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## Bringing the Past to Heel: History, Identity and Violence in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

... it is only through knowledge of its history that a society can have knowledge of itself. As a man without a memory and self-knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory (or more correctly, without recollection) and self-knowledge would be a society adrift.

- Arthur Marwick<sup>1</sup>

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

- Karl Marx<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Walk the aisles of most bookshops or scan the pages of publishers' catalogues and one thing becomes clear: history is big business. At a time when the 'death of reading' has been widely proclaimed, there seems to be a ravenous hunger for popular history and historical fiction. The growing popularity of history may in some sense seem ironic, considering that not all too long ago we were assured that history had 'ended'. A simplistic analysis of the collapse of communism allowed some to giddily proclaim a new post-ideological era.<sup>3</sup> This sense of liberating optimism was only fuelled by strands of postmodern philosophy that had long-since seeped from their academic home through all levels of culture. The defining features of postmodernism are as contested as the date of its emergence; however, the most common include a fundamental distrust of 'metanarratives', a suspicion of the reliability of historical evidence (and memory) and the belief that identity is inherently fragmented and infinitely malleable. Accordingly, postmodern critiques of history (sometimes coming from within the

field itself) have pointed to the dangers of relying upon narrative sources and the impossibility of ever recreating a comprehensive picture of the past as it happened.<sup>4</sup> However, although the critique of the *grands récits* and their replacement by endlessly interpretable micro-histories has been greeted as emancipating – freeing the past as well as the historical imagination which describes it from confining totalising narratives<sup>5</sup> – they have not gone unchallenged. For instance, in *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida eloquently challenges the popular ‘endism’ of the 1990s, questioning not only its novelty but also its analytical (and ethical) value. Far from having been vanquished by a victorious free-market system, the power of Marxism as an ideology (and its historical consequences) resists either forgetting or simplistic forms of *ad fontes* remembering. Coming to terms with Marxism – like any other historical phenomenon – requires a critical memory which is aware of its own historicity (i.e., its being produced by the past which it seeks to master) as well as its inability to pin down the formative, yet always elusive, ghosts which haunt it.<sup>6</sup>

The literary contributions to the postmodern critique of history are no less contested. For Linda Hutcheon, ‘historiographic metafiction’, i.e., literary fictionalisations of the process of writing history, give voice to the ‘unsung many’<sup>7</sup> forgotten by the *grands récits* and present alternative histories that nevertheless defy narrative closure. Showing the writing of history to be a *bricolage* of open-ended possibilities rather than a closed and universally valid account, historiographic metafiction possesses a subversive potential which critics have celebrated at length. Yet, as has been pointed out, there are problems with the postmodern emphasis on subjectivity and the unreliability of historical narration.<sup>8</sup> First, there is nothing particularly new about the insight that all history is to some extent subjective and selective, and much postmodern writing is merely stating the obvious. Second, by privileging the individual example, postmodern historiography often indulges in a historical relativism that fails to take a stand.<sup>9</sup>

Published in 1992, Ian McEwan’s *Black Dogs* critically addresses postmodern notions of history and the self, precisely by employing them in order to show up their limitations.<sup>10</sup> Set

in 1989 – with flashbacks to the period immediately following the Second World War and the 1980s – it depicts the attempt of its protagonist, Jeremy, to recount a personal history (that of his wife’s parents) in the larger historical context of post-war Europe. In the process, he not only constructs his own life story, thus illustrating the role of history in the life of the individual; he also raises more global questions regarding the nature of history. Deeply self-referential, *Black Dogs* draws attention to the subjectivity of the historical process and foregrounds the inevitable selection processes of historiography – what Hayden White has called its ‘emplotment’.<sup>11</sup> If, as such, the novel deserves the label historiographic metafiction, it nonetheless simultaneously questions this literary trend and its underlying assumptions. Driven by his own ghosts, Jeremy’s endeavour is consistent with Derrida’s assertion of the enduring power of the past and the obligation to treat it with respect. More than simply a call to remember, *Black Dogs* also emphasises the moral dimensions of remembering: the inescapability of the past, our responsibility to face it (in the name of the future) and our inevitable failure to ever completely come to terms with it. In the novel, it is particularly in the encounter with violence that moral responsibilities become most weighty, compelling characters to take a stand, act upon their convictions and be accountable for what results.

