

READING HUMANITY BEYOND THE SPY DISCOURSE IN IAN MCEWAN'S *THE INNOCENT*

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Abstract. The article interprets Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* (1989) as a fictional illustration of the concept of humanity understood as a sum of universal features and activities of the human species (e.g. curiosity, feelings, initiation, recreation) and, at the same time, as the novel's central provider of significance. In the light of the spy discourse, the analysis points out the human constants in the characters' lives in terms of psychology and behaviour, shedding light on the historical contexts in which they become visible. The study centres around *Berlin*, the stylistic support for the author's characterial explorations, and the intersection point of the book's main thematic interests: espionage, war, romance.

Keywords: spy, discourse, city, Berlin, humanity, universality

1. Introduction

An outstanding contemporary British novelist, Ian McEwan distinguishes himself as a writer displaying an impressive eclecticism of themes and motifs: he takes the reader from politics or history to psychology, from the Romantic landscape to sexuality, from the macabre to ecological concerns. The diversity of such authorial perspectives seems to be also reflected in the related criticism, which oscillates from form (Dominic Head) to content (Peter Childs, Richard Brown), identifying both elements of continuity and of discontinuity in McEwan's fiction. Introducing political subjects, such novels as *The Innocent* (1989), *Black Dogs* (1992), *Atonement* (2001) or *Sweet Tooth* (2012), are often interpreted in the light of a specific historical context seen as the basic source of

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significance. Typically reflecting the postmodernist parameters of derision and fragmentation, McEwan's works cannot, however, avoid a general sense of history as continuity and atemporality. Marina Mackay, for instance, interestingly detects in *Black Dogs* and *Atonement* the coexistence of pessimistic anti-humanism with a humanist approach to war horrors (2009: 161). Viewed in their entirety, the thematic lines of such fictional works manage to render the flow and permanence of generations, of feelings, of narrative itself. History can take on different shapes, McEwan seems to imply, but it is omnipresent and so is human nature.

Finished in 1989, *The Innocent* offers a rather serene, humanly coherent version of *zoon politikon* in comparison to McEwan's subsequent novels. The novel describes Leonard Marnham's complex European experience in the early 1950s, when the young man is co-opted into an Anglo-American espionage operation against the Soviet Union. In fact, the work basically narrates how the intricacies of the political thriller painfully interfere with the hero's love story with the German-born Maria Eckdorf. Thus, it deals consistently with intelligence scenarios, but it also offers sufficient material for an underlying parallel discourse that allows the critical eye to move from the historical-social surface to universal human psychology and behaviour.

Relying on the framework of discourse studies, this article discusses the relevance of the novel's suspenseful narrative in rendering the writer's basic message in *The Innocent* – the image of humanity as a series of manifestations specific to a planetary species. The article's reference point is the spy discourse – the novel's fictional scaffolding analyzed here as literary "narrative" (Jaworski and Coupland 1999: 29-30) and, implicitly, as "an individualizable group of statements" in the line of Michel Foucault's communication structures (qtd. in Mills 1997: 6). In terms of literary theory, *The Innocent* can by and large be read as a spy novel, although it also contains elements of detective and crime novels in keeping with the general "thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry" (Boltanski 2014: xvi). Moreover, the discourse of espionage is supplemented by, for instance, the discourse of politics, war or love. However, among all these, the discourse of the city apparently stands central to the book, and serves as a gate to the all-encompassing discourse of humankind. In this sense, *Berlin* acquires a metaphorical significance within the spy plot, and

reveals to us the novel's guiding concept: the quality of being human. Specifically, humanity is here explored as a set of reactions and traits characteristic of human beings on an aspatial and atemporal plane. One can consider, in this sense, a typology including the learner, the traveller, the player, the lover, the friend, and, last but not least, the soldier.

