MULTICULTURALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: IAN McEWAN'S *THE INNOCENT* (1990)

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Abstract: Published in 1990, Ian McEwan's novel The Innocent is, in a nutshell, the story of a man coming of age under strange, at times even horrific, circumstances. What we deal with is a psychological thriller in which there is a strong relationship between society and the individual and in which personal conflicts are almost always socio-culturally and politically rooted. The main character, Leonard Marnham, is a British technician sent to Berlin in 1955 to work on a CIA – MI6 surveillance project against the Soviet Union. The concept of national identity becomes fundamental to the understanding of novel, set in post-war Berlin and bringing to the fore characters of different national backgrounds. The current paper investigates the particular historical context and multicultural background against which the plot unfolds and how they determine the evolution of the protagonist.

Keywords: cultural stereotypes; multiculturalism; national identity

Considered to be an outstanding literary achievement, *The Innocent* brilliantly combines elements of Ian McEwan's previous fiction, such as a dark and, at times, even horrific vision of the world, with "a more mature and balanced perspective" (Malcolm 2002, 110). The protagonist of the novel, Leonard Marnham, a 25-year-old British technician, will come of age under exceptional circumstances. Sent to Berlin in 1955 to work on a joint CIA – MI6 operation that involves spying on the Russians, "the innocent" Leonard experiences love and death in a typical "Ian McAbre" fashion. The character's maturation and psychological scrutiny take place against the backdrop of Operation Gold, meant to tap into the landline communication of the Soviet Army by means of a tunnel linking the American to the Russian sector of Berlin. While performing various tasks for both the British and the Americans, he falls in love with Maria Eckdorf, a thirty-year-old German woman that will initiate him in matters of erotic love. Ironically, both his happiness and his doom come through Maria: the night after their engagement, Leonard accidentally kills her ex-husband, Otto. In order to conceal the murder, the two lovers decide to dismember Otto's body and dispose of it, but this also ruins their relationship. What is more, Operation Gold fails at the same time as their engagement and Leonard is being sent back to Britain. A *Bildungsroman* and a psychological thriller, *The Innocent* is also a spy novel, as it is set against the background of espionage, intelligence and counterintelligence, with most of the action taking place in Berlin, in a multicultural environment. Similarly to Otto's body, the novel "skillfully dismembers international body-politic by the sharp knives of espionage and diplomacy" (Ledbetter 1996, 80). Basically, *The Innocent* deals with a British man in love with a German woman, working with the Americans to spy on the Russians; this gives us plenty of opportunities to witness the role played by the concept of national identity in the evolution of the protagonist. Hence, our paper sets out to investigate how the particular historical context and multicultural background of the novel determine the unfolding of the plot and influence Leonard's coming of age.

Mixing psychological fiction with espionage fiction, *The Innocent* is, in David Malcolm's (2002, 8) terms, "socially, politically and historically determined". While essentially dealing with Leonard's discovery of love and of darker emotions such as "dangerous fantasy, hatred, violence and brutal murder" (Malcolm 2002, 14), elements of espionage fiction are also very prominent in the novel. The setting is highly illustrative in this respect; because of it, "almost everything is specifically marked by national identity" (Brown 1994, 107). The action takes place in the Cold War 1955-56 Berlin, a city which is divided into different zones of influence for the Americans, the British and the Russians. This very setting will be the place for numerous treacherous acts, bringing to the fore cultural stereotypes and revealing differences in national character and identity. The 1950s are particularly important for both the British and the Americans, since these years were marked by the end of imperialism for Britain and by a rise in power for the USA, whose cultural dominance was extending at a global level. Glass sums this up in his conversation with Leonard: "you guys were great in the war, you were formidable. It was your moment. (…) Now this is ours" (McEwan 2005, 112). In an interview with Casademont, the novelist himself further reinforces this point:

> The year 1955 threw up some interesting things for an Englishman. By that time (…) the British Empire's days were over. (…) The baton of empire was being self-consciously handed over to the USA. (…) the American empire was the less 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: pop music, movies, fast-food (…). So the young man who is at the centre of The Innocent, Leonard Marnham, goes abroad for the first time in his life and is rather unconfident, rather in the way his country is so recently unconfident" (McEwan, qtd. in Roberts 2010, 58).

