Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 77-82

Ian McEwan, On Chesil Beach: "There is no sexual relation"

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The year is 1962, the scene is the honeymoon suite in a Georgian inn on Chesil Beach, a British seaside resort where a couple of newly-wed twenty-two year olds, recent University graduates, are fast approaching the greatest test of their lives:

> They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible. But it is never easy (3).

On Chesil Beach is the seventeenth book published by one of Britain's most prominent prose writers, Ian McEwan, a novelist whose early reputation owed a good deal to scandal: he was considered "the sick delinquent confrère of Genet, Burroughs, and Céline" (Ryan, 4).

Readers will not find this latest fiction sick, however, just sad and somehow uncomfortably true. Florence and Edward are both virgins, both innocent and very much ashamed of their lack of knowledge. Edward can not bring himself to confess the fact that he has no experience, while Florence pretends to flirt as she hides the fact that the very thought of sexual activity terrifies her. McEwan's point is that in this not so far away era, pre sexual revolution and pre feminism, the words to express their predicament are lacking for these highly educated young adults. Today however, at the date of publication, the situation is just the opposite, not only for the psychoanalytically informed, not only for readers of Foucault, but also for the viewer of Oprah or Dr. Phil. The difference in our attitude toward talking about sex should make the premises of *On Chesil Beach* rather anachronistic. That the novel is still compelling then, suggests that something is at stake which merits a closer inspection.

From the first paragraph of this very short novel, we have an indication of Florence's superior knowledge and a hint of the dubious import of its source. The newlyweds appear on their wedding night as they are served supper in the "honeymoon suite" of a Georgian inn on Chesil Beach.

> Edward did not mention that he had never stayed in a hotel before, whereas Florence, after many trips as a child with her father, was an old hand (3).

The information looks harmless enough at this juncture, yet very soon the status of this "old hand" will be put into question.

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Both Edward and Florence are deeply apprehensive about their coming trial.

> His specific worry, based on one unfortunate experience, was of over-excitement, of what he had heard someone describe as 'arriving too soon'. The matter was rarely out of his thoughts, but though his fear of failure was great, his eagerness – for rapture, for resolution – was far greater (7).

For both Edward and Florence the unmentionable is not just restricted to their personal inexperience and misgivings concerning sexuality. His unspoken reality includes a mother who is brain-damaged and severely incapacitated for whom his father and her children have always maintained a difficult charade in which they pretend that she lives an ordinary life as mother and wife.

For Florence, on the other hand, the problem is graver, and all the more so since it resists the recourse to language: "[W]hat troubled her was unutterable, and she could barely frame it for herself" (7).

McEwan excels at rendering the phobic recoil of Florence who fights down bouts of nausea whenever she is reminded of the realities of sexualized bodies: "[T]he idea of being touched 'down there' by someone else, even someone she loved, was as repulsive as, say, a surgical procedure on her eye" (8).

In this context, what are we to make of Edward's attraction to the "great man" theory of history in spite of the fact that it had gone out of fashion to believe that forceful individuals could shape national destiny? He was stubborn enough to write a senior thesis going against the notion of "History" with a capital being driven by inevitable and necessary ends which would soon be understood as a science. His study of exceptional individuals seems to him to prove exactly the contrary and he sticks to it, even projecting, after graduation, to write a series of short biographies of secondary 'great men'.

Perhaps a link could be established between Edward's vision of history as shaped by strong men and his own recent self image as a barroom brawler. The section which recounts his last fight during college shows him as acting in a sort of animal or instinctual daze as he prepares to chastise the Soho rocker who has insulted his intellectual friend. The friend's surprising reaction teaches Edward a lesson. "Street fighting did not go with poetry and irony, bebop or history. He was guilty of a lapse of taste. He was not the person he had thought" (95). Thus Edward's inability, his fear of acting according to instinct on his wedding night is somehow a function of his having learned that what is expected of him is *not* what comes naturally.

For Florence, on the other hand, there is a sense of insufficiency and even of guilt attached to her inability to feel sexual desire. As Edward undresses she seems to be miles away and, in fact, she is.

> Here came the past anyway, the indistinct past. It was the smell of the sea that summoned it. She was twelve years old, lying still like this, waiting, shivering in the narrow bunk with polished mahogany sides. Her mind was a blank, she felt she was in disgrace. After a two-day crossing, they were once more in the calm of Carteret harbour, south of Cherbourg. It was late in the evening, and her father was moving about the dim cramped cabin, undressing, like Edward now. She remembered the rustle of clothes, the clink of a belt unfastened or of keys or loose change. Her only task was to keep her eyes closed and to think of a tune she liked. Or any tune. She remembered the sweet scent of almost rotten food in the closed air of a boat after a rough trip. She was usually sick many times on the crossing, and of no use to her father as a sailor, and that surely was the source of her shame (99-100).

There could, of course, be other sources of her shame. A little later when Edward has ejaculated immediately as soon as she touches his penis, Florence feels guilty and is convinced that the catastrophe is all her fault. Here a mysterious phrase is interjected: "And there was another element, far worse in its way and quite beyond her control, summoning memories she had long ago decided were not really hers" (105). What are these repressed and repudiated memories? The

sensation of the semen on her skin and especially its smell, "dragged with it the stench of a shameful secret locked in musty confinement – she could not help herself, she had to be rid of it" (106).

