various places of the narrative but always in mere hints, thus adding to the reader's expectations and prolonging the time before the story's fateful turning point.

To single out one moment or event of enormous physical, psychic or emotional intensity, one with potentially life-changing consequences for the novel's main protagonist(s), is another characteristic feature of McEwan's narrative style. This happens either at the beginning of the story, such as the abduction of a little child in *The Child in Time*, the fatal ballooning episode in *Enduring Love* (1997), and the fountain scene with the broken vase in *Atonement*, or somewhere towards the end, like the homicidal act in *The Comfort of Strangers*, the Lake District hiking scene in *Amsterdam* (1998), and the wedding night failure in *On Chesil Beach* (2007). *Black Dogs* follows the latter pattern – the whole preceding text in fact serves as a kind of narrative overture to the novel's turning point, preparing the ground for the much-awaited catharsis. The force of the

19 Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 18.

20 Kiernan Ryan, "Sex, Violence and Complicity: Martin Amis and Ian McEwan," in *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Rod Mengham, (London: Polity Press, 1999), 208.

21 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 37.

22 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 49-50.

scene with the black dogs consists in the fact that it combines the motif of an external threat with that of revelation and self-discovery. Therefore, June realises that the dogs are not alien to her, as they, apart from the imminent physical danger, represent a mirror image of her own self.

She was drawn to the idea now because the creatures were familiar. They were emblems of the menace she had 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.²³

In this moment of extremity she understands that just as each person has an inherent capacity for both good and evil, so each person needs to exercise some amount of egotism if he or she wants to retain individuality and self-esteem. Though at first June takes the dogs as a manifestation of some divine principle, a materialisation of the metaphysical, she soon becomes aware that they are “an extension of her own being,”²⁴ that they embody a moral imperative to get to know oneself in order to be capable of approaching others, and that only a person content with his or her own life can truly help those in need. From this perspective, her previous idealistic assistance of others regardless of her own needs and desires suddenly appears unconvincing, as her personality seems to have dissolved in the continuous acts of charitable altruism. The fact that she fears the possible absence of the dogs in her life suggests June’s realisation that without a certain healthy assertiveness it is impossible to achieve happiness in one’s personal life.

Unlike other moments of this kind in McEwan’s novels that aim to either shock the reader or trigger the story, the scene with the black dogs serves a different purpose – it invites a more scrutinous reading and a return to certain passages. This incites the reader to think about events and attitudes that possibly transcend the scope of the novel. In this sense *Black Dogs* anticipates *Atonement*, in which the final plot twist achieves a similar effect. *Black Dogs*, however, employs another two of McEwan’s distinctive, interrelated narrative strategies: the fragmentation of narrative into separate moments and narration from an detached perspective, as if from the periphery of vision. Something crucial to the story is happening and the reader is forced to look “altogether elsewhere.”²⁵ McEwan especially enjoys the combination of these two. Right before the climax of a particular scene he writer “looks away” and offers the reader marginal details instead. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, for instance, Colin is being murdered but the reader gets Mary’s half-conscious, intoxicated account of the act. In *The Child in Time* little Kate is being abducted but the reader is made to observe details of the supermarket. To a much greater extent this technique is used in *Atonement*, for example when Robbie is being arrested and is talking to Cecilia but the reader experiences the scene through Briony’s uncomprehending perspective, admiring her sister’s “capacity for forgiveness.”²⁶ The whole of part two depicts Robbie’s “adventures” at the front and much of part three

²³ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 144-145.

²⁴ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 150.

²⁵ Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Ian McEwan: the essential guide* (London: Vintage, 2002), 5.

²⁶ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 185.

depicts Briony's experiences as a hospital nurse during the war. The story of *Black Dogs* is also fragmented into the series of chronologically disrupted and thematically only loosely connected events of Jeremy's divagating narrative that span more than forty years. Moreover, during many of these events peripheral narratives of details prevail over the perspective of the event as a whole, i.e. the Berlin street riot scene, Jeremy and Jenny's visit to the concentration camp in Majdanek, or June's purchase of the chalet in France. The story of *Black Dogs*, rather than written as a continuous narrative, is composed through these fragmented events and scenes interlinked via the novel's central theme – self-discovery.

