

THROUGH THE EYE OF A POSTMODERNIST CHILD: IAN MCEWAN'S "HOMEMADE"¹

JORGE SACIDO ROMERO
LAURA M^a LOJO RODRÍGUEZ

Universidad de Santiago de Compostela
jorge.sacido@usc.es
laura.lojo@usc.es

107

At an interview published in 1995, Ian McEwan stated that in the collection *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) “[t]he eye of the child gave me somewhere else to stand, a different way—a colder regard, perhaps—a way of looking at the adult world, of describing it as though one came from another planet” (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995: 2). McEwan was specifically referring to the stories in his first work of fiction as pieces about adolescents, individuals who, though closer to adults, are still children: “Adolescents were useful in the short story form, because they were full of adult desire and childish incapability” (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995: 2). This paper aims to examine the aesthetic, psychological and historical implications of one of the crudest representations of boyish experience in English literature: McEwan’s “Homemade”, which was the author’s literary debut and the opening piece in *First Love, Last Rites*. In “Homemade”, the adults’ authority is either circumvented, or directly undermined, so that ironic cynicism becomes the protagonist’s way of dealing with the world, an attitude that proves both empowering and disabling.

McEwan’s short story is articulated—in his own description of the narrative—as a critique of the adult world from the perspective of distance and alienation which the eye of the child provides. Rhetorically speaking, the child’s perspective proves particularly fruitful in this sense, for it renders an alienated, marginal, distorted and de-socialised vision of normative power. In Ian McEwan’s “Homemade”, the

power and presence of the adult world is revealingly diminished, symbolic paternal authority ironically debunked by a cynical and enlightened boy who transforms the world into a playground for his sadistic and obscene games, and yet, paradoxically, seems to draw little enjoyment from his exploits. The choice of the child's gaze proves particularly fruitful for our purpose; the child is more than an aesthetic innovation leaping *ex nihilo* into fictive existence, or a surrogate for unconscious, impulsive lives, for as a symbolic referent it possesses "a transformative power which influences not only the image we have of children, but also the image we have of ourselves as adults" (Kuhn 1982: 4). In other words, it would be useful to reflect on the investments which culture makes in the idea of childhood at particular moments of history, for such investments may mirror relevant ideological functions: the child may become a pattern of meaning and be conceived *culturally* as a set of ideas, attitudes and practices.

The child figure in literature has often been endowed with shifting—and even opposing—characteristics, which invariably mirror social and ideological transformations. The child served the Romantics as a symbol of the artist's imagination and sensibility, inasmuch as a vehicle for foregrounding increasing dissatisfaction with industrial and utilitarian values, "a symbol of Nature set against the forces abroad in society actively de-naturing humanity" (Coveney 1957: 31). Childhood became a pivotal literary theme as a result of its positive association with primitivism and irrationalism (Ziolkowski 2001: 2).² Following the premise that the child sees the world through prelapsarian eyes, the Romantics equated childhood with unblemished innocence and considered its "freshness of sensation as a norm for adult artistic experience" (Abrams 1973: 382). The Romantic consecration of childhood caught hold of the modern imagination and went through sentimental permutations in Victorian times, yet the work of modernist and postmodernist authors proposed radical reformulations of children's pristine innocence and unadulterated imaginative force.

Although the Romantic concept of the child's 'original innocence' already stood in utter contradiction with the dogma of 'original sin' central to the Christian tradition, it was in late nineteenth-century scientific discourse that the Romantic idealisation of the child was severely undermined (Coveney 1957: 33). While Cesare Lombroso (*L'uomo delinquente* 1876) and G. Stanley Hall (*Adolescence* 1904) stressed their lack of morality and, even, their criminality, Sigmund Freud's analytical exposure of the sexual life of the child posed its most serious challenge (Freud 1995: 547). *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality* (1903) tackled scandalous aspects of infantile experience such as masturbation, seduction fantasies, and children's sadistic conception of the sexual act. Freud showed in his analyses of infantile sexuality that children experience the adult world as both a source of

benevolent and normalising restrictions, and as menacing, mystifying and traumatic. According to Kuhn, it is the irruption of sex (and death) that spoils the Edenic harmony which the child protagonists of the Western literary tradition enjoyed (1982: 132).