2. Between Historical Berlin and a Discourse of Contemporary Ordinariness

In McEwan's *The Innocent*, the Berlin of the 50s does not simply stand for the main setting of a politically informed spy novel. It does not refer just to the European city divided between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union. It relies on complex spatial-temporal coordinates—Germany, England, the U. S. A., on the one hand; World War II, the Cold War, the Fall of the Berlin Wall, on the other hand. Moreover, *Berlin* represents the intersection point of a multitude of people, feelings, attitudes, memories or mere ideas which take Marnham, who “had spent the war with his granny in a Welsh village” (McEwan 1998: 5), on a complex journey through European history and through his own psychology. *The Innocent* apparently fits in with the idea that “from its inception, the detective genre has been intrinsically engaged with epistemological formations [...] produced in encounters between nations, between races and cultures” (Pearson and Singer 2009: 3). In McEwan's Berlin, the war memories, the secret corridor, the intelligence equipment, the spying game itself become all the elements of the city trope that the British writer puts forward for describing his protagonist's initiation and growth—two processes significantly achieved outside Leonard's home country and in the presence of people belonging to various national and cultural backgrounds. One can thus regard McEwan's cosmopolitan *Berlin* as an extended metaphor for the characters' emotional, intellectual and relational evolution, as an interface between historical transience and human permanence.

In the neighbourhood of Berlin, one becomes acquainted with the secret subterranean corridor that the Anglo-American intelligence services were preparing in 1955 for espionage purposes against the Soviet Union. Thus, a real-life historical fact, Operation Gold, supplies

the main fictional figures (the British Marnham, the American Glass, the German Maria) with a piece of their political present, not only with war memories. The protagonists find themselves in one of the incipient phases of the Cold War, being summoned to serve, each in their own way, the interests of the party to which they belong primarily by birth. The political-detective plot unfolds according to the expectations of the ordinary reader of the espionage genre, constructing a consistent series of what Karlheinz Stierle would call “stereotypes of imagination and emotion” (qtd. in Laurie-Fletcher 2019: 13). Accordingly, the narrative scheme develops coherently: the interception tunnel is set going; the Anglo-American common enterprise is divided between collaboration and mutual suspicion; the mysterious George Blake proves to be a Soviet spy; the secret operation is finally exposed; the Anglo-American plan turns out to have been a masquerade as the Russian party had been informed of their enemies’ operations long before.

However, until the end of the novel, this entire political context does not demonstrate a solid significance *per se*; it describes the characters’ identities at a universal, non-national scale. By his observation that “[c]old wars between the sexes, between ideologies, between reader and writer, literature and politics and fiction and reality have been the stuff of McEwan’s fiction from the 1970s” (2019: 88), Richard Brown testifies to the existence of a narrative pattern of McEwan’s tendency to extract the abstractness of events to the detriment of the materiality of history. In this sense, the political Berlin in *The Innocent* appears as a repository of people and situations that provide access to generally human experiences and meanings, to that “which binds us, our common nature, [that] is what literature has always, knowingly and helplessly, given voice to” (McEwan 2005: 19). As the title itself suggests, *The Innocent* is about initiation – into different types of human contact – and makes a case for universally human values, such as love and friendship. At a closer look, the international context in which the action is placed is, to a large extent, instrumental, revealing the writer’s preoccupation with human responses that transcend the particular time and space of the novel.

It is worth noticing that Marnham’s first exploratory contact with Berlin is motivated by quiet human impulses. Once he arrived at his new apartment in Platanenallee, “hunger and curiosity drove him out of

doors" (McEwan 1998: 4). The young man will primarily experience the new non-English urban space through the prism of the universal traveller's psychology, the faint echoes of his political memory appearing as part of the ordinary biography of post-war population: "It was hard not to feel boyish pleasure in the thousand pounders that had lifted roofs off buildings, blown their contents away to leave only facades with gaping windows" (5). The hero's political conscience is not developed into a consistent approach to the foreign otherness; the war years are briefly evoked as part of a child's taste for adventure, and the hero's contact with his multinational present is described as a rich display of objects and places, without significant authorial examination of the character's reception of his new environment through the lens of espionage rules.