Our reading of this book is not intended as an intervention into any specific historical debate; it is, above all, a literary analysis in defence of a notoriously provocative author. *Black Dogs* has been seen as evidence of McEwan’s tendency to flee from historical reality into a blissful ahistorical innocence, his pervasive lack of political vision and his uncritical distance from his protagonists and their fates.<sup>12</sup> Although both thematically and formally the novel may warrant such views, we will argue that McEwan not only endorses the individual’s need for a historical storyline but also provides a challenging counter-narrative to an ahistorical critical position pervasive since the end of the Cold War. The epigraphs we have chosen for this article stake out the territory in which our analysis will unfold. As Arthur Marwick points out, history helps both individuals and communities to locate themselves; his stance is an emphatically positive one. Karl Marx emphasises the nightmarish side of this indebtedness to history: as

fundamentally historical beings, humans are haunted by their own pasts and those of their societies. Unable to escape, they are nevertheless obliged to master – to bring to heel – what came before in order to act as moral agents in the present. McEwan's novel reminds the reader of the double-bind framed by these two perspectives without in the process sinking into a resigned pessimism. Although persistently calling up the most repellent spectres haunting modern Europe, *Black Dogs* is a statement about the necessity of history rather than its futility; it is a depiction of humanity's ability to live with rather than escape the weight of the past and an endorsement of the writing of history.<sup>13</sup> It furthermore invites us to realise that our present choices and actions not only cannot diminish the burden of the past but also will inevitably add to its weight in the future.

### Society, History and Self

*Black Dogs*'s engagement with history defines its plot and contributes to its conclusions about the interrelationships among self, society and the past. 'History' in the novel is present in two senses. First, 'history' as *content*: the actual events of human life and the relationships between the individual and the world around him or her. Second, 'history' as a *production process*: the creation not only of particular kinds of historical analyses but also of the historian, in this case, the book's narrator, Jeremy, as, in the late 1980s, he writes a memoir of his wife's parents, Bernard and June Tremaine. In particular, he attempts to explore the single key event that – in politics as well as love – drove them apart: June's encounter, while hiking in the Languedoc countryside immediately after the Second World War, with a pair of massive black dogs which, she is subsequently told, were used by the *Gestapo* to rape women as part of their 'interrogations' and to terrify the population into cooperation. For June, the encounter with the dogs is epiphanic, marking the onset of a spiritual fervour that alienates her from Bernard. In tackling this project, Jeremy reflects upon the interrelationships between personal and political, present and past, violence and responsibility. In the process, he is forced to face his own active participation in a present that will, inevitably, become history. Echoing Marwick's commentary

in one of our epigraphs, *Black Dogs* depicts history as straddling the realms of the personal and the social. The black dogs themselves are potent – albeit differently interpreted – symbols of these interrelationships, functioning simultaneously ‘on a personal, historical and cosmic level’.<sup>14</sup>

In the book, identities are established in reference to social ideologies; world-historical events invade and shape personal life, in ways both terrible and laughable. In the early stages of their relationship, Bernard and June become fervent Communists, idealistically committed to the project of building a new life and new Europe. However, following her encounter with the dogs, June purchases a house in southern France, commits herself to spiritual reflection, and turns her back on the Party. Sceptical of her transformation, Bernard lives alone in Britain, remains a Communist until 1956 and subsequently moves politically toward reformist social democracy. Jeremy is obsessed by the event and its long-term, rippling effects on the Tremaine family. In fact, he even perpetuates this overarching family myth by keeping the truth, of which he is aware, secret until the end of the novel, using the image of the dogs as a means of providing symbolic continuity and a sense of suspense.

By embedding June’s personal experiences within the broader historical context in which they were lived out, Jeremy takes, as Bernard ironically comments, a ‘life and times’ approach (75). For example, while interviewing June, he is fascinated by a photo of her and Bernard from 1946. Taken in front of the British Museum – an institution *for* as well as a monument *of* history – the photo makes recurrent appearances at various points in the book. For Jeremy, it serves as a frozen marker of Bernard’s and June’s starting point, an emblem of their innocence and optimism and a symbol connecting world and personal history: ‘The world is new and at peace, fascism has been the irrefutable evidence of capitalism’s terminal crisis, the benign revolution is at hand, and they are young, just married and in love’ (27). More sceptically, June asks, ‘why should I expect millions of strangers with conflicting interests to get along when I couldn’t make a simple society with the father of my children, the man I’ve loved

and remained married to?’ (53). For her, the failure of the political (the end of state communism) mirrors the failure of the personal (her estrangement from Bernard).

