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Cold comfort in *The Comfort of Strangers*: Ian McEwan's modern gothic

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> "In my view the danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety".
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> Melanie Klein[1]

> "Why do we do this? Why do writers do this, and why do readers want it? Why do we reach into ourselves to find the worst thing that can be thought?"
>
> Robert Stone, quoted by Ian McEwan[2]

Last year I presented a paper on Ian McEwan's early stories, which, I argued, seduce the reader into a disturbing confrontation with the perverse imagination. As I pointed out then, although McEwan's later fiction assimilates perverse desire into a more subtle exploration of modern sensibility, it typically includes a startling scene that violently disrupts the ordinary life of his protagonist – itself a kind of sadistic writerly ploy that offers readers a perverse pleasure. Today I want to explore McEwan's use of the perverse in *The Comfort of Strangers*, his most gothic novel (made into a film in 1991, with a screenplay by Harold Pinter). Although as is typical of the gothic, this novel defers the shocking event – a horrifically perverse scene – until the climax, and thus doesn't fit the more typical pattern of McEwan's fiction, in which the traumatic event occurs fairly early, it raises a more general generic question: what do we want from the gothic, a genre which has traditionally been linked to perverse desire?

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[1] Klein, M. (1948). A Contribution to the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 29:114-123.

[2] McEwan remarks in an interview: "In 1986 I was at the Adelaide literary festival where I read the scene from *The Child in Time* in which the little girl is stolen from a supermarket. ... As soon as I was done, Robert Stone got to his feet and delivered a most passionate speech. It really seemed to come from the heart. He said, "Why do we do this? Why do writers do this, and why do readers want it? Why do we reach into ourselves to find the worst thing that can be thought? Literature, especially contemporary literature, keeps reaching for the worst possible case. "I still don't have a clear answer. ... perhaps we need to play out our fears within the safe confines of the imaginary, as a form of hopeful exorcism".

From its inception in the 18th century the gothic has embraced the erotic macabre, casting a dark shadow on enlightenment views of human psychology. Significantly, as we might recall, the gothic began as a spin off of the Burkean sublime, an aesthetic category essentially linked to affect, producing terror and astonishment – an aesthetics of shock and awe. In the face of sublime astonishment, Burke wrote, "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other." (On the Sublime, 58) The horror of the mind being entirely filled with its *object* is the horror gothic fiction depicts; perversely titillating the reader with the prospect of obliteration, the Gothic probes the limits of the psyche through a protagonist's melodramatic confrontation with a fearsome and evil Other.

Moreover, beginning with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the architecture of space has been integral to that confrontation. The classic gothic plot typically situated its protagonist in an imprisoning medieval castle or other labyrinthean structure, its dark and enclosing spaces evoking in the reader fears of helpless entrapment, which as several critics have noted, recall infantile fantasies of a fearsome maternal body. The modern gothic situates its dangers in more realistic and contemporary contexts, more ordinary and familiar places, in the modern city, for example, which has its own labyrinthean spaces – the dark alleyways and barely lit streets so beloved of the masters of cinematic terror as well as the basements and attics of ordinary houses. But whether interior or exterior, these physical sites are constructed to induce a feeling of helplessness in the face of a powerful other, of an anxious vulnerability with which the reader is made to identify. What is remarkable is that in McEwan's modern gothic, the sense of helplessness is itself made suspect; it is a "*culpable* helplessness," a feeling that in the novel *Saturday* McEwan suggested was especially pervasive in our post 9/11 modern times[3]. Why culpable? Where does the guilt come from? What prohibition is being transgressed? What perverse pleasure taken? And what is the relation of that pleasure to "the worst thing that can be thought" as Robert Stone had asked?

In the traditional gothic, whether the protagonist was the evil Gothic male, himself demonically overpowered by his own transgressive desire, or the Gothic female victim, relentlessly pursued by a dangerous male other, both played out a sadomasochistic drama of compulsive lust and helpless surrender by acting out roles that were conventionally gendered; typically it was the woman who enacted the masochistic position. McEwan's modern gothic revitalizes this exhausted pattern by destabilizing the conventional gendering of perverse desire, exploring the attractions of an erotic surrender to the putative death-drive – the Gothic subject par excellence – for both sexes, in a more psychologically sophisticated way[4]. Indeed, as *The Comfort of Strangers* shows, it is not a question of evil but of psychological forces to which we reluctantly but helplessly submit that is the subject of the modern gothic; it is the nature of our wishes that terrifies and astonishes, and induces guilt.