Britain's eclipse by the United States as a major world power is probably the source for the frustration and dissatisfaction of the British, emotional reactions which are brought to the fore from the very beginning of the novel. While briefing Leonard about the situation in Berlin, Lieutenant Lofting argues: "It's not the Germans or the Russians who are the problem here. It isn't even the French. It's the Americans. They don't know a thing. What's worse, they won't learn, they won't be told. It's just how they are" (McEwan 2005, 1). It is only a few lines later that Leonard finds out what Lofting refers to exactly: the Americans do not have "the first notion of team work", they go behind our backs, they withhold information, they talk down to us like idiots" (McEwan 2005, 1). Soon afterwards, as Leonard gets in touch with his superior, Bob Glass, his first thought is that "he would have to take direction from a stranger, an American stranger" (McEwan 2005, 3). Pinpointing Bob's nationality is, for the British man, a means of distancing himself, of asserting his own individuality and national identity in opposition to the other's identity. But during his telephone conversation with Bob, Leonard cannot help but collapse "into the English dither he had wanted to avoid in conversation with an American"; he feels inferior and "foolish" (McEwan 2005, 4), lacking the confidence of the American he has just spoken to, and, as a matter of fact, of any American.

As David Malcolm (2002, 122) put it, "Leonard's Englishness seems already shabby and feeble in comparison with the forcefulness of the American he has not yet met". Being British in the 1950s "was not quite the comfort it had been to a preceding generation"; sensing

that there is "something risible about his stiffness of manner", Leonard feels "vulnerable", as opposed to Glass, one of the Americans who seem "utterly at ease with being themselves" (McEwan 2005, 7). In Richard Brown's words, "Even the defeated Germans seem to have more self-confidence and swagger in their national identities than Leonard" (Brown 1994, 107). What is more, Leonard's low self-esteem as a British man abroad who, "in deference to Glass", is "softening his 't's and flattening his 'a's", is coupled with the American's expressive ease and freedom when it comes to speaking his mind: "The British. (…) they're so busy being gentlemen. They don't do their jobs" (McEwan 2005, 9). This way, the innocent, naive, even old-fashioned Marnham epitomizes "the twilight of British supremacy" and "the triumph of American cultural imperialism" (Ryan, qtd. in Childs 2006, 89). Claire Colebrook sums this up by stating that, in the novel, "the English characters, and Englishness in general, occupy a position of unwitting, dull and subjected naivety, while American characters and culture seem to open out to the future, to sexuality and to knowledge". In point of fact, the previous historical relation between Europe and America is now reversed, as Colebrook argues: "Once seen as the very figure of a childlike origin of the world in relation to a historically over-burdened Europe, America is now closer to being a street-wise and awakened adolescent enlivened by knowledge acquisition" (Colebrook, in Groes 2009, 49).

The U.S. domination of the cultural sphere is prevalent all throughout the novel, and the following examples are illustrative in this respect. For instance, Leonard "is both repelled and fascinated" by the sight of two US Army sergeants practicing American football throws (Malcolm 2002, 122). From his standpoint, "these were grown men, showing off", "over-demonstrative and too self-loving"; it irritates him that "two adults should be so publicly playful", but, irrespective of this, he keeps on watching "with disgusted fascination" (McEwan 2005, 14-15). Although such behavior is, in Leonard's eyes, "showy and childish, typically American" (McEwan 2005, 121), he comes to appreciate it as a kind of innocence he is not capable of. Indeed, Americans do not seem to observe the same etiquette that is compulsory for him and his people in both verbal and non-verbal communication, but, in time, he grows so fond of it that, while at home for Christmas, he begins to miss "the near rudeness of the American's speech, the hammer-blow intimacy, the absence of the modifiers and hesitancies that were supposed to mark out a reasonable Englishman" (McEwan 2005, 115-116).

