THE PLEASURE OF PROSE WRITING VS. PORNOGRAPHIC VIOLENCE. AN INTERVIEW WITH IAN McEWAN

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Rosa González - You started as a writer of short stories, but you haven't published any more since your two collections of the 70's, and in fact your novels are getting longer. Doesn't the short form interest you any more?

Ian McEwan - I'm writing a short novel at the moment, but no, I haven't written short stories since the 70's. They belong in another stage of my life. I felt they had a function for me for a time, they were a kind of laboratory for me, they allowed me to try out different things, to discover myself as a writer. They were really the means by which I sort of kick started myself into the consciousness of writing. I expect one day I'll start writing them again, but at the moment the novel is what I find myself doing.

R.G. - But even though your novels are more discursive than your short fiction, they are nevertheless very tightly constructed and they are written in a very precise and controlled prose. Those seem to me to be the essential qualities of the short story. Would you say your style has been shaped by your training as a short story writer?

I.McE. - The thing is my first two novels were extended short stories, and some of the habits of short story writing carried over into writing fiction. But I always felt the most important aspect of the actual business of writing novels is at the level of constructing a sentence, of shaping sentences and shaping paragraphs, and shaping units of chapters and making chapters, you know, and in that hierarchic sense, to take pleasure in the field of prose itself,

R.G. - So the length doesn't matter...

I.McE. - No, I rather dislike the tradition in English novel writing of just throwing anything down, which I think is the case. People feel, well it's 400 pages, no particular sentence matters, or only certain scenes matter, and everything else is just sort of spoken as it were into the page, they take no pleasure in meaning.

R.G. - Do you have any literary model? For example, you have been considered as an inheritor of Kafka...

I.McE. - I don't think I am Kafka's inheritor. All kinds of foolish and flattering things are written about writers, and they constantly get overpraised; it's simply a hazard of the profession, and you have to learn to live with it. Kafka has been very important to me though, he was the writer who enabled me to begin writing. His work, which ran against, in such opposition to, the mainstream of English fiction at the time I started writing -and this is paradoxal given the claustrophobic labyrinthine nature of Kafka's imagination- his writing offered me a fantastic freedom, a freedom from the English novel really, with its obsessions of social documentary, of historical specificness, and interest in many things that I had no interest in and knew nothing about, like class mobility, the nuance of class in England, furniture, what kind of print cloth characters were wearing in their many-folded skirts and so on. In other words, the English novel seemed to me like a very dusty, dark, overfurnished room, its fabrics all mothy, and in Kafka there seemed to be a marvellous clarity, simply because his characters could be any time in any place, and that seemed to me an enormous freedom. The other thing that I admired in him was a fantastic humour, which I think is undercelebrated and not sufficiently acknowledged. Sometimes a black humour, but still a funniness, the funniness of strangeness, that I liked a great deal. I certainly don't see myself as any kind of inheritor, I feel that Kafka is, as far as I'm concerned, the most important and the first modern writer, the kind of writer that could not have existed in the 19th century, whereas I can somehow feel that Henry James could, Conrad straddles both worlds, even Joyce, in a way, draws something from the 19th century, but there is something irreducibly modern, definitely modern about Kafka. I think many writers have one author who opens the door, they are not necessarily models, I mean, I wrote some pastiche of Kafka, after reading his story called "Lecture to an Academy", which is narrated by an ape. I then wrote a story narrated by an ape, an ape who is living with a woman who is so busy trying to write her second book that she is no longer paying any attention to the ape. Now, I was trying to write my second book and perhaps Kafka was my ape and I was sort of living him and there are all kinds of other little tributes or thefts from Kafka in my early work but since then I've probably gone as far as possible away from his work in my own, and in no way see myself as an inheritor.

R.G. - Even though in a sense you were very lucky because your first book of stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) was an immediate success, it also

established you as a controversial writer. Do you feel that this reputation has affected your later work negatively?

I.McE. - Yes, I have found it very difficult, due to the insistence of certain newspapers to sensationalize what I do, and to portray me as some kind of psychopath. And once a kind of field of meaning, of expectation, is set up round my work, people then read it in this way. And even when, say in *The Child in Time*, there isn't this element, then *all* people write about is the absence of it. So, yes, I have a problem with my reputation and I constantly give readings to try to oppose it, because I think that my work isn't this sort of monochrome of violence and horror. But, I don't know, writers just grumble about their press all the time, and that's my particular grumble.

R.G. - Your last novel, *The Innocent*, was summarized in a *Sunday Times* review (6 May 1990) as "Sex, Death and Hidden Perversions", obviously a most biased judgement, although there is in this novel a latent violence, a mixture of love and horror...

I.McE. - Well, I don't undertake to write about these troubling things lightly, nor do I do so in the hope that it will get me more readers, in fact I think it has got me fewer. But our society is violent, and the writer has the responsibility of reflecting this violence and also the violence within each of us, without falling back on the pornographic violence you find nowadays in many books and films. The important thing is not what is described but why it is described, and I'm interested in how the violent impulse grows inside ourselves and makes us capable of such acts of violence. In *The Innocent* I wanted to explain how a normal person, caught up in a critical situation, can become extremely violent, and the most obvious example of violence is war -the protagonist's mind is full of images of the Second World War-. On the other hand, I also wanted to show the brutality man can achieve by comparing the dismemberment of a corpse to the dismemberment of a city: the bomb-devastated Berlin of the post-war.