Just as the infiltration of world events into the sphere of individual life is a recurrent theme in the novel, so are individuals’ tendencies to instantly historicize the ‘present’ as it is happening (particularly as a result of the ubiquity of media and real-time observation). In considering a present event, we look back from an imagined future, evaluating what passes before our eyes in terms of its ‘historic’ value. By looking back at Bernard and June at the outset of their lives together, Jeremy mirrors the forward-looking historical awareness he imagines them to have had on the basis of the photograph of Bernard and June in front of the British Museum (139). Both perspectives are structured by a historical sensibility that brings together the personal and political. Bernard and June – as Communists – self-consciously analyse their lives as part of a larger historical process; Jeremy, even without such a politicised historical consciousness, constructs his own narrative according to similar principles. The interconnections between social and individual experience and the intermixing of past, present and future are also apparent in Part Two, as Jeremy’s wife returns from a business trip to the Continent. Jenny’s homecoming coincides with the fall of the Berlin Wall, a public event which literally intrudes upon one of the most intimate aspects of their lives while bestowing historical significance upon their private reunification: ‘Jenny and I were in tears, and when the children came running in to greet her, the little drama of reunion, the hugs and cuddles on the living room carpet, drew poignancy from the joyful events in Berlin – and made Jenny cry outright’ (69-70). Bernard appeals to Jeremy’s ego to convince him to accompany him to Germany. Aghast at the possibility that history might be happening without him (cf. 70), Jeremy looks forward to taking his place on the historical stage and becoming one of the many people ‘converging on Berlin from all over the planet’ (71).

History, in these cases, embroiders individual experience, making it both more attractive and meaningful. Obviously, this process can often be beneficial, helping form

individual identity. However, the apparent self-satisfaction with which Jeremy views his own place in world history when sunk in quiet contemplation at the *bergerie* seems less appealing:

As I occasionally do when I am happy, I thought about the whole pattern, the thumbnail story of my existence from the age of eight until Majdanek, and how I had been delivered. A thousand miles away, in or near one house among all the millions, were Jenny and our four children, my tribe. I belonged; my life was rooted and rich. (122)

As we shall see, Jeremy will realise that his present happiness is, in fact, precarious: the violence that he has elided in appropriating history for his own sense of well-being will return with a vengeance (and will strike much closer to home). His self-congratulatory tone sits uneasily with his reference to the Majdanek concentration camp, where, during a tourist visit in the early 1980s he had fallen in love with his wife. Even the most intimate happiness is not immune to the ghosts haunting Europe, however much these ghosts can make individual lives seem more meaningful.

Calculating though it may be, Jeremy's relationship to history is by no means deviant. As Marwick suggests, history is inherent for individuals and nations in making sense of who they are and where they come from. In the same vein, Jeremy's efforts are presented not merely as a personal eccentricity, but as a human necessity partly driven by the fear of a life without history. When Jeremy visits the terminally ill June in order to interview her for his project, he senses that dread in his mother-in-law. However, Jeremy's interpretation of her momentary confusion upon waking from a brief nap voices, above all, his own terrors: 'We both knew she had peeped into the pit, into a chasm of meaninglessness where everything was nameless and without relation, and it had frightened her. It had frightened both of us. We could not acknowledge this, or rather, I could not until she had' (49). The answer to the experiential void is creating – rather than merely finding – a narrative, specifically historical narrative. The result of this therapeutic method remains partial and precarious. Moreover, although the necessity for



engaging in (and with) history is made clear, the specific tools for and hidden assumptions of understanding it remain elusive.

On the surface, Jeremy, and through him the reader, find themselves confronted with the stark contrast between Bernard and June, apparently triggered by the crucial encounter with the black dogs; the former's engagement with the world and social-democratic politics, the latter's withdrawal from the world to an isolated life steeped in religious mysticism. In Jeremy's words, Bernard and June are 'extremities', 'twin poles'. As such, however, they provide a 'slippery axis' along which his 'unbelief slithers and never comes to rest' (19). Jeremy, then, does not trust the apparent bipolarity projected and pursued by his parents-in-law: 'It will not do to argue that rational thought and spiritual insight are separate domains and that opposition between them is falsely conceived. ...Nor will it do to suggest that both these views are correct. To believe everything, to make no choices, amounts to much the same thing, to my mind, as believing in nothing at all' (20).