A disease of the imagination – the hauntings of the past

The Innocent (1990) and *Black Dogs* signal a new concern in the author's writing – the history of the second half of the twentieth century. In the earlier espionage thriller the historical background is mid-1950s Berlin. In *Black Dogs* the WW II, post-WW II and post-1989 periods assume a more complex function as they significantly contribute to the novel's state-of-the-person and state-of-Europe levels of meaning in which the reader encounters what Richard Bradford calls

the McEwan leitmotif [...] of the world as comprised of strata, levels of existence and experience which if kept apart will guarantee that the worst aspects of life remain separate from the rational, the predictable and the routine. At some point in all his novels these strata are caused to intersect.²⁷

From this perspective *Black Dogs* anticipates not only McEwan's later works dealing with the recent past, such as *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, but also the internationalism of *Amsterdam*. McEwan, however, is not an historical writer and the past focused on in his novels is always explored in order to better understand the characters and the motivation behind their actions, or to pose universal questions concerning the human condition and the relationship between private and public histories. The historical era of *Black Dogs* is mainly the Second World War and its aftermath, and all its main protagonists' fates are somehow affected by this, including those who did not experience the war firsthand themselves. Jeremy and Jenny's first common experience, for instance, is their visit to Majdanek. As they are silently walking hand in hand through this "disease of the imagination and a living peril, a barely conscious connivance with evil,"²⁸ their mental processes are deeply affected by the place's nightmarish monstrosity and unspeakable atrocity which has taken place there. As a result, upon their relief at being away from the camp in the normal world, they easily overcome the initial awkwardness and insecurities of a beginning relationship. They both feel the urge to celebrate the fact that they are free and alive through immediate lovemaking. A similar intertwining of private and public history is the episode during which Jeremy and Bernard visit Berlin during the fall of the Wall – against the background of a momentous historical event the narrative concentrates on the protagonists' coming to terms with their lives as well as their mostly futile attempts to accept each other's interpretation of

27 Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 22.

28 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 110.

past events. The most striking example of this intersection in the novel is Bernard and June's honeymoon in France. Their journey takes place soon after the war in 1946 and the consequences can be seen everywhere in the form of damaged buildings, the devastated countryside as well as the ruined or fatally affected human fates, all the nameless private miseries the range of which can never be measured or even estimated. Having seen a young local girl grieving over a lost male family member, Bernard understands that that war should not be taken "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 [...] and whose totality showed more sadness than anyone could ever begin to comprehend."²⁹ Although the war has ended officially, its real tragedy consists not only in the countless deaths of innocent people, but also in how it forever permeates the social and emotional lives of those who survived it. Bernard realises that the war is never over for those who have lost someone in it. The atrocities have merely been transformed from the battlefields into the intimate sphere of everyday lives, feelings of loss, haunted dreams and painful reminiscences. By making the beasts that indirectly contribute to the breakdown of Bernard and June's marriage trained Gestapo dogs now wild, McEwan goes even further, suggesting that the war can afflict even those who believed themselves safe from its effects

The exploration of the possible life-long consequences of the traumas caused by WWII in the lives of the novel's central characters makes *Black Dogs* a direct forerunner of *Atonement*. However, *Black Dogs* differs from its more renowned successor in its international scope, achieved through the continual correlation of the characters' destinies and the modern history of the whole of Europe. When June searches for a symbolic meaning of her encounter with the black dogs, she suggests that "if one dog was a personal depression, two dogs were a kind of cultural depression, civilisation's worst moods."³⁰ This statement can be interpreted in two related ways: first, personal histories are always inseparable from official ones, and these two forms of experience are mutually contingent; second, no monstrous event like the war can ever be considered finished, for it automatically becomes part of our civilisation's eternal neurosis, a nightmarish reminder of what human beings are capable of under certain extreme circumstances, as well as a warning that our subconscious may be inhabited by dark phantasms no one would ever wish to invoke. Therefore, the worst thing humankind could do is to displace such a memory from its collective consciousness or collective conscience. Whoever avoids remembering past mistakes is forever doomed to repeat them. And so the black dogs of the past will always be wandering through the landscape of the human imagination, both creative and depraved, conscious and suppressed, "fading as they move into the foothills of the mountains from where they will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time."³¹