If in the case of Edward, the novel invites us to ponder his relation to the castration complex in his fixation on the great man theory of history and his own propensity to brawl outside of pubs, in the case of his new bride Florence, the problem may well stem from her relationship to her hyper competitive, businessman father. "As far as Edward could tell, father and daughter rarely spoke, except in company, and then inconsequentially. He thought they were intensely aware of each other, though [...]. Ponting was always putting his arm around Ruth's shoulders, but he never, in Edward's sight, embraced her big sister" (115). Florence's father seems to be very excited at the news of the engagement. "It crossed Edward's mind, barely seriously, that he was rather too keen to give his daughter away" (115).

To make matters even worse, Florence cannot confide in her mother, an Oxford don who teaches philosophy and has no ear for music. After her revulsion at the sight of Edward's ejaculation, Florence flees to the beach and there she has a desire to feel the warmth of a mother's embrace: "This was how an infant might be, securely nestling in the crook of its mother's arm, though Florence did not believe she could ever have nestled against Violet, whose arms were thin and tense from writing and thinking" (141).

To some readers, less prompt to empathize with squeamish Florence, the total misunderstanding between the young lovers must seem humorous. As the bride realizes that this dreaded moment of sexual revelation is what marriage is all about she thinks she is really going to be sick. "When he heard her moan, Edward knew that his happiness was almost complete" (30). Edward mistakes his new wife's gagging nausea for the betrayal of ecstasy. But his ideas are never his own; he holds many of the views of his peers, for example that girls want to have sex but hold out for marriage. Edward's university friends who succeed in having sex pay dearly for it by dropping out of school in their second year. "The Pill was a rumor in the newspapers, a ridiculous promise, another of those tall tales about America" (39). The blues music that Edward listens to in London clubs during his years at university assures him that men his age are explosive sexual beings, while his experience tells him that he and his friends can only tell dirty jokes and drink too much further reducing their chances of meeting a girl.

> There were rumours that in the English department [...], men and women in tight black jeans and black polo-neck sweaters had constant easy sex, without having to meet each other's parents" (40).

Edward's interest, as an historian, is in apocalyptic cults, his fascination lies with these regular bouts of unreason in human existence. He hesitates, wondering whether to apply for a doctorate to continue studying this medieval madness.

On the other hand, Florence's mother is an Oxford philosopher. "She had never kissed or embraced Florence, even when she was small. Violet had barely ever touched her daughter at all. Perhaps it was just as well. She was thin and boney, and Florence was not exactly pining for her caresses. And it was too late to start now" (55).

For Florence, falling in love with Edward is the means to a discovery about herself. Although being loved is a source of narcissistic gratification and Edward's love flatters her, it also reveals something lacking:

> [...] she was really the one who was missing from the room. Falling in love was revealing to her just how odd she was, how habitually sealed off in her everyday thoughts. Whenever Edward asked, How do you feel? Or, What are you thinking? She always made an awkward answer. Had it taken her this long to discover that she lacked some simple mental trick that everyone else had, a mechanism so ordinary that no one ever mentioned it, an immediate sensual connection to people and events, and to her own needs and desires? All these years she had lived in isolation within herself and, strangely, from herself, never wanting or daring to look back (61).

Edward, on the other hand, also suffers from a sense of isolation which is perhaps in part attributable to the fictional universe in which he grew up ever since the accident that damaged his mother's brain when he was five years old. While Edward's father, the headmaster of a primary school, assumes all of the household tasks, the family persists in pretending that their mother is actually a normal person, thanking her every evening for the dinner which she has had no hand in preparing.

During his seminars of the 6os and 70s, Jacques Lacan repeated a mantra which could find its illustration some forty years later, in McEwan's novel: "There is no sexual relation". In part, at least, this seemingly paradoxical statement echoes Lacan's earlier pronouncements concerning man as a creature, not of nature, but of language, the Symbolic order. In *Seminar XI*, he says for example:

> [...] I told you that the human being has always to learn from scratch from the other what he has to do, as man or as woman. I referred to the old woman in the story of Daphnis and Chloe, which shows us that there is an ultimate field, the field of sexual fulfillment, in which, in the last resort, the innocent does not know the way, Jacques Lacan (*Sem XI*, 27 May 1964).
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> What I am saying, following Freud, who provides abundant evidence of it, is that this function [reproduction], is not represented as such in the psyche. In the psyche, there is nothing by which the subject may situate himself as a male or female being.
>
> [...] the ways of what one must do as man or as woman are entirely abandoned to the drama, to the scenario, which is placed in the field of the Other – which, strictly speaking, is the Oedipus complex.
>
> Sexuality is established in the field of the subject by a way that is that of lack, p. 204.