R.G. - Why did you choose this particular setting, and what was the point of departure of the novel?

I.McE. - It is strange for me to reflect on the beginning of this book -which actually started in the Soviet Union- at this moment, during the very troubled times that President Gorbachev's reforms have entered. When I went there in 1987 with a small delegation of anti-nuclear people called European Nuclear Disarmament, we met the full force of Perestroika before it was even really written down: Perestroika was then just a few months

old. We were there because we wanted to take advantage of Perestroika to persuade the Soviet authorities to stop persecuting members of their own anti-nuclear groups. This all seems ancient history now but up until about 1987-88, because the Soviet Union's official policy was peace, they therefore felt that there was absolutely no room for any individuals to talk about peace, they had to do so through the channels of the proper committees and organizations. And we were there to make contact with the unofficial groups, the Russians who dared speak about Russian weapons. Whereas the Soviet Union only spoke about American weapons, we wanted to talk about both and we were trying to bring these two groups together. So we met policy makers in the institutes and in particular in the Institute of American and Canadian Affairs and we were treated, I think, to a most extraordinary trailer to what was going to happen in Europe in the next two or three years. These people, who if they were in Washington would be called foreign policy intellectuals -they weren't actually government people, but they were the people who wrote out the policy options for the Kremlin- were talking of the most extraordinary things, one of which was that Eastern Europe had to go its own way and that the Soviet Union would begin to withdraw unilaterally troups from East Germany, and that it no longer saw in its own interests to put down any kind of anti-Communist political movement. When we asked, in our excitement, where we could read these things, they said "none of us would write these things down because if Mr Gorbachev goes and someone else comes along, and these things are written down with our names at the bottom, then probably we'll lose our jobs." And for that reason the excitement was simply what people were saying but not actually speaking, and it wasn't until President Gorbachev addressed the UN -I think it was the end of 1988- that the true force of this change became apparent. Now, I never imagined I was going to write a novel, but I left Moscow full of the sense that the Cold War was coming to an end. It so happened that three weeks later I found myself in Berlin, which I hadn't visited in a long time, and I did many of the things that tourists do: go to Potsdamer Platz and stand on a wooden platform and look over what was once a very busy thoroughfare and is now just raked sand full of mines and automatic guns, and began to think that soon this too might disappear. By soon I thought some 10 years -that seemed pretty soon to me- and so, without really thinking about it very carefully, I began to plan a novel about the Cold War, not the end of the Cold War but the height, or the depths of the Cold War, in 1955. I was looking for a story, a true historical story, and for a long time I thought it was going to be the story of someone trying to escape from the East, but then I read about this extraordinary tunnel dug by the Americans and the British in collaboration, a very daring project, a tunnel that ran 400 metres under the boundary of

the Russian sector in order to tap telephone lines, telegraph lines, in the Soviet sector, that connected with Moscow. What attracted me about this tunnel were two things: one was that the Russians knew about the tunnel even before the Americans had started to dig it and yet didn't do anything about it because they didn't want to endanger the position of the spy who had told them, in other words, had the Russians diverted a lot of radio traffic away from these lines then the Americans and the British would've guessed that there must be someone giving their secrets away. Though I never really thought about spying -I don't have any particular interest in it- I thought what a curiously useless thing spying is, what an oddly circular, self-contained, self-referential system it is, and then I began to read more serious books about spying, and I began to see that you have to look very hard for any country that has ever seriously changed its foreign policy on the basis of information acquired through spying. Spying is simply a move and countermove within this closed system, and in many ways is analogous to forms of literary modernism -it's what came to my mind-. What also came to my mind is that the Cold War is a fantastic misuse of intellectual, scientific and human resource, to make this completely worthless but intricate structure. So, I realized that the tunnel was the thing that interested me most, and so, because I'd chosen the tunnel I therefore was in the year 1955 and this threw up some interesting things too for an Englishman. By 1955 it was quite clear to at least half, and I'd say the better half, the more intelligent half, of the British population, that the British Empire's days were now over -this was one year before the Suez crisis, which was something of a watershed in British foreign policy-. And the baton, as it were, of empire was being quite self-consciously handed over to the USA, in fact, the consoling myth for many Britons was that we were Greece to their Rome, that we were the older mature empire, the Americans were the brasher, more powerful empire, but what we lacked in economic and military power we made up for in a certain kind of wisdom, and that the Americans were now taking over. And it seemed too that 1955 was a year of perhaps the first flowering of the means of the Pax Americana. As empires go, I'd say, the American empire was the least vicious in some respects because its power and its influence extended not, in the first instance at least, through the sword but through other means, and 1955 saw fairly attractive things in a way compared to mass violence and genocide. Pop music, movies, fast food -the word teenager had been invented in 1953, quite a recent invention- and I felt that for an Englishman abroad in Europe, one of his major encounters should be really with an American, and so it is that this young man who is at the centre of *The Innocent*, Leonard Marnham, goes abroad for the first time in his life and is a rather unconfident young man, unconfident in something like the way his country