Likewise, Leonard is enthralled by American pop music, with all its implications of US cultural power. Everyone seems to listen to American music and *Voice of America* and his own affair with Maria is constantly marked by them: "the love songs he knew were all too courteously restrained. In fact, what suited him now was the raucous American nonsense he thought he despised" (McEwan 2005, 75). At the climax of their relationship, Leonard confidently claims that "These songs made them feel free" (McEwan 2005, 108). The understatement is that he is finally free from cultural stereotypes, from the prejudices that marked his childhood and continue to be a part of his parents' way of thinking. He has finally discovered his own identity. This newly acquired knowledge makes him proud: "Leonard took satisfaction dancing in a way his parents and their friends did not, and could not, and in liking music they would hate, and in feeling at home in a city they would never come. He was free" (McEwan 2005, 121). This gratifying feeling does not come without a particular dose of skepticism, though; indeed, he might be free now, but, in acknowledging his acceptance and

even love of American music, he also acknowledges its cultural superiority, something which he is reluctant to do. When Russell arrives at the engagement party, for instance, the fact that the radio is tuned to *Voice of America* makes Leonard uneasy, although he is not able to pinpoint the exact reason for this: "Leonard did not know why he should feel foolish that his wireless was tuned to that station" (McEwan 2005, 123).

American supremacy is also visible in the power relations within Operation Gold, which "embody an American hegemony in European affairs" (Malcolm 2002, 123). Although the understanding between the American and the British was that "the taped telephone conversations were flown to London" and "the telegraph messages to Washington for decoding" (McEwan 2005, 63), the overt, even offensive statement Glass makes is meant to prove the US superiority: "I'll tell you. It's all political. You think we couldn't lay those taps ourselves? (…) It's for politics that *we're letting you in on this*. We're *supposed to* have a special relationship with *you guys*" (McEwan 2005, 22 – our emphasis). It is made clear for Leonard that the Americans are doing the British a favor by involving them in the operation. If it weren't for political reasons, no knowledge of the tunnel would have come to Leonard and his people. Moreover, by choosing to oppose "we…ourselves" to "you guys", Glass makes a point of stating the difference between the Americans and the British. An indicator of the fact that Glass' view is generalized Even "the new man", an American who has just been hired to work on the project, displays similar beliefs; she shows no restraint in blaming the British for the ventilation problems that occur at the tunnel: "You guys really screwed up" (McEwan 2005, 110). The Anglo-American distrust, "the mutual antagonism between the American and the British" is, Dominic Head claims, "a distinction between amateurism and professionalism" (Head 2007, 93). Undeniably, Leonard and his people are constantly reminded of their inefficiency in doing their job. The only reason for the Anglo-American cooperation – which, as the novel further reveals, is not based on full disclosure, but on secrecy and lies – is politics.

But the British have their own viewpoint on this; they are the ones doing the Americans a favor: "very generously, we let the Americans into our tunnel, gave them facilities, let them make use of our taps" (McEwan 2005, 70). There is a further twist: "our allies" (McEwan 2005, 70), as MacNamee ironically calls the CIA agents, are withholding information, sharing only the outline, not the details, of how to break the codes of the tapped messages. Since "we're not prepared to live off the crumbs from their table", Leonard is talked into spying on the Americans. This seems to be a fairly easy endeavor, since, in McNamee's words: "You know how careless the Yanks can be. They talk, things are left lying around" (McEwan 2005, 70). The Americans' expressive freedom is considered to be a sign of weakness that might lead to a security breach; in opposition, as Glass himself notes, the British are characterized by verbal restraint: "You quiet Englishmen, you don't horse around, you don't talk about it, you get in there fast" (McEwan 2005, 89). Suspicion and insecurity is everywhere, a fact which is not at all surprising when taking into account that the world of espionage always involves intelligence and counterintelligence. Glass claims that the British "are not serious the way we are" and does not trust them. As a matter of fact, he does not seem to trust anyone; it is his contention that: "Collaboration leads to errors, security problems, you name it" (McEwan 2005, 111).