Ironically, Berlin, a place meant as a communication centre with a political purport, "a legacy of the old Imperial control" (19), is finally transformed into the location of universal human feelings, the really efficient links that manage to create a map of a-continental human relations. As Glass, Marnham's American guide, suggests in the second chapter of the novel, the book offers an indirect deconstruction of the intelligence content of the entire story: "I'll tell you. It's all political [...] You think we don't have amplifiers of our own? It's for politics that we're letting you in on this" (22). The spy discourse is basically conceived as incredulity towards political narrative, to echo Lyotard's famous syntagm, but the epic scheme is apparently recuperated towards the end of the novel thanks to a sentimental reunion episode. Two men, an Englishman and an American, together with a German woman form the essential trio of the story, and the relation between them, as revealed in the last chapter of the book, defies time and political regimes: they have remained in one another's memory on account of emotional experiences. Politics is essentially a sterile project, a façade for a reality hidden in a spy novel illustratively "riven with ambiguities and contradictions" (Pepper 2000: 34) due to the political-human tandem.

The dissolution of the political relevance of the spy discourse is also detectable in secondary characters such as the Soviet Russians, whose chasing of non-Communists in post-war Germany is depicted as an almost mechanical act reducible to sheer humanity: "Every time we met them, these Russian officers, they looked so fucking unhappy [...]"

They didn't even enjoy behaving like assholes. That's why I could never really hate them. This was policy. This crap was coming from the top" (McEwan 1998: 32). The Europe after World War II is, the novel suggests, populated by superfluous political truths, but the flesh-and-blood people remain there, their human essence meaning more than ideologies. As David Malcolm points out, "the cold war is rarely seen in the novel as a clear-cut crusade against evil, but rather as an enormously complicated boys' game" (2002: 17). Created by a circumstantial political background, the human response in *The Innocent* is not meant as a relevant piece of local history, but as a means of projecting the cosmopolitanism of the scene onto the entire world, and of universalizing humankind as a species. While confessing at some point in the novel that "that's why I'm always watching out for a nice Russian girl to take back home to Cedar Rapids" (McEwan 1998: 127), Glass, the American, seems to offer us the very illustration of this idea: he outlines a half-humorous image of irrelevant politics, and hints at the eternal return to everydayness. This is not a time for heroes, the novel seems to imply, this is a time for stories about anybody's life.

Along similar lines, the discourse of the Berlin people does not preserve the appearance of war. The return to routine conversation topics connotes the revival of a fundamental dimension of their global inscription into the generally human: "He had enough German now to know that the locals hunched at their tables were not discussing genocide. It was the usual pub grumble – the late spring, the government, the quality of the coffee" (94). The described atmosphere is thus ordinary, predictable, and, above all, universal, referring not necessarily to German, English or Russian ways of relating to the human other, but to worldwide communication practices. Comparably, the game is another omnipresent value that brings together people belonging to opposite political sides, as happens in the highly suggestive description of the Americans' pastime habits: "The Vopos over by the cemetery watched the games through field glasses, and when a long ball sailed over the sector boundary they ran forward willingly and lobbed it back. The players cheered, and the Vopos waved good-naturedly" (97). Among espionage objectives, sport offers a universal language, and the human capacity for empathy has now the opportunity to fully manifest itself.

3. Exploring the Concept of Initiation

At the end of the novel, one realizes that the characters share reference points such as feelings, curiosity, memories or, simply, pastimes. However, the most important motif in the sphere of human commonality seems to be initiation, an all-encompassing concept applicable to the members of any nation. Interestingly, the state of innocence – be it bodily, social, political – is not dissipated in the male protagonist's home country, England, but in a cosmopolitan milieu which connects him to a larger human mass and, also, apart from the recent history of the continent, to the history of mankind. Marnham's experience of foreignness seems to indirectly suggest the universality of the codes ensuring humans' inscription into the rhythm of their own species: ignorance – experience – maturation. In the light of the concept of innocence as "erasure of history" (McEwan 1990, Interview), *Berlin* becomes cumulatively a trope for general notions such as learning, experience, development, and communication.