However, in the reformulation of the idea of childhood from the turn of the nineteenth century onwards, the dark side of childhood went hand in hand with more palatable aspects, heir to the Romantic view, particularly the universal tendency to fantasy-making in games and daydreams about which Freud also spoke.³ In, for instance, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911), Freud stated that fantasy-making was free from the restrictions of material reality and social regulations—or the reality principle—and was "subordinated to the pleasure-principle alone" (Freud 2001: 222). Play and daydreams are compensations for the strictures imposed on children by the intervention of socialising institutions (principally, family and school) whose love and acceptance they must learn to find a rewarding substitute for fantasizing as they develop into adults.⁴ Thus, surmounting the narcissistic projections onto the real world through the internalisation of the social norm, the assumption of responsibilities and the acceptance of real-life restrictions—one's own limitations included—was the endpoint on the road towards adulthood.

109

McEwan's "Homemade"—his first published work—has recently been described as an example of "postmodernist depthlessness" (March-Russell 2009: 228). Apropos the stories in the collection, McEwan repeatedly insisted that he initially planned each piece as "a kind of pastiche of certain style", "as a way of trying on different clothes—writing pastiche" (Hamilton [1978] in Childs 2006: 10; Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995: 2). The stories evidence a young author at the beginning of his career trying to find his own voice through a characteristically postmodernist strategy: parody and pastiche (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995: 2).⁵ McEwan's initial literary steps targeted authors such as Henry Miller or Norman Mailer through an ironic rewriting of their stories about the triumphant sexual exploits of male heroes (Hamilton [1978] in Childs 2006: 10; Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995: 2).

A beginner's strategy of parodic dissociation from preceding authors, typical of intergenerational relations in the literary field, resembles to a certain degree the attitude of the protagonist of "Homemade", bitterly criticising adult role models and ironically debunking his best friend's position as guide in the rites of passage into adulthood. Yet, whereas the author, Ian McEwan, did succeed in making a name as literary artist through the originality of a first work that achieved public recognition, the *unnamed* narrator of "Homemade" proved unequal to the challenge of going through with his first sexual encounter as an initial step into the

adult world. The I-narrator (presumably an adult) revisits the episode of his failure and displays a substantial degree of rhetorical dexterity he already possessed in his early years in disavowing the central sexual conflict that determines his life. He might know the theory, but cynically hides his lack of real experience of the secrets of life and poses as a connoisseur.

In this sense, there is a basic similarity between the protagonist of “Homemade” and that in “Conversation with a Cupboard Man” —another of the narrators in *First Love, Last Rites* who McEwan described as “alienated figures, outsiders, sociopaths” (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995: 3): “How did I become an adult?” the latter asks himself, “I’ll tell you, I never did learn. I have to pretend. [...] I’m always thinking about it, like I was on the stage” (76). Indeed, both the experience recounted and the narrative itself could be described as a performance masking the pretender’s impotence when coming to terms with his own sexuality, or when successfully choosing a sexual object —the defining feature of adolescent sexuality, according to Freud (1995: 572). Despite the narrator’s flamboyantly playful style, he remains throughout a child, for whom sexual experience is unendurably traumatic; one who mimics (as children do in games), but does not fully internalise, the adult world. In tune with other narrators of the collection, the protagonist of “Homemade” dramatises “ignorance, profound ignorance about the world” (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 1995: 4).

110

As McEwan suggested in the initial quotation, the child whose “eye” offered a new perspective on the adult world in “Homemade” is at a far remove from his idealised Romantic counterpart. In this story, the adult world is diminished; symbolic paternal authority is scorned and kept in the background by a cynically and precociously enlightened boy for whom the surrounding world is a playground for his sadistic games till, forced by what McEwan called “the absurdities of adolescent male dignity” (Childs 2006: 10), his attempts to lose his virginity end up in a debacle where he rapes his ten-year-old sister Connie, who falls asleep while he penetrates and ejaculates inside her. This “one fuck”, which is “the subject of this story”, is the single event which he is incapable of mastering convincingly through his irony and which forces the narrator’s account into an unacknowledged exposure of his flaws which undermine his rhetorical control (14).