So what are the wishes that *The Comfort of Strangers* explores?

The plot is simple and yet full of psychological twists and turns of phrase that gesture toward a perverse deviation. The protagonists, Colin and Mary, an unmarried British couple in a devitalized relationship, have chosen to return to Venice, the scene of a previous idyllic holiday, to try to rekindle their desire and decide their future. They are in many ways typical of a young modern couple today: narcissistic, aimless, looking for a vitality that they seem to have lost. While there is a significant difference between them – Mary is a divorced mother of two, her absent children linking her to a maternal form of Eros that is unavailable to the self-absorbed Colin – they are too *familiar* (literally

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3 In this context, let me suggest that the gothic's popularity has always been symptomatic of a widespread social and political apprehension, of a sense of helpless vulnerability that the gothic aesthetic particularly engages. It is no accident, for example, that gothic literature emerged in the late 18th century in Britain, when political revolution was in the air, when monarchies were threatened by the political movements in U.S. and France, where the sons rebelled against the authority of self-indulgent paternalistic kings (as in Freud's myth of the primal horde). Externalizing genuine fears, it at the same time eroticizes and parodies them through aesthetic conventions that play with the truly fearsome and make it pleasurable.

4 Here the novel asserts its link to the fiction of transgression and limits, and especially to the writings of Georges Bataille.

like family) to one another. "This was no longer a great passion. The pleasure was in its unhurried friendliness, the familiarity of its rituals and procedures, the secure precision-fit of limbs and bodies, *comfortable*, like a cast returned to its mold" (17, italics mine).

Given this too-close fit, how can a space be carved out for desire? By de-familiarizing their relationship, the novel suggests, by encountering the uncanny and repudiated Other, externalized in the guise of the strange couple with whom they become obsessively involved. Robert – a hirsute physically apelike figure seems to embody McEwan's well-known interest in Darwinian evolution and his mysteriously fragile wife Caroline.

> "A squat figure... He was shorter than Colin, but his arms were exceptionally long and muscular. His hands too were large,the backs covered with matted hair. He wore a tightfitting black shirt, of an artificial semitransparent material, unbuttoned in a neat V almost to his waist. On a chain around his neck hung a gold imitation razor blade which lay slightly askew on the thick pelt of chest hair. Over his shoulder he carried a camera" (26).

A Venetian who had lived in London, Robert has inherited his grandfather's palazzo, and identifies with his family's patriarchal history, insisting that women desire to be dominated by strong men, contemptuous of feminist calls for equality and dismissing their radical demand that rapists be castrated. Caroline, a Canadian who seems more girl than woman has been confined to the palazzo because of a mysterious back injury. Although both act to seduce Mary and Colin into their shared sado-masochistic scenario, it is Colin alone who is the beautiful object of desire, and for Robert, a specifically homoerotic object that his camera has repeatedly and surreptitiously captured in photos. This symbolic capture, what Christian Metz called "an instantaneous *abduction of the object* out of the world into another world, into another kind of time... definitive, like death" (1985, 84, italics mine) – and thus a kind of rape – will be made all too real by the end[5].

Venice, although never named and therefore in a sense, "unreal," is an ideal city for this perverse drama. Once known as the "La Dominante" and the "Queen of the Adriatic" and often cited as one of the most beautiful cities in the world, Venice is rhetorically gendered female[6]. But although a once-dominant queen, and still architecturally preserved whole out of the past, Venice now embodies a kind of *fin de siecle* fantasy of decadent and failing beauty to which tourists flock with their cameras in a scopophilic orgy. Indeed, unlike a beautiful aesthetic object the novel shows this fantasmatic city to be subject to real time and disintegration, a material symbol of the end of a civilization as it inevitably succumbs to modern pollution and rising water levels. In what seems an intentional interplay with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, a kind of ghostly pregenitor text that haunts this novel, McEwan not only explores its Dionysian temptations but also catalogues visible and symptomatic details of its decay – waste residue, dustbins, black flies, and a hospital that is ironically itself a figure of disease[7].