is a little unconfident. In a previous generation an Englishman abroad, say the Englishmen of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, would've felt rather like the English were a superior race, that abroad was an inferior place but an interesting one worth visiting. But Evelyn Waugh's hero can afford to look down his nose on the Americans; their habits, especially the Californians' are rather extraordinarily extravagant but fundamentally empty and very silly. For Leonard Marnham the Americans represent maybe some point which he'd like to attain, a world he'd rather like to enter and much of the novel is concerned with Leonard overcoming his distate for rock and roll and beginning to like freezing cold Coca Cola, accepting that grown men might drink chocolate milk, accepting the paradox that this very powerful nation seems also to have a culture which is the culture of the nursery: the food, the drink, the music, all seem somewhat childish to a serious Englishman, but Leonard bends to it.

R.G. - One of the recurrent themes in your work is gender identity and the ambivalent attitude of men towards women, a mixture of fear and at the same time envy, as reflected for example in the many instances of transvestism in your books. Could you elaborate on this idea?

I.McE. - I don't know if I can. I mean, my novels, the work, is the elaboration. Yes, I mean, the difficulty of understanding between men and women has always been one of the prime materials of the novel from the very beginning, and the relationship, I think, has been the substance of the novel, or at least one of its strands, the other being the picaresque, the adventure, and I think there are both comic and tragic possibilities for writers, in the difficulty that men and women have in satisfying themselves in relationships, of having them, or of feeling free in them, of being honest...

R.G. - You have referred to men as being afraid of women. Recently you mentioned it in front of a Spanish audience, and there was a lot of head shaking and frowning from the male side.

I.McE. - I think, probably the men's insistence on power, in relationships or in society, is based on fear; fear maybe of been engulfed, fear that might have its roots in childhood, or at one point having been dependent on a woman, in the form of the mother. But I mean, I am in a sense only airing a very conventional view, I think, of psychoanalysis and its traditions, especially from Freud, of identifying fear, but I can't see what else it could be that produces so many rapes, so much violence, if there wasn't something in women that men identify as a threat to their existence. So, I think that the head shaking and the frowning when I say that is inevitable. I think you

have to look quite deep inside yourself for this fear, I don't think it is an instinct men actually feel, what they feel is often irritation or aggression.

R.G. - Another recurrent theme in your work is the sexually confused world of adolescents, which is not a subject that has been much explored in British fiction. Why do you think this is so, and why are you so interested in it?

I.McE. - Well, I suppose it is because when I began writing I was twenty-two and the material that forced itself upon me was my own recent past. And I think adolescence is a difficult transitional time, it's a kind of rite of passage: it involves on the one hand fantastic confusion, economic dependence, coupled with a kind of adult capability to wish to explore the world. And there is a sort of outsidely (sic) quality to adolescents too and a very heightened degree of self-consciousness, so they make, in fictional terms, perfect narrators: they stand outside and yet they long to take part. And my adolescence was painful for its rather empty quality, I felt the world was passing me by, and I think something of that quality worked itself into my fiction.

R.G. - You last two novels have moved from the claustrophobic world of private trauma to the wider world of public and political matters. Is this because of your own personal engagement with such public issues as antinuclear campaigns, or the pressure-group *Charter 88*?

I.McE. - Yes, I mean, I've always been interested in politics to some extent. I never found before any adequate means to pour it into my work, and I wonder if the reason why I wrote an Oratorio is because I felt the novel was a very bad, unsuitable form, for such pressing moral concerns, that what would've come out would've been a very bad novel. Also, perhaps, just a growing confidence and finding out the ways of dealing with this material. But it's a mine field, really, if you set about writing fiction with a clear sense to persuade people of a certain point of view, I think you often find you write a very poor novel, and you cramp the field, you deny yourself the possibility of opening an investigation or free inquiry, which I think is the great reedeming quality of the novel.

R.G. - Nevertheless, whereas your early work offers a rather bleak vision of the human condition, your last two novels end on a much more hopeful note. How would you account for this shift in outlook?

I.McE. - Well, I've obviously changed over the years. I think when you are young you can afford pessimism more, although it still stays with me. I

think as you get older you find yourself searching for what is going to give meaning, or structure, or value to your life. When you are young, you just take things exactly as you feel, you feel you've got infinite time. We are happy to see that revolution on the street; as you get older you begin to doubt what will come out of that revolution on the street, and also you might own a bit of the street by then, and you don't want it broken. So, in a way I think it is for me a kind of emotional process. I've also had children; I think children force upon you something of a search for value, and you then have a stake in the world, an urge, you want it to continue, and you look hard for those things that you think will help it continue, and that is bound to make you at least fantasize, imagine those things like trust and good communication with people, and value in your way in life, and this inevitably comes through in your fiction.

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