To bring our argumentation into a wider historical focus we should pose the following question: what type of society can engender such a narcissistic, cynical and potentially perverse individual? The young protagonist of “Homemade” does tell us something about the particular historical situation, about crucial changes in the process of socialisation which increasingly becomes that of the “demise of Oedipus” which goes hand in hand (in inverse proportions, as it were) with the return of the Father of *jouissance* (enjoyment) characteristic of postmodernism

(Žižek 1999: 315; Žižek 1992: 124). Therefore, as we will show, through the eye of the peculiar child in "Homemade" a new, more insightful perspective on an adult world undergoing a historical transformation is attained.

Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (2004) have extensively analysed the proliferation of cultural representations of children in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the context of horror and violence. The depiction of queer, evil children in literature was particularly abundant in the 1970s, a time when the middle-class family was felt to be vulnerable to the ideological attacks of feminism, civil rights, and gay liberation of the late 1960s (Bruhm 2006: 99). The title in the McEwan story is a warning label as to what is under scrutiny, and the development and denouement of the narrative shows that the homemade product is far from being the good, functional product expected from the intervention of the family as the primary socialising institution. The male protagonist, whose life experience from twelve to fourteen years of age is recounted, does not take part in the Oedipal family drama of traditional psychoanalysis: neither a balancing identification with the father, nor a repressed incestuous desire for the mother (and, by extension, for the sister) is the outcome of family relations. The youth shows his absolute contempt for his father as the embodiment of the work-ethic:

I used to laugh when I thought of the twelve-hour shift my father worked in the flour mill, of his exhausted, blanched, ill-tempered face when he got home in the evening, and I laughed a little louder when I thought of the thousands who each morning poured out of the terraced houses like our own to labour through the week, rest up on Sunday and then back again on Monday to toil in the mills, factories, timber yards and quaysides of London, returning each night older, more tired and no richer. (15)

The figure of the father is so diminished that he is no rival for the son either as a social ideal (he stole books and sold them on the black market), nor as the obstacle to the satisfaction of an incestuous desire he does not have: "My mother vast and grotesque, the skin hanging from her like flayed toad-hides, and my ten-year-old sister was an ugly bat whom as a child I could hardly bring myself to look at, let alone share a bath-tub with" (14).⁶ The protagonist is likewise absolutely derisive towards the school, the other major socialising institution. What is specifically under attack is the formative virtue of games and sports, so important in the British educational system since the times of John Ruskin, which the protagonist laughs at with sadistic gusto:

Raymond was a mediocre runner and was among ten others chosen to represent the school in the sub-counties meeting. I always went along to the meetings. In fact there was no other sport I watched with such good heart, such entertainment and elation as a good cross-country. I loved the racked, contorted faces of the runners as

they came up the tunnel of flags and crossed the finishing line; I found especially interesting those who came after the first fifty or so, running harder than any of the other contestants and competing demoniacally among themselves for the hundred and thirteenth place in the field. I watched them stumble up the tunnel of flags, clawing at their throats, retching, flailing their arms and falling to the grass, convinced that I had before me here a vision of human futility. (16)

Moreover, fantasy-making as the mental and performative dimension free from the restrictions of the reality principle of which we spoke above is, in the case of “Homemade”, used for perverted goals. The private realm of the home—a haven of safety and comfort, and the repository of consecrated social values to be instilled into the minds of the young to transform them into normalised adults—is wounded at its very heart through the violation of the regulating prohibition of incest by way of a premeditated manipulation of ludic dynamics. The protagonist proposes that he and his ten-year-old sister Connie play hide-and-seek and “mummies and daddies” as “warming up” activities that culminate in the pathetic rape of the latter. Indeed, children’s play, traditionally viewed by adults as innocent and charming, is subverted and perverted to become a tool for mischief and utter moral degradation.

112

The story’s main character could be thus described in McEwan’s own terms as completely immoral, as an example of “a failure of the imagination”, the tool which “permits us to understand what it is like to be someone else” (Louvel, Ménégald and Fortin 1995: 6). McEwan states *à la* Rousseau that human beings are “innately moral beings” and that “social behaviour is an instinct with us” (Louvel, Ménégald and Fortin 1995: 6). The protagonist’s incapability of showing the slightest degree of empathy towards anyone therefore poses a major moral problem in “Homemade” because, in the author’s own view, “it is at the level of empathy that moral questions begin in fiction” (Louvel, Ménégald and Fortin 1995: 6).