Lacan comes back to these matters in the opening to *Seminar XXIII*, the Joyce seminar, where he repeats that "man stands apart from what seems to be the law of nature, in that, there is not, for him, any natural sexual relation." (12)

In these views, Lacan is entirely faithful to one of the cornerstone discoveries of the Freudian revolution, namely the distinction which Freud would always maintain, between an animal *Instinkt*, where a preformed object of sexual desire exists, and the human *Trieb*, where the object and its discovery is accidental and variable. As Laplanche and Pontalis point out, human sexuality is, in some sense, intrinsically perverse insofar as it only "leans on" the self-preservative instinct and therefore inevitably overshoots the requirements of mere biological existence.

One of the reasons for this is amply illustrated in Ian McEwan's novel: there is no equality in the matter of gender identity. If Lacan says that woman is a symptom for man, the reverse cannot be the case. So, then, what is a man for woman? Whatever you like, says Lacan, perhaps a ravage, havoc. This inequality is a result of a different relationship to the castration complex for each of the two sexes.

This structural dissymmetry between the sexes is something that I have studied in other contexts, my interest in this example drawn from Ian McEwan's novel is centered on the essential Lacanian notion of *méconnaissance*; misrecognition.

In an interview with Bryon Appleyard in *Timesonline* of March 25, 2007, McEwan notes:

> People who are psychotic or autistic can't read other minds. They might be frighteningly logical, but they have no emotional commitment.

He then contrasts the artist and the terrorist. In relation to his interest in the post 9/11 world and his novel *Saturday*, McEwan notes that novelists imagine their way into other minds. Terrorists are incapable of doing so, or else they refuse that possibility. "Extreme cruelty", says McEwan, "is a failure of the imagination".

The failure of empathy is then a central focus of interest for McEwan. In his latest novel, he examines that failure in the context of the breakdown of the symbolic order. In an interview with Mike Collett-White entitled "Complete Surrender" in *Reuters,* speaking of his own personal discovery that he had an older brother and that this child had been given up for adoption by his parents before their marriage says:

> "I don't think it affects my opinion, but I certainly have regrets that they went to their graves feeling they couldn't discuss these things. [...]
>
> They couldn't talk about it even when it was long in the past, which suggests to me it must have still bothered them. [...]

When his brother, who knew he was adopted, succeeded in discovering the identity of his parents, he introduced himself to McEwan, but it was too late for reconciliation with the parents. His father was dead and although McEwan took him to the nursing home where his mother was cared for, she was too far sunken into dementia to recognize the son she had surrendered.

> "I don't feel harshly judgmental", says McEwan. "One has to have lived through war or be immersed in the social attitudes of the time to understand".

That which cannot be spoken is the motor of the drama in *On Chesil Beach*. The first sentence reads, "They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible". That which can not be discussed is a source of shame, because the subject knows him/herself to be lacking. In the love relationship of the couple each is constituted by the other as the 'subject supposed to know'.

Lacan: "Who does not know from experience that it is possible not to want to ejaculate? Who does not know from experience, knowing the recoil imposed on everyone, in so far as it involves terrible promises, by the approach of *jouissance* as such? Who does not know that one may not wish to think? – the entire universal college of professors is there as evidence.

But what does not wanting to desire mean? The whole of analytic experience – which merely gives form to what is for each individual at the very root of his experience – shows us that not to want to desire and to desire are the same thing" (*Seminar XI*, p. 235 10 June 1964).

Then, in response to a question from M. Safouan on the difference between the object in the drive and the object in desire – Lacan responds that there are a lot of very pleasant things that we think we desire, in as much as we are healthy, but all we can say about them is this – we think we desire them. This has nothing to do with psycho-analysis. The objects that are in the field of *Lust*, on the other hand, have so "fundamentally narcissistic a relation with the subject that in the last resort the mystery of the supposed regression of love in identification has its reason in the symmetry of these two fields, which I have designated as *Lust* and *Lust-Ich*. What one cannot keep outside, one always keeps an image of inside. Identification with the object of love is as silly as that" (p. 243, 10 June 1964).

Read in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, chapters on Identification and Hypnosis and the State of being in Love.

Aphanisis is an important concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis (cf. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*). Although he credits Ernest Jones with coining the term, Lacan appropriated and altered its meaning quite substantially. In Lacanian theory, aphanisis describes the process through which a subject is eclipsed behind any signifier which has come to represent him/her. The subject as such is, accordingly, barred, a mere interstice, while the signifier reigns supreme. Barred and riven by the Other (of language), a subject has no choice but to conceive of herself *vis-a-vis* something other than herself, something 'outside' or radically separated from her. In this very process of conceiving of herself, of making herself thinkable, and thus communicable, a subject accomplishes her own radical alienation. And note here, that in McEwan's fiction, Florence who is a violinist and leads a classical string quartet will go on, after the annulment of the marriage to illustrate this Lacanian vision of radical alienation. Lacan's reflections go beyond concerns with impotence, frigidity and sexual functioning in general. Because the Other is the sole means through which a 'subject' can be rendered conceivable, aphanisis, the disappearance or the fading of the subject behind any signifier used to think it, is an essential concept for understanding subjectivity and the threat of the subject's fundamental emptiness.

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