Common national stereotypes are not only typical of what the Americans and the British think of each other; they are also present when it comes to the Germans. At the beginning of his stay in Berlin, Leonard himself is highly biased; although he has not fought the war, he thinks of Germany "as a defeated nation", and, with "a certain proprietorial swagger", he feels "pride in the victory". Had he still been a child, he would have "made his engine noise and become a bomber for a celebratory minute or two (McEwan 2005, 5-6). Later on, when he begins his Romance with Maria, it seems to him that "his earlier pride in its destruction" was "puerile, repellent" (McEwan 2005, 46). His definition of the Germans changes completely once he falls in love with Maria: they "were no longer ex-Nazis, they were Maria's compatriots" (McEwan 2005, 63). His love for Maria becomes stronger and stronger although he is aware of the fact that his mother wouldn't welcome a German woman into the family (McEwan 2005, 113) and that his father "loathed the Germans" (McEwan 2005, 120). As David Malcolm put it, it is primarily in Leonard's relationship with Maria that he "feels the difference between home and abroad", "a liberation, an escape into newness and excitement" (Malcolm 2002, 118). It won't be long, however, until thoughts of superiority over the Germans as a right gained by means of conquest resurface in Leonard's consciousness. Once he is "able to define himself in strictest terms as an initiate, a truly mature adult at last" (McEwan 2005, 56), he starts having fantasies of violence, of sexual aggression towards Maria:

> He looked down at Maria, whose eyes were closed, and remembered she was a German. (…) German. Enemy. Mortal enemy. Defeated enemy. This last brought with it a shocking thrill. (…) She was defeated, she was his by right, by conquest, by right of unimaginable violence and heroism and sacrifice" (McEwan 2005, 77).

Although he repeatedly tries to push such thoughts aside, they proliferate to the point that "his private theatre had become insufficient" (McEwan 2005, 79) and he wants the fantasy to become real. In what he perceives as nothing more than a consentual, erotic game he has a right to play, he attempts to force Maria into making love with him; Maria will, nonetheless, interpret his action as sexual violence, which almost puts an end to their relationship. When Leonard meets Maria for the first time, he is rather effeminate, shy and lacking confidence. It is Maria who approaches him in the bar and, usurping, to a certain extent, "the traditional role of the man's sexual superiority"; however, as he begins to assert "a more conventional masculine authority, his attitude begins to reflect the imperialistic dominance that Britain was striving to regain over Germany after the war" (Wells 2010, 58). Eventually, due to Maria's empathy and forgiveness, the two lovers overcome their relationship problems and decide to get married. Leonard proves a change in attitude as he comforts Maria after Otto's assault on her: he decides to speak German, "illustrating a new desire to bridge the cultural divide rather than being an imperialist master" (Wells 2010, 60). Nonetheless, Leonard is not bound to forget very easily the war atrocities attributed to the Germans: while carrying the suitcases containing Otto's corpse, in an attempt to gain confidence and justify his own atrocious actions, he tells himself that there is nothing strange about him. Berlin is, after all, "full of people with heavy luggage" (McEwan 2005, 172).

For Glass, the marriage between a German woman and a British man is highly symbolic in terms of such a union's power to bridge the gap between the two nations, and, by

extrapolation, to bring peace to the entire European continent; the speech he delivers at the engagement party is revealing in this respect:

> We all of us in this room, German, British, American, in our different kinds of work, have committed ourselves to building a new Berlin. A new Germany. A new Europe. (…) Leonard and Maria belong to countries that ten years ago were at war. By engaging to be married, they are bringing their own peace, in their own way, to their nations. Their marriage, and all others like it, bind countries tighter than any treaty can" (McEwan 2005, 124)

However, the novel foregrounds that Americans are also prejudiced when it comes to the Germans; Glass, for instance, uses the appellative Fritz to refer to all the Germans working at Operation Gold, reducing their identity to merely that of ex-Nazis, who are nothing more than "a real horror" (McEwan 2005, 63). As Lynn Wells contends, in *The Innocent*, "the lingering violence of the Nazi era is exacerbated by Germany's post-war political masters, the British and the Americans, with both groups imposing their imperialistic power" (Wells 2010, 57). In what concerns the German women, Glass is convinced that they are fairly easy to seduce: "These girls, as long as you're not a Russian, you can't go wrong" (McEwan 2005, 26). Similarly to what the British think, the Americans also seem to contend that their victory over the Germans makes them superior and gives them the unalienable right to treat them any way they want. Highly revealing in this respect is the fact that Glass manages to make the German police drop the investigation about the dismembered body in the suitcases found in the tunnel. As Maria puts it, "I guess in those days it was an occupied city and the Germans had to do what the Americans told them" (McEwan 2005, 221).