What is the origin of the protagonist’s evil in “Homemade” if human beings are innately moral? We cannot account for his malice by saying that adolescents always rebel against social impositions and resist authority to affirm their own identity. Transgression of the law in his case is never deterred by prohibition, starting with those prohibitions imposed by father and family and continuing with school norms and other social restrictions. Violation of laws and prohibitions does not in his case bring a sense of guilt which the traditional version of the superego in psychoanalysis inflicts on the subject to rectify behaviour and police thoughts and unlawful desires. He is invulnerable to the twinges of a guilty conscience because such an agency seems inoperative in his case. He drinks whisky, smokes cannabis, enjoys “the thrills of shoplifting” and makes more

money than his father and uncles put together by selling the "slim volumes of prestigious verse" he steals at Foyle's to an unscrupulous, corrupt Mile End Road dealer (10).⁷ He even supersedes Raymond, the friend that falls short in performing the function of guide into the "secrets of adult life": "The world he showed me, all its fascinating detail, lore and sin, the world for which he was a kind of standing master of ceremonies, never really suited Raymond" (10); "Raymond was my Mephistopheles, he was a clumsy Virgil to my Dante, showing me the way to a Paradiso where he himself could not tread" (12). This is the reason why the narrator, at the beginning of the story, says: "it was ironic that Raymond of all people should want to make me aware of my virginity" (9). Both Raymond and the protagonist, distinguish themselves from their peers, whose doings show a balance of pleasure and duty: "While others of our age picked their noses over their stamp collections or homework, Raymond and I spent many hours here [a café near Finsbury Park Odeon] discussing mostly easy ways of making money, and drinking large mugs of tea" (13). And yet, though Raymond, who is one year his elder, has knowledge of what is illegal, immoral or obscene ("the secrets of adult life"), his failure to achieve real experience of the latter is underlined by the narrator: "He knew that world well enough, but it —so to speak— did not know him" (10).

This cafe close to Finsbury Park Odeon is where the narrator, accompanied by his *manqué* Mephistopheles, overhears adults relating their mischievous deeds and constructs his half-baked ideal models of licentiousness. The following passage, which we quote selectively, sounds like a *précis* of libertine literature:

We listened transfixed to their unintelligible fantasies and exploits, of deals with lorry drivers, lead from church roofs, fuel missing from the City Engineer's department, and then of cunts, bits, skirt, of strokings, beatings, fuckings, suckings, of arses and tits, behind, above, below, in front, with, without, [...] we listened to who and how the dustman fucked, how the Co-op milkmen fitted in it, what the coalman could hump, what the carpet-fitter could lay, what the builders could erect, what the meter man could inspect, what the bread man could deliver, the gas man sniff out, the plumber plumb, the electrician connect, the doctor inject, the lawyer solicit, the furniture man install [...] I listened without understanding, remembering and filing away anecdotes which I would one day use myself, putting by histories of perversions and sexual manners—in fact *a whole sexual morality*, so that when finally I began to understand, from my own experience, what it was all about, I had on tap a complete education which, augmented by a quick reading of the more interesting parts of Havelock Ellis and Henry Miller, earned me the reputation of being the juvenile connoisseur of coitus to whom dozens of males—and fortunately females, too—came to seek advice. And all this, a reputation which followed me to art college and enlivened my career there, *all this after only one fuck—the subject of this story*. (14; emphases added)

After this passage, to which we will return, the reader learns about Raymond's plan to meet Lulu Smith, who "will let you see it for a shilling" (14). They had spoken about her earlier in the narrative as the promiscuous, insatiable, obscenely carnal model of female taken from Miller's *Tropics* who, at the point in time from which the story is told, still overwhelms the narrator:

Lulu Smith! Dinky Lulu! The very name *curls* a chilly hand round my balls. Lulu Lamour, of whom it was said she would do anything, and that she had done everything. [...] Lulu Slim—but how my mind *reels*—whose physical enormity was matched only by the enormity of her reputed sexual appetite and prowness, her grossness only by the grossness she inspired, the legend only by the reality. (12-13; emphases added)