Beguilement and scepticism – memory and history

Thus another theme that makes *Black Dogs* a significant forerunner to McEwan's later novels is that of memory and recollection of the past - the ambivalent relationship of memory and history. As in *Atonement*, this theme goes hand in hand with an exploration

²⁹ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 164-164.

³⁰ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 104.

³¹ McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 174.

of the relation between memory and writing. Writing is made a theme not only through intertextual allusions to writers like Kafka, Plath, Proust and Conrad, but mainly by being presented as an auto-therapeutic means of facing up to one's past. Jeremy is hoping to record June's memoirs with the precision of an impartial journalist, only to discover that he is becoming entangled in his divagations. The result is a work more subjective than he ever intended, a work which perhaps says more about him than about June and Bernard. Tormented by June and Bernard's imaginative voices, he realises that the burden of attempting to reconcile the two separate worlds of personal memories is heavier than he can bear and that he would always be, as his wife tells him angrily, punished for stirring up their pasts. Jeremy thus eventually finds out that his ambition to know the exact version of June and Bernard's past is illusory, that it in fact no longer matters. He comes to understand that his eagerness to disclose other people's pasts is his disguised wish to come to terms with his own life and that he can actually enjoy the pleasure of fleeing their past into his present.

The fact that memory is a highly evasive, subjective, and therefore fundamentally unreliable source of information permeates the entire story of *Black Dogs*. Jeremy is unsuccessfully trying to reconstruct a truthful account of the fateful moments of Bernard and June's honeymoon only to realise that he will always end up with two different, if not mutually exclusive, versions of the past. McEwan repeatedly demonstrates that every past recollection is merely a reworking of the original event through the prism of the present, one that is substantially determined by one's experience, wishes, hopes and self-projections. In one of the first descriptions of June's memories he stresses, apart from the fact that due to her progressive illness her memory is at times unreliable, that how she remembers Bernard is affected by her attitude to him formed during the years of their separation:

The ideas by which June lived her life were also the ones by which she measured the distance between Bernard and herself, and if these ideas were powered by a pursuit of the truth, then part of that truth was a bitterness, a disappointment in love.³²

Above all, the Bernard of her memories will always be the person who betrayed her and whom she misjudged, whom she used to believe to be a different, better person. McEwan does not spare Bernard's memory either – when confronted with Bernard's depiction of the unforgettable impression from their encounter with the young French war widow near a stone monument with half a dozen fresh names inscribed on it (one of the few instances when he shows his capacity for genuine emotion) June claims she does not remember any such woman at all. Moreover, when Jeremy later visits the place he finds no names on the monument, only Latin quotations. Although the ability to recollect the past is crucial for our awareness of who we are and where we come from, what actually happened remains, no matter how much we resist accepting this, irretrievable due to the very nature of our memory. As all accounts of the past are inevitably partly fiction, Jeremy understands that the only way in which June and Bernard's versions can be reconciled is in the form of a story.

The contingent and discontinuous facts of the past become intelligible only when woven together as stories. [...] History

32 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 43.

is persuasive because it is organized by and filtered through individual minds, not in spite of that fact; subjective interpretation gives it life and meaning.³³