However, taking a decision is not necessarily the same thing as merely submitting to a naive belief in objective 'truth'. Although Jeremy is initially driven by an effort to find out what 'really' happened, the evidence he collects is partial, confusing and contradictory, and his subjects themselves are unreliable. For instance, Bernard's and June's recountings of their first sexual experience together vary sharply. Bernard claims that June recalled a different event altogether, leading to an outburst in a taxi while he and Jeremy are approaching the Berlin Wall: 'I'll tell you this. 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 recognize independently of each other. She made patterns, invented myths' (86). Yet, Bernard's powers of self-deception are no less formidable, only he is disarmingly forthright about them. When Jeremy comments on Bernard's long loyalty to the Party, suggesting that he must have 'bent an awful lot of facts', Bernard shrugs and says, 'Of course' (88). A 'scientific', rationalistic approach to life is no more objective, as he readily admits: 'Laboratory work teaches you better than anything how easy it is to bend a result to fit a theory.

It isn't even a matter of dishonesty. It's in our nature—our desires permeate our perceptions' (89).

In different ways, then, and with different levels of consciousness, both Bernard and June are mythmakers, as their different uses of the story of the black dogs indicates. For June, they are real, a 'malign principle' (19) destructively recurrent in human history; for Bernard they may well have been a figment of her imagination (173). But even here, Jeremy realises, the truth of the story is less important than the function of historical storytelling itself. As to the dogs' function in June and Bernard's mythology, Jeremy declares, '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' (50). For this insight to become complete, Jeremy would also have to apply this critique to his own historical work, which is, after all, based almost entirely on the partisan and mythologizing testimony of Bernard and June.

However, although *Black Dogs* takes such a sceptical (and in that sense thoroughly postmodern) view of the historian's ability to fully recapture the past, it nonetheless never completely abandons the notion of historical truth. History is not only shown to be relevant but indeed crucial to an individual's self-understanding; Jeremy has rightly been called a 'postmodern orphan', set adrift amongst the competing discourses of his time.<sup>15</sup> His struggle to come to terms with his uprootedness, also raises the issue of moral responsibility, which distinguishes *Black Dogs* from most other contemporary historical or historiographic novels. Far from being liberated by the epistemic implications of his unstable personal narrative, Jeremy remains burdened by the past. His name, with its biblical resonances, suggests that we take his narrative as a jeremiad, 'a lament over the ways of the world' without hope of redemption.<sup>16</sup> Other, more explicitly political, echoes corroborate this pessimism. In Marx's words, the past 'weighs' on Jeremy's present, thwarting his furtive attempts at mastering history without becoming too deeply implicated in its true complexity.

This experience is illustrated primarily through two graphic instances in the novel. Jeremy's expectations about taking part in Berlin's 'historical' event are celebratory, and he

anticipates not only entertainment (a ‘huge party’), but also personal reward: ‘Back upstairs, standing under the shower, invigorated and clarified by lovemaking, bellowing the snatches of Verdi I could remember in Italian, I congratulated myself on my rich and interesting life’ (71). However, he and Bernard quickly find that East Germany’s liberation from communism is haunted by the spectre of fascism, embodied in the gang of young skinheads who turn on Bernard after his attempt to stop their attack on a man with a red flag. Reality both meets and undermines their media-conditioned expectations (cf. 94–5). The liberationist story broadcast throughout the world suppresses a much more ambivalent ‘historical’ reality, whose first-hand witnesses Jeremy and Bernard have become. Suppression of historical complexity comes in many forms, including souvenirs, which Jeremy duly and critically comments upon, noting queues ‘for scale-model watchtowers and postcards of no-man’s-land and the empty beaches of the death strip’ (91).

In a seemingly scandalous leap from the almost ridiculous (tourist kitsch) to the atrocious (the Holocaust), McEwan links Jeremy’s Berlin experience with his visit to Majdanek with Jenny years before. At first overwhelmed by the stark, malevolent relic of genocide, Jeremy begins to wrestle with uncomfortable feelings as the monuments to suffering literally begin to pile up. But instead of sympathy and terror, his feelings verge on a more questionable sort of awe. Indeed, Majdanek’s highly dramatic presentation itself invites such a contradictory reaction. The ‘extravagant numerical scale’ of destruction (110) diminishes Jeremy’s ability to react ‘correctly’ to the historical stimulus:

As we walked on, my emotions died. There was nothing we could do to help. There was no one to feed or free. We were strolling like tourists. Either you came here and despaired, or you put your hands deeper into your pockets and gripped your warm loose change and found that you had taken one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare. This was our inevitable shame, our share in the misery. (110)