The use of present tense ("curls", "reels") indicates the overpowering effect that this sexual object still has on the grown-up narrator, echoing the fear his younger self felt as he faced the challenge of his first sexual encounter and denoting his inability to come to terms with his own sexuality. The narrator's position of enunciation (the reputed *jouisseur*) is thus undermined by the fact that he lacks the experience of real sexual intercourse with a woman. In "Portrait of the Subject as a Young Man" (1991), Lynda Broughton read "Homemade" as a story about male anxiety concerning women's sexual power that turns the tables of traditional gender relations. Broughton highlighted the rape scene, as the ten-year-old girl not only does not react in panic at her brother's sexual advances, but laughs at his penis ("So silly, it looks so silly" [23]) and tutors him as to how to penetrate her ("I know where it goes,' she said, and lay back on the bed, her legs wide apart" [23]). The problem with Broughton's otherwise exhaustive and subtle analysis is that she took for granted that "Homemade" is a story of a successful rite of passage into maturity and credited the protagonist with a knowledge he does not really acquire: "[Homemade] recount[s] the events which constituted the hero's progress from innocence to experience [...] The last knowledge the hero is to acquire is, of course, sexual knowledge, the knowledge of woman" (Broughton [1991] in Childs 2006: 18). As we will show in what follows, the hero's passage into (sexual) maturity is truncated; a failure which looks paradoxical given that he inhabits a world marked by permissiveness.

McEwan stated that the stories collected in *First Love, Last Rites* are about "all kinds of frustrations" (Louvel, Ménégaldó and Fortin 1995: 2). Frustration undercuts the narrator's ironic detachment and the character's gleeful cynicism in "Homemade". He is unable to enjoy something that he knows, in theory, to be enjoyable. Moreover, his connoisseurship is a fake, a veil of pretence, because, as he himself confesses, it rests on "only one fuck—the subject of this story" (14). He was pressed into doing something despicable because of the shame he felt at

his own virginity, "the last room in the mansion [...] a total anathema, my malodorous albatross" (13). Unwilling to have sex with a seemingly real connoisseur, Lulu Smith, he rapes his sister and feels absolutely frustrated: "I sat there in the lonely detumescent blankness, numbed by this final humiliation into the realization that this was no real girl beside me, this was no true representative of that sex; this was no boy, certainly, nor was it finally a girl—it was my sister, after all" (23). This "one fuck" is the only evidence in the text of the protagonist's sexual experience as there is no account of other, more gratifying, more fulfilling episodes, but just some general remarks such as "when I finally began to understand, *from my own experience*, what it was all about", or self-congratulatory statements such as "the juvenile connoisseur of coitus to whom dozens of males—and *fortunately females, too*— came to seek advice" (14; emphases added).

It is clear that the protagonist's lack of satisfaction does not derive from his sense of guilt as his rape of Connie is not experienced as a violation of the incest taboo. He does not feel remorse for what he had done while his parents were away. Initially, it seems that frustration rests on the devaluation of the object: she is not "finally a girl", a real woman with whom he could say he had lost his virginity and left behind his childhood (23). However, his strong dissatisfaction after this pathetic sexual debut does not arouse in him an expected desire for other encounters in which to show his manliness: "Tomorrow I would tell Raymond to forget the appointment with Lulu" (23). Bearing this in mind and taking also into account our grounded suspicion that the rape was the narrator's only act of sexual intercourse, we conclude that sexual enjoyment eludes him, that he is incapable of finding satisfaction in sex, a frustration he tries to counterbalance by posing as connoisseur of the pleasures of coitus. Readers are faced with an apparent anomaly. The protagonist recognises no limits to his immoral actions but at the same time finds no pleasure in sex, which in our culture is supposed to be enjoyment *par excellence*.

Frustration has nothing to do with guilt, with the intervention of an internalised parental agency that punishes his illicit wishes and actions. Its cause is to be sought not in inhibiting sexual repressions he would ironically disavow, but, rather, in the very absence of prohibition itself. It could be argued that what is at work here is repressed homosexuality, a resistance to compliance with the "heterosexual imperative" dominant in society, hence his rather cryptic affirmation near the beginning that "this story is *about Raymond* and not about virginity, coitus, incest and self-abuse" (Butler 1993: 2, 9; emphasis added). Raymond, who figures as a failed guide and a weakling to be laughed at, is nevertheless placed ambiguously at the centre of the story, as the focus of the narrator's concern, without further explanation. Or, even more strongly, one could argue that what determines the

protagonist's sexual inhibition is the masculine fear of women, the anxieties caused by this object of desire that threatens to undermine male power, for which we find more explicit evidence in the text: such as the prospect of having “to perform the terrifyingly obscure” in his encounter with Lulu Smith or his little sister's sexual expertise referred to above (14). Yet, the point we want to make is that the obstacle to enjoyment is precisely that there is no obstacle, that the barrier of repression is lifted in a way that suffocates the subject and leaves him sexually impotent.

