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My tongue did things by itself": story-telling/story-writing in "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" (Ian McEwan)

Richard Pedot

- 1 Ian McEwan's short stories are notable for their use of solipsistic, and usually morally disreputable, first person narrators, and also for the discrepancy between the squalor or obscenity of the themes and a seemingly detached, unemotional narration. It is in fact doubly surprising that the characters should be telling their stories: on ethical grounds, it may be found scandalous, for instance, that a sexual pervert, guilty of the murder of a young girl, should be able to recount the events leading to that crime without the slightest trace of remorse or even of understanding; on intellectual grounds, it is no less amazing to discover that the same person can simply express himself articulately.
- 2 Indeed, in a 1978 interview, Ian Hamilton pointed out to the author that in his first collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, "the first person narrator is a lot more literate, if not literary, than you'd imagine him to be if you had a third person account of how he actually behaves" (Hamilton 8). This might simply look like a then unsolved technical problem for a young author trained in Norwich courses of creative writing and at the time privileging pastiche to find his own style. McEwan at first took Hamilton's remark as "a legitimate criticism", defining the issue as that of wanting it both ways: your narrators, he claimed, may be fools, "and yet at the same time you want them to be fairly perceptive people" "to carry lines which are *your* best lines"—which are therefore given to "morally discredited" persons.
- 3 McEwan's perhaps disingenuous eagerness to fall in with Hamilton's observation—he was after all, while still making his debut, talking to a leading critic—may in fact cloud the issue. Pastiche and inexperience will explain the situation only up to a point and this at the cost of ignoring that the idiosyncratic sense of unease elicited by the early stories originates in the tension between an impossibility to communicate and the writerliness of

the narrator's account even in the simplest narrative form. It is precisely this tension that a reading of the narratives in formal terms tends to underestimate even as it underlines it—somehow dissolving the squalor of the subject matter into aesthetics, whether the result be considered as success or failure.

- 4 Unstated and unquestioned in the exchange between critic and writer is the assumption that sordidness calls for a realistic or, better still, naturalistic rendering. This I take to be the drift of both Hamilton's question and McEwan's proviso that "those stories are not dramatic monologues inside a naturalistic framework." The broader implications of the issue for McEwan's fiction are not my concern here¹ but as a means of broaching the topic of orality in his short stories, I would like to draw attention to the suggestion, in McEwan's argument, that realistic/naturalistic fiction requires careful mimesis of oral enunciation, but at the same time serves as a reminder that orality in written texts is first and foremost a textual effect—and as such liable to deconstruction. My working hypothesis is that McEwan's deconstruction of the oral/textual antinomy—and by the same token of realism in fiction—has to be approached in relation to the stories' specific challenge: that of handing narration over to people usually deprived of speech—because of intellectual incapacity and/or because their right to speak is queried on moral grounds. We will see that pastiche—the borrowing of someone's voice in order to pitch one's own—can take on parodic implications, as a critique of our hermeneutic assumptions, grounded in the belief in the prevalence of live speech (Derrida's "*parole vive*") over writing.
- 5 The focus of study will be one particular story in McEwan's first collection, "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" (*First Love, Last Rites*), admittedly a pastiche of Fowles's *The Collector*. McEwan's attempt with this story was "to do the kind of voice of the man" in Fowles's book, "that kind of wheedling, self-pitying lower middle-class voice" (Hamilton 18). In fact, it is not primarily the quality of the character's voice that is at stake in the stylistic emulation, but rather, technically speaking, narrative voice, as the enunciative framework in which the reader is given a homodiegetic account of the main character's own perversion. The term nevertheless in itself remains ambiguous—still too much fraught with psychological connotations, as Genette freely acknowledges (Genette 76)—, even more so in regards with "Conversation".
- 6 As a matter of fact, the story is especially interesting in a discussion of orality because it at once foregrounds and forestalls (oral) communication. As a self-confessed dialogue it seems to start auspiciously enough with the following incipit: "You ask me what I did when I saw this girl. Well, I'll tell you." (75) Soon, however, the reader will realise that there is no option other than to "listen" vicariously to the long soliloquy of a 18-year-old "baby", who had been kept in *infancy*—i.e. deprived of a language—by his mother, up to the age of seventeen. The initial "you" will turn out to be a mute "social worker" (75) whose actual function will never be elucidated, except as the recipient of the narrator's sorry tale. The narrator himself is a young man whose sole aspiration, in his own admission, is "to climb into the pram" (87)—out of nostalgia for "the old cotton-wool life when everything was done for me, warm and safe" (82)—and who has elicited for his more or less permanent abode a large cupboard, in secluded darkness. His protracted dependence on his mother in fact has rendered him incapable of any genuine contact with the others, and his natural mode of conversation seems to be of the kind he had with a deaf and dumb inmate of the prison where he served a term for various acts of juvenile delinquency, sitting in the latter's cell saying nothing or at times pouring out his