The visitor's distance from the camp's historical victims cannot be overcome, however much evidence is heaped up to illustrate their suffering: 'We were on the other side, we walked here freely like the commandant once did, or his political master, poking into this or that, knowing the way out, in the full certainty of our next meal' (110). What is worse, even darker imaginings begin to surface as Jeremy's responses begin to become blunt:

After a while I could no longer bear the victims and I thought only of their persecutors. We were walking among the huts. How well they were constructed, how well they had lasted. [...] I sank into inverted admiration, bleak wonder; to dream of this enterprise, to plan these camps, to build them and take such pains, to furnish, run, and maintain them, and to marshal from towns and villages their human fuel—such energy, such dedication. How could one begin to call it a mistake? (111)

Even in such apparently unambiguous moral situations, the proper 'message' may not be received, and may even become inverted.<sup>17</sup> Rather than supporting those critics who have condemned McEwan for his 'distance' from or morbid fascination with the hideous and horrible, this fictional reaction is well based in reality. In his book *The Holocaust and American Life*, Peter Novick – sceptical of the effort to draw clear 'lessons' from the Holocaust – points to a similar ambiguity with regard to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC:

Indeed, visitors did draw their own conclusions, extract their own lessons. A 'pro-life' visitor reported that the exhibits deepened her conviction that Americans who turn away from the awful reality of what happens in abortion clinics are just like the Germans who averted their eyes from the fate of the Jews. A teacher from an apostolic church school told the students she was shepherding through the museum that if the Jews of Europe had recognized Jesus as the Messiah, 'the Lord could have heard their prayers a lot more.'<sup>18</sup>

Like Novick's seemingly misguided visitors to the Holocaust museum, Jeremy neither consciously sides with Nazism nor would he indulge in (or have sympathy for) Holocaust denial. However, even if one leaves aside the dangers of 'forgetting', the reactions of Novick's visitors, like Jeremy's own, point to the fraught process of remembering. While emphasising the slippery qualities of efforts to save and impart the message of the past, Jeremy also puts his finger on another pervasive theme in *Black Dogs*: violence.<sup>19</sup>

## Violence

It is a commonplace that we live in a violent world, but the topic of violence is treated in a sustained and complex way throughout McEwan's novel. Whether the abusive relationship he witnesses between his sister and her husband or the attack by the skinheads in Berlin, Jeremy's confrontation with violence allows him to maintain a clear division between good and evil, victim and perpetrator, even when these events are placed within the broader context of twentieth-century European history. In *Black Dogs*, work, play, travel and even falling in love are all played out against a background of repression and violence, whether on the level of the state or the individual: while Bernard and June's love blooms amidst the debris of the Blitz, the romance between Jeremy and Jenny is kindled during a visit to Majdanek. However, violence is not depicted only as something 'out there', as a merely external force. Fascism and communism are both given due credit for generating their own forms of violence, but it is not as simple as that. By the early nineties, both ideologies could be said to exist only 'in the past'; however, as depicted in *Black Dogs*, the present remains marked by their seemingly inescapable legacies. If the black dogs represent trauma in its most symbolic form, the Berlin skinheads embody the material reality of violence, which cannot be conveniently locked away in the past.<sup>20</sup>

However, the book suggests that to simply blame the great ideologies for imposing violence on the world is too naive, as – so it seems to be suggested here – they are but specific ideological manifestations of something common to us all. Taking his cue from June, who

recalls Bernard's 'predatory' look when they met (48), Jeremy views human beings in terms of the dogs' potential for bestial violence. In Berlin, Jeremy observes that 'A crowd is a stupid, slow creature, far less intelligent than any one of its members. This one was prepared to stand all night, with the patience of a dog, waiting for what we all knew would not happen' (88). Later, the pack of skinheads descending upon the red-flag waver in Berlin 'exuded a runtish viciousness, an extravagant air of underprivilege, with their acned pallor, shaved heads, and loose wet mouths' (96). He addresses a violent stranger in France: 'You are an animal, an animal Monsieur' (130). Ironically, Jeremy applies this principle to June herself; when he tries to help her sit up, June stops him 'with a noise, a growl [...]' (50).