Symbolically, *Berlin* can be seen as a rite of passage, as the point where a character's former state critically reaches a new stage and faces transformation. Beyond the local political context, Marnham's initiation is primarily erotic and psychological – a situation that introduces him, once more, into the realm of the universally human. To the male protagonist, the relationship to Maria Eckdorf represents the descent into unexplored sections of his body and of his psyche, and the German capital merely serves as a background for a thrilling episode of a *Bildungsroman*. The characters do not seem to be politically involved in an authentic manner. Like Marnham, an automaton in the subterranean corridors of the spy operation, Maria is placed outside a substantial political creed: she is "cleared" (McEwan 1998: 107), and in war time she "had been a terrified civilian, cowering from the nightly bombing" (121).

To a certain extent, Marnham's foreign world is perceived almost phenomenologically, as an unquestionable given, and one cannot detect a militant substratum in any of the two lovers' acts. Aware of the fact that Maria "had been liberated by the invasion of Europe, not crushed" (78), Marnham still indulges in his "soldier fantasy" (108) of rape which can be transparently decoded as the voice of the unconscious. A psychoanalytical perspective appears to be more convenient for understanding the role of

Berlin in the hero's scrutinizing new facets of the world: the war imagery provides him with a metaphorical support for the spectacle of his psyche, for his newly risen atavistic mechanism. Thus, the experience of continental Europe fulfills a quasi-stylistic function. It does not localize the individual, nor does it particularize him. Instead, the Berlin in the hero's consciousness is instrumental on an emotional plane: it does not construct a politically motivated spy discourse, but names the idiosyncrasies of the human species.

In equally human terms, Berlin tells the story of a friendship, that between the British Marnham and the American Glass. A small dispute with a political subject, for instance, is placed under the sign of Glass's reassuring remarks, rendering Marnham's nationality immaterial: "When I say 'you', I'm talking about your government. I'm glad *you're* here" (113). To the young and inexperienced Englishman, Glass represents the best illustration of the friend in need who speaks up for him and who even saves him in the intricate case of the accidental murder, offering the model of an unconventional human bond that can transcend years. "He [Glass] always spoke very fondly of you" (225), Maria will confess three decades later. The relation between the two people has obviously been cemented by their human-to-human interaction, outside the undercover nature of their meetings. McEwan does not detail the characters' affective motivation, their ethical monologues or their presumptive inner processes; he simply outlines a temporal curve and registers the story of a human link. In terms of novel composition, the author instinctively avoids the trap of a reductive patriotism and offers instead a more comprehensive human perspective, minimizing the dimensions of the political spy discourse.

The young Englishman's social initiation appears to be complete the moment when the political intrigue sustained by the Anglo-American tunnel is finally exposed as a game based on deception and sterile theatricality. The Russians had been informed about the plan long before, but they had entertained the illusion for security reasons. Having lost its reason for being, the whole plan is reduced to a useless form; the spy discourse becomes subject to derision. The collapse of the political seems to be fully confirmed when Marnham arrives at the intelligence base with the two trunks containing fragments of human body, but which were, as the young man pretended, pieces of top-secret equipment. The

protagonist's instinctual act apparently stands for the almost unconscious desire to push forward the human in a brutal, ostentatious way. Although he is aware of the fact that, sooner or later, the traces of his unintentional murder will be discovered, Marnham goes steadily to the base as if in an attempt to confirm an act of defiance that flesh – pure and simple – will finally perform. The symbol of the flesh, prefigured in the early chapters of the novel by Leonard's "meaty" (23) breath or by the box cardboard comparable to "flesh" (41), which reaches its climactic representation in chapter 18, suggests the final response to all the attempts to politically inventory the human material. The use of the flesh image is McEwan's stylistic means to render the immateriality and transitoriness of the political network of human relationships. As intimated by the dialogue between Marnham and Glass, political truth is illusory: "[...] That's quite a secret you're carrying about.'/It really is'" (192). As the two people speak about totally different things, i.e. intelligence material and the remnants of a murder, the Englishman seems to imply that the reality of the flesh-and-blood individual is the ultimate halt of any political form of human representation.