thoughts in perfect awareness that he couldn't be understood. Basically, indeed, speech is too much for him, as he tells his interlocutor: "I'm sitting in this chair with my arms folded, that's all right, but I'd rather be lying on the floor gurgling to myself than be talking to you." (76)

- 7 So it can be said that "Conversation" ironically stretches to the limits of verisimilitude the discrepancy between inarticulacy and literacy, what can actually be spoken and what is said. Yet, as a monologue addressed to an unknown and silent listener, the story has nevertheless a feel of orality about it and contains many of the usual signs that betray or rather mimic oral delivery in texts—to begin with its brevity, which is compatible with short oral delivery. Sentences tend to be short, clipped, in a predominantly paratactic sequence, as befits such kind of supposedly unrehearsed addresses in which the speaker is not meant to have an overall view of his argument beforehand. This is perhaps the most obvious feature borrowed from Fowles's narrative. In both cases, the short syntactic range is there to convey a sense of the narrowness of the narrator's understanding which is rooted in immediacy. This is not the linguistic disarticulation that one would expect from such quarters, but neither is it perfect articulacy.
- 8 Orality is more obvious, to the point of overkill, in all the elements that support the idea of an audience, from phatic phrases to shifters to rhetorical questions. The narrator's account is interspersed with words that do not have—at first—precise meaning in themselves with a view to maintaining the fragile bond of narrative between the young man and his mute listener, or on the metatextual level, to underscoring it for the reader—possibly the only audience. The innocuous expletive "well" is to be expected, and is certainly used in its many guises, to emphasize a readiness to talk or go on with the talking—as in "Well, I'll tell you."—or to offer a more or less genuine apology for one's behaviour—"I can see you think I'm dirty and bent. Well, I washed my hands afterwards, which is more than some people." (75).
- 9 More common however are direct appeals to the addressee: variations of the "you know" type ("you can imagine", "you've no idea", ...); allusions to the listener's judgement ("don't think", "don't get me wrong", "I can see you think", "you might be thinking", "you might say", ...) or, in a more circuitous way, to anyone's judgement, presumably including the listener's ("it sounds pretty stupid" or "incredible", "That must sound pretty stupid to you.", ...) Rhetorical questions, although they are by definition not destined to be answered by the listener, if ever there is one, belong in a similar category, in the sense that their purpose is more or as much to make a show of holding the line than to help the argument forward ("Why didn't I run off ...?", "What did I think of?", "How did I become an adult?", "So what could I do?", ...) They are in fact neither more nor less direct than the above forms of addressing the hypothetical social worker.
- 10 The enunciative stakes could then be reversed, arguing that it is not so much the presence of an audience that requires such patterns of communication, as the latter which generate the audience, or simply make one possible. A witness is by no means indispensable, except *in potentia*. As for the questions, they might as well be the implied witness's—be they explicitly voiced or the narrator's guesswork—as the figment of the latter's imagination, in the absence of any actual addressee. The incipit—"You asked me what I did when I saw this girl."—is a good case in point, as it dispenses with any interrogation mark, thereby vacillating between the re-statement of a former question, a mere echo of it, and something akin to a demand that the question should be put to the speaker, which is the same as putting it in the interlocutor's mouth.