The novel also displays a fait amount of cultural stereotypes directed towards the Russians; although they do not take part in the unfolding of the plot directly, it is on discovering their national secrets that Operation Gold focuses. The setting of *The Innocent* is, after all, 1955-1956 Cold-War Berlin; the Americans' prevailing feeling is that of contempt and hatred towards the Russians, a feeling displayed with each and every opportunity they have. In a nutshell, according to the Americans: "They're scum, really" (McEwan 2005, 26). Russell is one of the US agents who tries to empathize with the Soviets; in spite of the fact that he describes them as "cold", never smiling, never wanting "to make things work", "cruel", deceptive, with a language that is always "too strong", he seems able to understand them: "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". Glass feels compelled to overtly state his opposing viewpoint: "I hate them. (You could say it's their system you've got to hate. But there's no system without people to run it" (McEwan 2005, 31-32). The conversation the two Americans have in Leonard's presence also reveals that German women hate and fear the Russians, since in "May '45 they behaved like animals", having raped their sisters or their mothers, or even their grandmothers" (McEwan 2005, 27). Indeed, Maria herself will be tormented by memories of a Russian soldier raping a woman when Leonard sexually assaults her.

Russians are felt to be an imposing presence all throughout the novel, but Americans are sure they will not do anything against them if they ever find out about the tunnel. Everyone involved in Operation Gold thinks that once the Russians discover the project there

will be nothing left for them to do but cover it; the plausible explanation for "the great Russian silence" is that news of the operation to the public would undoubtedly make them "lose face". Surprisingly enough for the Americans and the British, Russians apparently decide to "milk it for propaganda", in spite of the fact that "they are going to come out of this looking stupid". But their goal is not only that of revealing "American treachery" (McEwan 2005, 196-197); as it turns out, they had been aware of the existence of the tunnel all along and the fact that they are exposing it to the public now is only a matter of necessity. The British double agent George Blake – who actually was a non-fictional spy involved in Operation Gold - informs the Russians with respect to the Operation from the very beginning, but the Soviets decide not to act upon it so as to ensure Blake's safety. Nevertheless, when the British mole informs them about the existence of special decoding devices in the tunnel – the suitcases containing Otto's dismembered body that Leonard took there – the "secret" is finally exposed. It is noteworthy that all those involved in Operation Gold were utterly deceived by the Russians, who revealed everything on their own terms, when it best suited their interests.

Taking into account everything that has been noted so far, the cosmopolitanism of the novel is obvious. Moreover, by means of the protagonist who stands out as a British man in Cold War Berlin, the novel focuses on "what is not British and what is clearly differentiated from it". This focus on abroad is, according to David Malcolm, a typical concern for the novelists belonging to McEwan's generation (Malcolm 2002, 118). In the novel, the contrast between home and abroad becomes prominent when Leonard goes back to England for Christmas. He misses the freedom and excitement of Berlin and is disappointed in the triviality of Tottenham and its people, who do not seem to be aware of the world-historical events taking place outside their country. Since Leonard's liberation and coming of age take place abroad, it is fair to consider that, to some extent and by extrapolation, the novel is about "the liberations that abroad brings, not just to its characters, but to fiction itself" (Malcolm 2002, 120).

The postscript of the novel, set in Berlin in June 1987, presents the victory of Americanism: the German capital has been marked by globalization, it has been Americanized. "An European city like any other a businessman might visit", whose "dominant feature was traffic", Berlin now has Burger King, McDonald's, Videoclips and Unisex Jeans (McEwan 2005, 213). The fact that Maria chose to marry Glass is, according to Wells, an indicator of "the triumph of American openness (…) over the British reserve and elitism". In other words, "Maria's transformation mirrors that of Berlin itself" (Wells 2010, 62). Although *The Innocent* can be considered "an allegory of the moral anarchy that entices stronger nations to force their world views on weaker countries", the ending is optimistic: love triumphs as well, in spite of national differences; it seems that "transcultural pacification and acceptance are, after all, possible" (Slay 1996, 86). "A novel of espionage affords an apt medium" for this type of closure, gained through a "remorseless unfolding of the plot". all in all, "tunneling down beneath the surface and burrowing across borders into forbidden territory to hijack and crack coded messages is a perfect image for what McEwan's fiction is up to" (Ryan, qtd. in Childs 2006, 89).

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