However, Jeremy's use of canine imagery is questionable.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, the potential for violence is not limited to obvious candidates such as neo-Nazis. The initial harassment of the red-flag waver hunted down by skinheads in Berlin, after all, comes from 'business types or solicitors' (96). Their mild (though still physical) intervention is depicted as unleashing the 'uglier manifestation' of violence by the right-wing youths. Furthermore, violence is not merely something endemic to larger socio-political contexts but invades private areas of Jeremy's experience, often blurring the distinction between perpetrator and victim. His niece Sally, a victim of parental abuse and, subsequently, a violent marriage, is finally 'found unfit, too violent, to care for her little boy, who was now with foster parents' (68). Significantly, Jeremy himself lashes out violently toward the end of the book, against a complete stranger, albeit in defence of an innocent victim.

This latter incident has a crucial role, forming the climax of Jeremy's narrative about himself and immediately preceding the final section, the memoir. Furthermore, it brings together several of the book's themes. In a French restaurant he sees a child being abused by his father. Remembering his own violent childhood and struck by the child's look of misery, Jeremy steps in and challenges the father to a fight. He justifies his action by casting it as a historical gesture of revolutionary significance: 'I had a brief ennobling sense of myself as one of those obscure French citizens who blossom from nowhere at a transforming moment in their

nation's history to improvise the words that history will engrave in stone' (130). From this imagined nobility, Jeremy quickly descends into savagery, beating the abusive father in an effusive rage:

There was a satisfying moment when he was stunned but could not fall. His arms dropped to his sides and he stood there and watched me as I hit him with the left, one two three, face, throat and gut, before he went down. I drew back my foot, and think I might have kicked and stomped him to death if I had not heard a voice and turned to see a thin figure on the lighted doorway across the road.

The voice was calm. '*Monsieur. Je vous prie. Ça suffit.*'

Immediately I knew that the elation driving me had nothing to do with revenge and justice. Horrified with myself, I stepped back. (131)

Here, Jeremy, who has already seen the line between victim and perpetrator blur in Majdanek, crosses that line.<sup>22</sup> The violence symbolised by the dogs is not a foreign presence, but some inherent human trait; our potentially bestial nature is signalled in this climactic scene by the use of a phrase commonly used to quieten an enraged pet: 'Perhaps June would have said that what I really had to confront was within me, since at the very end I was restrained, brought to heel, by words usually spoken to dogs: *Ça suffit!*' (124).<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the twin preoccupations of *Black Dogs* with history and violence take on similar patterns. History is depicted as violent; violence takes on historically shaped contours, both in terms of motive (e.g., Jeremy's revenge for his past sufferings) and its imaginative construction (e.g., Jeremy's ennobling vision of himself or his and Jenny's complex reactions to the camp). In both cases, the characters in the book – and by extension, human beings in general – are positioned as not only observers, but also participants. On the one hand, they must actively engage with history – and its violence – in order to understand themselves (à la Marwick). On the other hand, that action is itself constrained by the historical violence (and violence of

history) that calls it forth (à la Marx). In *Black Dogs*, the individual's mastery of the past involves a constant self-positioning in reference to histories and incidents of violence that are both personal and political. That this endeavour is a struggle is clear, yet McEwan's characters cannot escape from the demands of this reckoning – in fact, they cannot even escape their own threatening potential for violence.

Such an interpretation of McEwan's novel might seem to follow those critics who have blamed the author for his complicity with the very terrors he describes. Thus, in 'looking the beast of history straight into the eye', Marc Delrez writes (8), 'a novel such as *Black Dogs* fails to act upon its best insights because [...] it also includes a resigned awareness of its own forced complicity with evil' (20). Whether an honest appraisal of one's potential for violence is inevitably a form of complicity is an open – and clearly a personal – question. We think that it is not and furthermore believe that such candid self-reflection is a precondition of any moral thought and action. Rather than evidence of the author's love affair with the outrageous and macabre, the omnipresence of violence in *Black Dogs* points to McEwan's concern with the interaction between public and private, his self-confessed interest in 'the tension between the private worlds of individuals and the public sphere by which they are contained'.<sup>24</sup> McEwan's solution to this tension has been labelled escapism. But how can a book that so relentlessly portrays the need for engagement with history (whether social or personal) be seen as advocating an irresponsible, indeed immoral escapism? To the contrary, it is the confrontation with the violence of history which enables and compels the development of a personal moral stance, the prerequisite for any moral action. Jeremy does not escape; in fact, he is drawn nearer to the people around him (and himself) as he gets closer to the past and is finally able to complete 'his' memoir of June. Jeremy's growing empathy is particularly comprehensive because his research and his experiences have led him not only to associate with victims but also to understand the perspective of perpetrators. If this is true of Jeremy, it is also something demanded of the reader. As Kiernan Ryan puts it in his highly favourable assessment of McEwan's moral stance, '[his] books seek to unseat our moral certainties and sap our



confidence in knee-jerk judgements by making us recognize our involvement in what we are reading' (206). We would agree, adding only that our involvement extends beyond what we read into the world in which we live and act.