- 11 Similar conclusions, of course, can be drawn as regards the direct appeals mentioned above, which set up the conditions for the presence of an interlocutor rather than being its by-product². This seems to suggest that there is no inherent difficulty in mimicking dialogue in texts, since dialogue is always already a good imitation of itself. Such indicators of orality as those alluded to up to now may be seen to work like grammatical shifters, pointing to positions waiting to be filled up by applicants. As a matter of fact, all of them rely on the I/you deictic pair, itself related more implicitly to spatial and temporal *deixis*. Predictably, when this *deixis* is explicit, it contributes to reinforce the illusion of (the narrator's, and by the same token the social worker's) presence, but significantly, this occurs exclusively in the opening and concluding paragraphs, as if to frame the whole narrative, and more precisely to introduce the main prop: the cupboard.
- 12 Interestingly enough, it is just as the narrator conjures up the big wardrobe—"You see that cupboard there, it takes up most of the room." (75)—that the reader as implied interlocutor is bound to feel the most frustrated: he cannot *see*—i.e. check the existence of—what the use of shifters (*that, there, the*) implies is present at the moment of enunciation, which is in turn validated in fiction by the existence, or imaginary presence, of the narrator. This eventually suggests that the most successful imitation of orality in narrative is bound to be at the same time the most doubtful. The paradox has been touched upon already, it is that of the inversion of the process of authentication: in writing, without the immediate presence of the speaker, it is the shifters that imply an actual context instead and not the context that grants actuality to the shifters—"here", "now", "you", etc., being understood in relation to the moment and place of enunciation.
- 13 To return more specifically to "Conversation", deictic reference moves in a circle. The reader is led to infer the presence of the room and the piece of furniture because it is a logical consequence of the oral frame of enunciation— of the presence of a narrator pointing to them in his speech. At the same time, however, we take his narrative to be oral because of the shifters, whose handling is specific to a context of oral, immediate communication. Orality is *deixis*, *deixis* is orality.
- 14 Leaving aside the more general questions about phonocentrism such paradox elicits, we are still confronted to a narrative which problematises enunciation as presence—or presence as the site of enunciation—in the subtle play of deictic antinomies (here/there, now/then). "Here", the site of enunciation, designates the attic room where the narrator is speaking, in opposition to "there": "You see that cupboard there, it takes up most of the room. I ran all the way back here, climbed inside and tossed myself off." (75) So "there" is not situated outside—though such a place exists—but within, to the point, however, of *almost* including it within itself, taking up most of it. This doesn't spell the end of the dichotomy in a fusion of opposites, but hints at a hierarchical reversal, with the supplement exiled into secondary position claiming precedence.
- 15 As suggested by the numerous repetitions of "in there" at the end of the story, following the reiteration of the phrase concerning the volume taken up by the wardrobe, the latter's inside is a crucial location for the narrator. The implication is that, even though he is presently indulging in speech for the social worker's sake, he'd rather be indulging himself in the dark and silent surrogate womb "there". He would therefore be truly present to himself not when speaking, *here, now*, craving instead a pre-linguistic mode of existence, which he has known for the greatest part of his life. The cupboard is not only "there" but also "then"—"the old cotton-wool life" that seems to take up most of his present life: "Mostly I sit in the cupboard thinking about the old times in Staines, wishing

it all again." (87) Yet, we should not jump to the conclusion that presence or reality exists only outside language, in perfect unison with the maternal body. Instead we should acknowledge a disturbing relation between silence and speech, bearing in mind that the young man's narrative, though legitimated by the social worker's presence, working as a prompt, revolves around a linguistic void, which can be considered as its originary site, seeing its importance in the narrator's mind. It is as if the there and then of silence, or of gurgling, were presiding over the here and now, the whole scene, of story-telling—or is it of writing?