But perhaps most important for any Gothic plot, Venice is a confusing labyrinth of dark and narrow passageways that lure the visitor into its precincts, a city where an outsider inevitably loses his or her bearings, as Colin and Mary repeatedly do, before they are taken in hand by the sinister Robert. Indeed, getting lost seems to be their unconscious goal. As Adam Phillips reminds us, in contrast to being lost – a more primitive state in which there is no object of desire, no direction, no boundaries to the self and the other (and one could argue that both Mary and Colin are already lost in this sense before they go to

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5 Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October*, Vol. 34, (Autumn, 1985), pp. 81-90

6 Venice has long been fictionally exploited as the site of decadent sensuality.

7 McEwan, whose fiction is always haunted by literary echoes, puts this novel into ghostly conversation with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, which tracks the erotic captivation of a bourgeois vacationer by a beautiful boy, whom he secretly and voyeuristically pursues in spite of the cholera contagion spreading in the city. But Robert, in spite of his voyeuristic pursuit of Colin, is no Ashenbach; Robert's obsession with his past humiliation, and his consequent will to control, demands a more perverse enactment, the destruction of the beautiful object, an act that serves to reassert his own potency, even as he unconsciously courts the punishment that will follow.

Venice) – "getting lost" is a more complex and ambivalent enactment[8]; it defers the goal of "getting there," temporarily deviates from an anxiety-provoking object, or resists finding it; but it is also a way of losing (throwing off) one's familiar orientation in order to discover the excitement of the unfamiliar, in a kind of rebirth though the perverse. Getting lost, Colin and Mary encounter the black-shirted Robert, and while his masculinist, fascistic ideas repel them, his very alien certainties and sadistic stance offer an ironic "comfort" – unsettling their familiar relationship, and indeed, their very assumptions about the nature of their desire, and opening up a risky kind of freedom, a liberated Eros.

Thus after their first visit to the palazzo, after Robert has both openly admired Colin's beauty and broken the genteel surface of Colin's merely conversational sparring by actually punching him in the stomach – a physical act of domination which neither verbally acknowledges – Colin and Mary lock themselves into their hotel-room for several days, indulging in their newly aroused lust, interspersing their sexual acts with intimate talk, "formulating" as McEwan somewhat ironically writes, "theories about the past"(79) " – about sex, about the difference between men and women's orgasms, about their childhood, all of which McEwan ironically undercuts by his use of indirect discourse, as if to suggest that their comfortable talk is a cover-up of an uncomfortable recognition. Thus, as he slyly notes, they avoided any mention of "the cause of their renewal" (81).

Yet McEwan's text indicates the perverse nature of "the cause" through their playful and sexually arousing exchanges of fantasies that "won from the listener consent to a lifetime of subjection and humiliation." They "cling to each other like children" fearful of separation; they "joked about handcuffing themselves together and throwing away the key," an allusion to Paolo and Francesca, who, we might recall, subordinated reason to desire (Dante, Inf. 5.38-9). Sharing fantasies of erotic domination "that came from nowhere, out of the dark," they imagine the body of the other as a helpless passive instrument of desire, without subjectivity, to be used and abused. In short, in this interval, Mcewan allows them the erotic freedom of a child-like pre-oedipal Eden, where perverse subjection is innocent play. But the risks of imagining such total entrapment, objectification and absolute control of the other become apparent when their flirtation with perverse desire ends in Colin's real death.

In the closing pages of the novel, having, in an uncanny repetition, returned to Robert's palazzo, Colin and Mary are separated. Colin is compelled to go with Robert to the public male enclave, Robert's bar, while Mary remains in the house with Caroline, and in each gendered site the revelations unfold: on the male side, Robert openly indulges in a homoerotic flirtation in order to humiliate (and metaphorically castrate) Colin and thereby assert his own power. Colin's response is unusual: almost as if he sensed some awful future that awaited him, he has a momentary impulse to escape social relations and their constraints altogether, to surrender to the solitary sensuality of the moment, acting out a primal narcissism that is impossible[9]. As Colin, walking *forward* with Robert toward the inevitable climax, looks *behind* him, McEwan's diction exposes Colin's desire:

> A narrow commercial street, barely more than an alley, broke the line of weatherbeaten houses. It wound under shopping awnings and under washing... and vanished enticingly into shadow. It asked to be explored, but explored alone, without consultations with, or obligations towards, a companion. to step down there now as if completely free, to be released from the arduous states of play of psychological condition, to have leisure to be open... to perception, to the world whose breathtaking, incessant cascade against the senses was so easily and habitually ignored... to step down there now... melt into the shadow, would be so very easy[10]. (106)

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8 Remarks delivered in a talk to the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis.