While writing down June's memories Jeremy is made to contemplate the relationship between reality and fiction, between what really happened and its narrative version in the form of a story. Faced with the challenge of being an outsider recording and making "retroactive sense of an overcrowded memory" he feels "both beguiled and skeptical" and understands that it would be impossible to avoid employing certain story-telling mechanisms in order to make his account both credible and alluring. Yet he remains determined to accomplish his project of making a precise, matter-of-fact documentary although he finds June's black dogs "too comforting."³⁴ Their almost mythological non-existence makes them easy material for a creative reworking. In his illusory attempts to confront June and Bernard's memories in order to arrive at one objectively irrefutable truth, Jeremy becomes a metaphor for the *naďve* writer who believes in a clear borderline separating history and fiction and in the existence of an objective, universal truth. Having suffered the tormenting futility of searching for points of concurrence in two significantly divergent perspectives, Jeremy eventually quits. He changes his initial plan to one of fictionally reinventing the two protagonists' lives so he can juxtapose their ideas and memories and transform them into a seamless narrative: "Rather than remain the passive victim of my subjects' voices, I had to come to pursue them, to re-create Bernard and June."³⁵ Jeremy cannot walk the same path as June and Bernard once did because of the prickly shrubs that have overgrown it. Like Briony in *Atonement*, Jeremy comes to accept that not only does the past lie beyond any complete retrieval, but also that a writer's control over other people's lives does not exceed his or her narrative, that it does not reach beyond the limits of the realm of imagination.

Human nature is all we've got to work with

The motif that permeates the often 'biting' divagations of *Black Dogs* is that of self-discovery. All the three central protagonists as well as Jeremy and June, especially as they are more susceptible to self-scrutiny than Bernard, arrive at crucial discoveries concerning their personal lives through their effort to recollect and make sense of their pasts, namely recognising the affinity between the private and official sides of human existence. June in time comes to understand that any project of public involvement in the name of helping others must always start from the initiator's inner well-being. She points out that

without a revolution of the inner life, however slow, all our big designs are worthless. The work we have to do is with ourselves if we're ever going to be at peace with each other. I'm not saying it'll happen. There's a good chance it won't. I'm saying it's our only chance.³⁶

33 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 218.

34 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 50.

35 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 123.

36 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 172.

Without a thorough growth towards a balanced and independent personality any such charitable intention turns into an empty gesture of only political significance, an end in itself. McEwan emphasises the correlation between private responsibility and public involvement in which the first necessarily conditions the success of the latter, while their reversed causality does more harm than good. Jeremy perceives the relationship between official and private history from a different perspective when he wonders "at all the world historical and personal forces, the huge and tiny currents that had to align"³⁷ to make his life what it has been and what it is like. He realises that there are forces, both devastating and productive, for instance June's black dogs, that lie beyond our control and therefore we tend to attribute their meaning based on how they affect the domain of our personal experience. Paradoxical situations thus might appear when a tragic historical moment has a beneficial effect upon certain individuals' lives.

As in all McEwan's works, in *Black Dogs* the ethical content is "embedded in disturbing fictions, in which a narrator may take up a position that is dubious or depraved".³⁸ The novel, however, occupies a distinctive position among them, as it can be understood as a crucial link between his earlier and later novels. In many respects it anticipates his most acclaimed mature novels that exemplify what Tamás Bényei denotes as the postmodern "tradition of the psychological novel by virtue of the psychological and ethical relevance of the speech situation that they present."³⁹ Though relatively small in scale, the novel explores a number of themes typical of its author's mature works, but, most of all, through its symbolic meaning framework *Black Dogs* signals McEwan's new central theme – what it takes to be a human being. "Human nature, the human heart, the spirit, the soul, consciousness itself – call it what you like – in the end, it's all we've got to work with. It has to develop and expand, or the sum of our misery will never diminish."⁴⁰ Like Briony Tallis in *Atonement* and Edward Mayhew in *On Chesil Beach*, June and Jeremy make a discovery that is age-old yet always vital for the successful formation of personality – that the true value of all our acts consists in how they affect and relate to other people. Despite its bleak concluding paragraph and the recurrent motif of violence, the novel does express an optimistic belief in love as the redeeming force in human experience.

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37 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 173.

38 Dominic Head, *Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 258.

39 Tamás Bényei, "The novels of Graham Swift: Family Photos," in *Contemporary British Fiction* ed. Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham, and Philip Tew (London: Polity Press, 2003), 41.

40 McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 172.

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