Symbolized by "flesh", the characters' human quality is thirty years later translated into non-political relations – love and friendship. Marnham's initiation apparently has long-term effects. In time, the characters are no longer connected by the espionage mechanism or the terrifying experiences in a post-war Western Germany; instead, in accordance with the structure of a traditional romance, they have preserved the emotional link that they shared at some point of their Berlin adventure. The Berlin Wall which will soon be torn down, according to the anticipatory last lines of the novel, predictably symbolizes the ephemeral character of any political view; it is significantly doubled by the written proof of Glass's and Maria's lasting feelings that connect their Americanness to the Europeanness abandoned in their British friend, and in the city of their youth. Revisited by Marnham three decades later, Berlin strikes the foreigner as ungraciously cosmopolitan, respiring the premonitory signs of the German reunification, and indirectly speaking about its universality. Considered the best place "to understand her [Maria's] letter" (227-228), the city intimates the male protagonist's connection to those foreign places, the chance to overcome geography by purely human modes of feeling

and understanding, the “[p]ossibilities for community” that Mark Ledbetter (qtd. in Childs, 2006: 81) reads beyond McEwan’s dynamic body poetics.

The Innocent obviously illustrates Dominic Head’s assertion that McEwan’s “works betray an ongoing search for systematic ways of understanding the world, as a defense against contingency” (2019: 6-7). By its mental and emotional dimensions, initiation provides access to an underlying concept of humanity that guarantees the novel’s structural coherence. In spite of the partially sustainable impression – in the line of postmodernism – of a conglomerate of loosely related genres, themes and motifs (history, politics, espionage, psychology, mystery, romance), the novel does not record the death of a narrative, but outlines a happy-end love story by reuniting – imaginatively at least – the main characters, Leonard and Maria, after almost three decades. By the end of the book, the author offers a sample of anti-postmodernism, making the characters’ human traits converge all into a levelling form of humanity situated beyond the history and the geography of a spy story. The two protagonists are now on two different continents – Europe and America; their national extraction is now irrelevant and so is their physical location. Predictably, they are brought together by the Berlin of their past, namely by common experiences and affections. Memory and feeling act as narrative connectors, by contrast with what Linda Hutcheon confirms as postmodernist provisionality (1988: 6). Moreover, the sobriety of the décor – Berlin’s life in ruins, be it past or present – does not allow for the postmodernist exhibitionism of a derided romance, making room for a rather stable narrative scheme of reconciliation.

4. Conclusion

In *The Innocent*, the spectacle of international espionage creates a supplementary level of significance devoted to the people’s inner meanders and their purely human connections. By enlarging Marnham’s evolution scene from native England to Germany and America, the writer revalues the political content of the novel, and further develops the narrative potential of the setting and of the characters. All the elements pointing to a humanized substratum of the spy adventure

called *Berlin* compose the multifaceted spatial metaphor that McEwan conceives in order to better express the characters' connection to the common traits of mankind. To put it short, *Berlin* stands for knowledge acquired at a continental and intercontinental level whereas the discourse of the city finally reveals a consistent discourse of humanity. As one can see, for instance, in chapter 15 where, significantly, "American songs were what marked out the weeks and months for Leonard and Maria now" (McEwan 1998: 123), the people's existence is a plea for understanding humanity at a global scale by means of ordinary little foibles of ordinary people. The book is not about the dominance of one state or another, nor is it about the efficiency of the spying system. The personages are not there on account of their nationality, but to offer the lesson of their sharing human criteria, of their being connected to a common mental and affective network. After saluting the debris logic of postmodernist awareness, McEwan's *The Innocent* seems to put forward a new sense of narrative stability thanks to its literary rendition of the concept of humanity.

One can thus be a Berliner, with McEwan, by acting according to the universal and universalizing principles of the human code rather than by observing an artificially conceived political pattern. In this sense, one should think of the metropolis in *The Innocent* as a trivialized, yet profoundly human fabric, bearing in mind one of the characters' half-humorous confessions: "... I know that seven o'clock of a winter's morning when I'm getting dressed for work, I don't think too hard about building a new Europe" (McEwan 1998: 126). Between deconstructing the political espionage plot and (re)constructing the concept of humanity, McEwan artfully manages to bestow coherence on the narrative project of *The Innocent*. By discovering and exploring their human essence, his characters defy the risk of becoming actors in a mere historical tale, and inscribe themselves into continuity.

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