At the beginning of *For They Know Not What They Do*, Slavoj Žižek comments on Freud's inability to help his colleague Edoardo Weiss with the case of a Slovene patient who was completely impotent. This young man's character and predicament bears some basic resemblance to that of the protagonist of “Homemade”:

He [the Slovene] is, in Weiss's words, ‘very immoral’, he exploits his neighbours and deceives with no kind of moral scruple —yet in all this he is far from able to achieve relaxed fruition in sex, without any kind of ‘internal obstruction’; he is ‘completely impotent’, enjoyment is entirely forbidden him. (Žižek 1991: 9)

116

For this man there are no moral limitations, yet he cannot enjoy sex. The explanation for this apparent lack of logic is not to be found in Freud, but in Lacan's radical redefinition of the agency of the superego. When what Lacan called the-Name-of-the-Father (the set of internalised social regulations and restrictions) is suspended, the subject's access to enjoyment is blocked. The superego of traditional psychoanalysis was the normalising and pacifying agency in charge of, on the one hand, ensuring that we obey the law and refrain from violating the prohibitions, and, on the other, regulating our access to appropriate forms of enjoyment. However, for Lacan, the superego is to be conceived of in radically different terms:

Lacan's fundamental thesis is that superego in its most fundamental dimension is an *injunction to enjoyment*: the various forms of superego commands are nothing but variations on the same motif: ‘Enjoy!’ Therein consists the opposition between Law and superego: Law is the agency of prohibition which regulates the distribution of enjoyment on the basis of a common, shared renunciation (the ‘symbolic castration’), whereas superego marks a point at which *permitted* enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into *obligation* to enjoy —which, one must add, is the most effective way to block access to enjoyment. (Žižek 1991: 237)

With the demise of the Oedipal father dramatised in “Homemade”, the pressure of this obscene superegoic agency is increased. Its presence is to be found in the collection of sexual experiences the protagonist overhears adults talk about at the café near Finsbury Park Odeon complemented by passages from the literature of perversion which constitute for him “a whole sexual morality”: that is, a whole set

of prescriptions ("morality") to enjoy. The protagonist's passage into adulthood is truncated by this suffocating superego imperative, so much so that his sexuality remains in actual practice infantile and narcissistically masturbatory:

Raymond acquainted me with the dubious pleasures of masturbation. At the time I was twelve, the dawn of my sexual day. We were exploring a cellar on a bomb site, [...] when Raymond [...] began to rub his prick with a coruscating vigour, inviting me to do the same. I did and soon became suffused with a warm, indistinct pleasure which intensified to a floating, melting sensation as if my guts might at any time drift away to nothing. And all this time our hands pumped furiously. I was beginning to congratulate Raymond on his discovery of such a simple, inexpensive yet pleasurable way of passing the time, and at the same time wondering if I could not dedicate my whole life to this glorious sensation —and I suppose looking back now in many respects I have— I was about to express all manner of things when I was lifted by the scruff of the neck, my arms, my legs, my insides, haled, twisted, racked, and producing for all this two dollops of sperm which flipped over Raymond's Sunday jacket—it was Sunday—and dribbled into his breast pocket. (11; emphasis added)

McEwan approaches sexuality—one of his central themes—to expose its darkest aspects and its most traumatic effects, which are frequently related to the young characters that populate his fiction. As we have argued in the foregoing pages, in "Homemade", one of the author's earliest pieces, the substitution of the traditional (Oedipal) limitation of our access to enjoyment by the post-Oedipal superegoic commandment to enjoy aggravates the imbalance caused by sexuality to a point that the protagonist is left stranded in a particular mode of subjectivity that can nevertheless be contextualised as typically postmodernist: playful, ironic, cynical.

Notes

¹. This research has been funded by the project *Modernism and Postmodernism in the English Short Story/Modernismo e posmodernismo no relato curto inglés*. Consellería de Innovación e Industria, Xunta de Galicia (INCITE 08PXIB204011PR).