9 Freud (1914) postulated an early stage of primal narcissism during which time an infant is preoccupied with its self and with its own pleasure while being oblivious of the needs of others.

10 This is clearly an echo of the end of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, when Paul, devastated by his mother's death, considers his options:

> On every side the immense dark silence seemed pressing him, so tiny a spark, into extinction, and yet, almost nothing, he could not be extinct. Night, in which everything was lost, went reaching out, beyond stars and sun. Stars and sun, a few bright grains, went spinning round for terror, and holding each other in

Meanwhile, back at the palazzo, Caroline, having drugged Mary into helpless passivity, confesses her masochistic devotion to Robert's sadistic demands, showing Mary the photographs of Colin – the captured object – that have become their aphrodisiac. When Robert and Colin return, all the secret machinations of Robert and Caroline's plot, and of McEwan's, are now ready to be revealed. At the climax, in what is the novel's most macabre scene, Mary, unable to warn Colin of his danger, is compelled to watch helplessly as Colin is essentially *raped*, that is, sexually objectified, "feminized" and then killed. But not before McEwan suggests ironies that compound the perverse play of the novel. Thus for example, before Robert kills Colin, he and Caroline manually explore Colin's face and body in a physical re-enactment of an earlier scene in which Mary, looking at Colin asleep, had "examine[d] his face as one might a statue's in all its exquisite detail" (55). Mary had enjoyed Colin as a work of art; Robert and Caroline enjoy him as an erotic fetish object that keeps their own passion alive[11]. The two are analogous, McEwan suggests, thus linking aesthetic pleasure to perverse desire.

And what is perverse desire? The novel develops its own perverse answer when, pinned to the wall, kissed on the lips, the terrified and astonished Colin at his climactic moment asks the novel's underlying question, "What do you want?" Denying that they either "want" or "need," Robert and Caroline leave unspoken the relevant but missing third term "desire" – but Robert acts it out when he quickly and casually slits Colin's wrist. Significantly, the act itself is described in a modifying dependent phrase so that it is easy for the reader to miss. Only through a moment of deferred understanding – a *nachtraglichkeit* that heightens the horror – do we realize what has just occurred, and understand that the slit is a castration *that has been sought*: a theme on which the novel has already played variations. More thematically, the slit is also a metaphor for the breach in the social and linguistic surface, like the breach in the ego that defines trauma, that reveals repudiated desire, that opens up the abyss, the gap, the void, what can't be spoken. Indeed, whatever term we use, finally, the word itself acts as a fetish, a means of screening while simultaneously pointing to the unspeakable Real toward which the gothic leads.

This is the "what happens" to reveal desire. But McEwan is also interested in why it happens. Indeed, McEwan offers us an array of motives for Robert's act, by giving an entire chapter to Robert's story within the larger story – itself a quasi-gothic tale of love, transgression, and punishment, of being beaten by his sadistic and tyrannical father and, even worse, exiled from his confirming gaze because of his envious sisters' treachery and his mother's inability to rescue him. No stranger to psychoanalytic narrative, McEwan leans on Freud's discussion of masochism in "A Child is Being Beaten," in which the child's fantasy of being beaten by the father is transformed into a masochistic gratification, and thus suggests the negative oedipal structure of Robert's obsessive desire. But Robert's tale also points to other motives. Certainly given the novel's play with narcissistic surfaces, Robert's act – the feminizing/castration/killing of Colin – is a reenactment of his own trauma with the roles reversed; it is a narcissistic triumph over his infantile humiliation[12]. But perhaps an

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> embrace, there in a darkness that outpassed them all, and left them tiny and daunted. So much, and himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing.
> "Mother!" he whispered – "mother!"
> She was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone, intermingled herself. He wanted her to touch him, have him alongside with her.
> But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly. (654)

Colin, however, does opt to surrender to the darkness.

[11] The function of beauty and art in western culture is two-fold, to nourish and make whole on the one hand through a healing immersion in what Christopher Bollas has called "the aesthetic moment," but also to surrender one's subjectivity to the external object as master. In this art is both transitional object and fetish object.