## Conclusion

The results of Jeremy's efforts at mastering the past are presented in the final section, where June's traumatic experience with the dogs that lend the book its title and central motif is recounted. Were one to read only this memoir, it would seem to be an unproblematic, factual account; however, the book's preceding four sections have paved the way to a more critical understanding of history, thus casting doubt on the concluding narrative and illustrating the impossibility for the historian to ever occupy the position of a fully neutral observer. We have been made aware of the influence of Jeremy's youth on the obsessions of his adult life, and we have witnessed his troubled and incomplete process of evidence gathering. Jeremy's text is not a *failure*, but neither is it a complete *success* (in terms of being the 'real story' or history 'as it really was').<sup>25</sup> And yet, McEwan's emphasis on the inherent ambiguities of history should not be taken as a measure of the futility of Jeremy's project. No matter how partial and limited, Jeremy (as well as Bernard and June and, by extension, all of us) need the stories that sustain our efforts at self-definition.

Whether individually or collectively, history is not only necessary, but also unavoidable. This is not least because the violence that drives it has not been (and perhaps cannot be) overcome. Contrary to what some might stipulate, we are every day reminded of the fact that history is not over. Even as *Black Dogs* appeared, the flames of violence were being rekindled in the Balkans; the virulent ethnic hatreds and mass slaughter of those conflicts hung heavily over the concurrent process of peaceful European integration, evidence enough that, as Derrida points out, 'Haunting would mark the very existence of Europe'<sup>26</sup>. The last two decades have seen ongoing struggles over law and legitimacy, freedom and oppression, democratic expression and dictatorship both within Europe and on its borders. Given these crises, it is

striking that the collapse of state communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s nevertheless generated such a robust political euphoria. Moreover, this sunny worldview proved well fitted to certain liberationist and playful postmodern forms of ‘endism’, resulting in an intellectual space in which postmodern scepticism could coexist with neoliberal optimism in consigning history, that accumulation of messy and often bloody contradictions, to the dustbin. Although never universal, the notion that history had ended encapsulated an influential *Zeitgeist*, which, despite (or even because of) a series of media-friendly crises, tended toward idealising a decontextualised, ahistorical and individualised self.

It appears that this particular tide has now ebbed, not least as a result of the events of 11 September 2001. They, or perhaps more their multifarious consequences, emphasised that, rather than ending, history was developing new axes, new alignments and a new dialectic. The result has not only been a dramatic shift in the outline of global politics but also the shaping of a new phase of history which – like that considered in *Black Dogs* – is influencing and constraining (if only as a historical backdrop) countless individual lives. To this extent, McEwan’s novel seems strangely prophetic, questioning the more triumphant (or naive) responses to the post-1989 world. Moreover, it marks a transitional period in McEwan’s oeuvre, away from the claustrophobic and egocentric plots of novels such as *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*, towards making history ‘one of the moving elements in a novel, one shaft of light or color, almost another character to play with’<sup>27</sup> – an interest explored in subsequent novels, notably *Atonement* (which in many ways is a companion piece to the novel under discussion here).<sup>28</sup> It may be that *Black Dogs* casts a pessimistic glance at humankind; however, it does so less out of a desire to shock than in order to drive a continuous engagement with – and thus, perhaps, control over – the darker sides of our selves, our pasts and our collective future.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nature of History* (London and Basingstoke, 1970), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford, 1977), p. 300.

<sup>3</sup> A notion associated with Francis Fukuyama, following the publication of *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, 1993). Fukuyama has subsequently modified his view.

<sup>4</sup> On this debate within British history, see Neville Kirk, 'History, Language, Ideas and Post-Modernism: A Materialist View', *Social History*, 19.2 (1994), 221-40.

<sup>5</sup> F. R. Ankersmit decries the 'modernist' emphasis on the 'trunk' or the 'branches' of history that attempted to link all events within a unified framework or model of history. Instead, he calls upon historians to examine the 'leaves' of history, individual 'historical scraps', which should be examined separately from other 'leaves'. 'Historiography and Postmodernism,' *History and Theory*, 28 (1989): 149.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York and London, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York, 1993), p. 66.