². As Maeve Pearson has pointed out (2007: 109), the European model of childhood as the "vessel of grace" had been inherited most notably from the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, meshed with John

Locke's conception of the child as *tabula rasa* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "natural child". The whole of it lent a powerful, metaphysical force to the political utopianism underpinning child education, particularly expressed through an increasingly sentimental view of children.

³. To the celebratory image of children playing on the seashore of Wordsworth's 1807 "Immortality Ode", we can add Friedrich Schiller's defence of play as

the true essence of man in the "Fifteenth Letter" collected in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) where he declares: "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*" (2004: 80; our emphasis).

4. Freud described "education" in these very terms in his 1911 essay (2001: 224).

5. For postmodernist parody and/or pastiche see, for instance, Hutcheon (1988) and Jameson (1991).

6. In a way not unlike that which Bruhm points out in reference to the evil child in gothic fiction and films, the main character in "Homemade" may actually be incorporating much of what is understood to be socially acceptable—work-ethic, liberality in matters sexual—and enacting them in ways more in line with his own interests and investments, "so that work-ethic becomes unchecked capitalism, and liberal sexuality becomes [...] perversion" (2006: 107).

7. The narrator's mastery of language allows him to view social intercourse

from a vantage point; ironically, words, language, and the vast amount of literary works he seems to be acquainted with allows him to adopt different tones, roles, masks, either to persuade or to deceive, and always for his own benefit: he plays Coleridge's Ancient Mariner (13), Dante's Virgil (12), Arlechino and Feste (17), Florence Nightingale (17), Wordsworth's innocent characters in the *Prelude* (12), Havelock Ellis's and Henry Miller's sexually experienced protagonists (14). Ironically enough, literature becomes also the *material* means for the narrator's mischief and moral degradation, since his expensive vices and questionable activities are financed from his profits shoplifting at Foyle's, and reselling the "slim volumes of prestigious verse" to the unscrupulous Mile End Road dealer, as mentioned above. In many ways, the narrator exemplifies the paradoxical nature of the capitalist, postmodern subject—mostly concerned with "easy ways of making money" (13)—submerged in a world where authority is feeble and virtue devalued, a world where, ironically enough, literature has lost its aura to become a commodity.

118

Works cited

ABRAMS, M.H. 1973. *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: Norton.

ABRAMS, M.H., et al. (eds.) 1979. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 2. New York: Norton.

BRUHM, Steven and Natasha HURLEY (eds.) 2004. *Curioser. On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

BRUHM, Steven. 2006. "Nightmare on Sesame Street, or The Self-Possessed Child". *Gothic Studies* 8 (2): 98-113.

BUTLER, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.

CHILDS, Peter. 2006. *The Fiction of Ian McEwan. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Through the eye of a postmodernist child: Ian McEwan's "Homemade"

- COVENEY, Peter. 1957. *The Image of Childhood. The Individual and Society, A Study of Theme in English Literature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- FREUD, Sigmund. (1911) 2001. "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. XII (1911-1913)*. Trans. J. Strachey. London: Vintage: 218-226.
- . (1903) 1995. "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex". *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. A. A. Brill. New York: The Modern Library: 509-597.
- HUTCHEON, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London, Routledge.
- JAMESON, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- KUHN, Reinhard. 1982. *Corruption in Paradise. The Child in Western Literature*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- LOUVEL, Liliane, Gilles MÉNÉGALDO, and Anne-Laure FORTIN. 1995. "An Interview with Ian McEwan". *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* 8: 1-18.
- McEWAN, Ian. (1975) 1976. *First Love, Last Rites*. London: Picador.
- MARCH-RUSSELL, Paul. 2009. *The Short Story. An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P.
- PEARSON, Maeve. 2007. "Re-exposing the Jamesian Child: The Paradox of Children's Privacy". *The Henry James Review* 28 (2): 101-119.
- SCHILLER, Friedrich. (1794) 2004. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. Trans. R. Snell. Mineola, New York: Dover.
- ZIOLKOWSKI, Eric. 2001. *Evil Children in Religion, Literature, and Art*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. 1991. *For They Know not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso.
- . 1992. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. London: Verso
- . 1999. *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

Received: 28 December 2010

Revised version: 27 January 2011