[12] My reading of this scene owes much to Marilyn Fabe, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at UC Berkeley and psychoanalytic interpreter extraordinaire.

even more compelling motive is Robert's unconscious rage at *maternal* helplessness as well as his identification with it. For he constructs a perverse primal scene that, in order to gratify and arouse, *must be watched* by a mother-woman who is unable to prevent the death of her beloved. In spite of its being a function of patriarchal power, the culpability of the mother who is powerless to rescue her child demands punishment, just as Robert unconsciously demands it of himself at the end by leaving clues for the police. So Mary is made to watch, unable to rescue her lover as he sinks to the floor, his eyes blazing at her across the room in disbelief[13]:

> "Mary?" he said anxiously, like someone calling in a dark room, "Mary?"
> I'm coming," Mary said. "I'm over here."

There is a terrible familiarity in the dialogue of this scene: we can hear the anxious child afraid of the dark calling for his mother, and yet we know that like the iconic mother Mary who was unable to alter her son's destiny, this Mary can't help either; her assurance is false: she can only watch as her beloved Colin, figured here as her child, bleeds to death. This is perhaps the worst thing that can be thought: Robert thinks it; McEwan thinks it. And like Mary we are forced to "watch" it, to think it also as we read.

Why do we read it? Why do writers write it? And why is the gothic again so popular in our time? Does the answer lie in our common sense of culpable helplessness, of having submitted to the lure of passivity and disintegration in the face of the overwhelming power of the Other? Certainly among Western nations the sense of helplessness has increased exponentially in recent years. As McEwan once speculated, "perhaps we need to play out our fears within the safe confines of the imaginary, as a form of hopeful exorcism." The gothic is such an imaginary structure, a play area for the dark side of the psyche[14].

At the denouement, the point of view becomes Mary's; hers is the maternally inflected feminist consciousness that McEwan uses to reflect on what has happened: "How... the sexual imagination, men's ancient dreams of hurting, and women's of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organizing principle, which distorted all relations, all truth" (126). That principle, Mary had asserted earlier (80), is patriarchy, which has resisted and perverted the evolution of sexual relations. In creating Robert as the arch-villain obsessed with patriarchal law and in showing its perverting effects on men and women, McEwan seems to believe this too; yet he also suggests that Mary's view of a single principle is too restricted, that there is a primal masochism that precedes the social organization of sexuality, that the erotics of pain, giving it or receiving it, is a primal primate urge which, although patriarchy has divided its enactment according to gender, belongs to both men and women.

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[13] In both novel and film, we as audience are made to be, like Mary, helplessly present at a scene that has been prepared for us. McEwan here manipulates the experience of *nachtraglichkeit*, the sudden recognition of a past desire, hinted at throughout the novel and film, that has drawn the characters back to the palazzo, a past scene in which the future had been already inscribed, a primal scene of wounding that now we watch from a distance in paralyzed fascination. (One might recall the etymology of that term in the Roman amulet called the fascinum=the phallic fetish that paralyzes).

[14] McEwan describes his interest "in writing at the edge of human experience. But now I was beginning to take character more seriously. These moments of crisis were to become a way of exploring and testing character. How we might withstand, or fail to withstand, an extreme experience, what moral qualities and questions are brought forward, how we live with the consequences of our decisions, how memory torments, what time does, what resources we have to fall back on. At the time this was hardly a conscious choice or a systematic program; it was simply how it came out in a number of novels, beginning with this one. And of course, these scenes – the stealing of the child, the black dogs, the fall from a helium balloon, and so on – offered attractive fictional possibilities in themselves. They presented challenges of pace, description, a sort of drumbeat of sentences, cadences you can only get from action scenes. They also offered a means of exerting a hold over the reader. And I could have action and ideas. I developed a taste for these various elements over a period of time". In short, McEwan places his work in the tradition of "transgressive fiction," which, as Wikipedia notes, is "based on the premise that knowledge is to be found at the edge of experience and that the body is the site for gaining knowledge."

Yet this too is a single organizing principle, so let me turn the screw of interrogation one last time, and suggest with Freud that perhaps the death drive, cause of the desire which masochism enacts, is not the last word; perhaps like D.H. Lawrence before him, McEwan envisions another more positive outcome in an Eros liberated: to lose the old exhausted self and its restrictive norms in the service of some kind of vital rebirth – the shock that restores a connection to the Real. Does McEwan imagine a psychological evolution and cultural revitalization through the perverse? Destruction in the service of becoming? In subsequent fictions McEwan would temper the gothic excess, delving more deeply into character, but continue to write "at the edge of human experience" seeking on that margin answers to such questions.

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