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<sup>8</sup> For a general criticism of postmodernism see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, 1993). With reference to its influence on historical study, see Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (1997. London, 2000) and Kirk, 'History.'

<sup>9</sup> See Eagleton *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (1992. London, 1998). All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

<sup>11</sup> As outlined *passim* in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973. Baltimore and London, 1975) and revisited in 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 37-53.

<sup>12</sup> Critical writing on *Black Dogs* is surprisingly scarce and usually biased. Typical for this stance is Marc Delrez, who in 'Escape into Innocence: Ian McEwan and the Nightmare of History', *ARIEL*, 26.2 (1995), 7-23, bemoans the novel's 'lack of a cross-cultural perspective' (22), which he sees as a trend in contemporary British fiction. This assessment is astounding, since McEwan's text is set not only in Britain but also in France, Germany and Poland.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jago Morrison, 'Narration and Unease in Ian McEwan's Later Fiction', *Critique*, 42.3 (2001), 253-86.

<sup>14</sup> See Morrison, 'Narration', 262.

<sup>15</sup> Pedot, Richard. 'Une narration en quête de son sujet: chemin de l'écriture et écriture du chemin dans *Black Dogs* de Ian McEwan,' *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 11 (1997), 71.

<sup>16</sup> On the genre of the jeremiad, see Sacvan Berkovitch's seminal study, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, 1978). Berkovitch notes different American and European traditions of this religio-political genre. Whereas the European jeremiad taught lessons 'about historical lessons and the vanity of human wishes', the American jeremiad 'create[d] a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless "progressivist" energies required for the success of the [New World] venture'. *Ibid.*, 23. Insofar as *Black Dogs* offers no possibility to transcend the crises it laments, it is well situated within the European jeremiad tradition; nevertheless, it also possesses resemblances to tendencies in the American jeremiad toward inculcating 'crisis' as a 'social norm' and stipulating 'a state of *unfulfillment*'. *Ibid.*, 23 (italics in original).

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<sup>17</sup> A similar point - in a very different context - is made in Nicholson Baker's short novel *Checkpoint* (New York, 2004). One of the two main characters, Jay, recalls his experiences at a memorial museum to John F. Kennedy's assassination, where visitors can stand 'in the place where supposedly the guy aimed his rifle and shot the president'. Here, he and other visitors became involved in a discussion about the technicalities of shooting someone from 'a very awkward vantage point'. *Ibid.*, 100. He notes, 'for a moment we were all thinking like assassins'. *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and American Life*, (New York, 1999), p. 260.

<sup>19</sup> While we agree with Morrison regarding the significance of the Holocaust in *Black Dogs*, we disagree with his conclusion that it provides a central motif to 'anchor' the novel. As we have noted, the Holocaust seems rather to have an unsettling and uprooting effect on Jeremy, reflecting his own violent potential.

<sup>20</sup> As Bernard muses, '...what possible good could come of a Europe covered in this dust, these spores, when forgetting would be inhuman and dangerous, and remembering a constant torture' (165).

<sup>21</sup> Kiernan Ryan, *Ian McEwan* (Plymouth, 1994), p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy also interprets and justifies his acts in a more personal way: 'It was an embodiment, however distorted, of my preoccupations, of the loneliness of my childhood; it represented a purging, an exorcism, in which I acted on behalf of my niece, Sally, as well for myself, and took our revenge.' (124)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Pedot, 'Une Narration', 72.

<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Kiernan Ryan, 'Sex, Violence and Complicity: Martin Amis and Ian McEwan', in Rod Mengham (ed.), *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 206.

<sup>25</sup> In the same way, we disagree with Christina Byrnes's Jungian assessment in *Sex and Sexuality in Ian McEwan's Work* (Nottingham, 1995) that McEwan achieves the synthesis of two contrasting poles at the end of the novel.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Spectres*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> McEwan qtd. in William Grimes, 'Rustic Calm Inspires McEwan Tale of Evil', *New York Times* Nov 18 1992, <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/27/specials/mcewan-grimes.html>>, accessed 30 December 2005.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Anja Müller-Wood, 'Enabling Resistance: Teaching *Atonement* in Germany', in Steven Barfield, Anja Müller-Wood, Philip Tew and Leigh Wilson (eds.), *Teaching Contemporary British Fiction*, special issue of *Anglistik & Englischunterricht* (forthcoming).

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