- 16 The tension between here and there, now and then, also being that between speech and silence, finds another expression in the tension we started from: between McEwan's characters' literacy/literariness and their foolishness or, we might even say at times, their near-imbecility. The narrator of "Conversation" is no exception to the rule, as his narrative seems such an impossible feat of utterance coming from someone deprived of speech for so long. Indeed, the idiot telling the tale is no Benjy, he has learned a thing or two, and thus at times resorts to unexpected notions, that do not sound his—as, for instance, when he rejects the hypothesis of "the pain-pleasure of being frustrated" (86) to explain his nostalgia of the warm oven in which he had been locked up by a malevolent cook, during a short-lived stint in a hotel kitchen.
- 17 Should we take the situation merely as evidence of inexperience or of the prevalence of pastiche over naturalistic representation, we would miss much of the text's capacity to disturb. Read in terms of the narrator's belated acquisition of language—experienced as violent imposition—and his concomitant longing for a return to a pre-linguistic life "in the pram", the discrepancy between linguistic ability and existential idiocy takes on a different colouring which is not necessarily detrimental to the diegetic stakes.
- 18 A brief consideration of the narrator's summary of his apprenticeship will substantiate this claim. This is how it begins:
- How did I become an adult? I'll tell you, I never did learn. I have to pretend. All the things you take for granted I have to do it all consciously. I'm always thinking about it, like I was on the stage. I'm sitting in this chair with my arms folded, that's all right, but I'd rather be lying on the floor gurgling to myself than be talking to you.
(76)
- 19 In the narrator's perception, then, the language he uses, which he was forced to learn in about two months (77) is not really his, but an imitation, role-playing. So much for the immediate presence of the speaking subject to himself/herself in speech. "I have only one language, Derrida writes, and it is not mine" (Derrida 15). Such is the paradox that McEwan dramatises by imagining the trauma of acquiring language in a seventeen-year-old boy, of having, in the boy's "own" words, his tongue doing "things by itself as if it belonged to someone else" (77). The experience of language then is one of alienation, even or perhaps especially that of psychology—the story's Oedipal frame of reference is a constant ironisation of psychoanalytic discourse. Eventually, no conversation is possible because the implied social worker is offered a mirror of his/her discourse—which makes his/her physical presence dispensable.
- 20 In its staging of language as dispossession, "Conversation" is exemplary of the deconstruction of the illusion of speech as presence to oneself. This, I would argued, is achieved not despite the apparent impossibility—from a naturalistic point of view—of the narrative voice, but because of it. Much of McEwan's short fiction—and this I take to include his first novel, *The Cement Garden*—belongs to what French critic Dominique

Rabaté calls impossible narratives (“textes impossibles”—Rabaté 72), among which he ranks such first person narratives (or *récits*, in Blanchot’s meaning) as Louis-René Des Forêts’s *Le Bavard*, Albert Camus’s *L’Etranger*, Edgar Poe’s “William Wilson”, or again Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable*. These fictions have the rhetorical power to mime oral communication and involve the reader in the semblance of a direct address (“l’oralité d’une parole, impliquant le lecteur dans ce qui semble une adresse directe”—Rabaté 17) while being at the same time soliloquies. Hence a foregrounding of the narrative voice (“monstration de leur voix narrative”—Rabaté 7) that puts into question its “presence” (to itself).

- 21 This is where the scene of story-telling can be seen to become a scene of writing, which is what the Genettian narratological concept of voice, according to Rabaté, tends to play down. The paradoxical combination of speech and silence we have detected in “Conversation” thus emerges as the dramatisation of what, in Western culture at least, defines writing—silent language or written voice. For the paradox is not the sole work of fiction. It results from an inherent flaw within presence, a *différance*, in spoken language. Fiction foregrounds the phonocentric illusion, the illusion of the fullness of live speech, as a transparent and, as it were, oxymoronically, immediate medium of subjectivity. It plays about with the play within (spoken) language.
- 22 “Conversation” further problematises the default in presence by making apparent the gap between the speaking subject and a language, *his* language, that belongs to someone else and by a dramatic use of deictic reference sets the stage for the enigmatic bond of silence and speech that seems to make narratives possible, or even perhaps, necessary. The literariness of speech in McEwan’s story should not be taken as mere artistic blemish. If it is that, how are we to account for the uneasiness felt at reading the solipsistic tale of a “morally discredited” person? Rather it contributes to the problematisation of oral communication, emphasising in particular the alienation of perversion in the discourse *on* perversion, toying with the (im)possibility of a discourse of perversion. How perversion in McEwan’s fiction, far from being anecdotic, partakes of the exploration of the issue of identity in/through language, in particular by the challenge it constitutes for the construction of narrative voice³, remains to be shown, but “Conversation” is undoubtedly a good starting point for such an adventure.

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NOTES

1. See R. Pedot, *Perversions textuelles dans la fiction d'Ian McEwan*, for an extended discussion of such tensions within McEwan's works up to *Black Dogs*.
 2. A stage performance of the story (Lyric Studio Theatre, Hammersmith, 1982) indeed dispensed completely with the postulated social worker, effectively replaced by the audience.
 3. Not surprisingly, Derrida's *Monolinguisme de l'autre*, also queries the issue of identity, claiming that identity is "never given, received, or reached", that there is only "the endless, unceasingly fantastical process of identification" to be endured ("Une identité n'est jamais donnée, reçue ou atteinte, non, seul s'endure le processus interminable, indéfiniment phantasmatique, de l'identification", 53).
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ABSTRACTS

Le but de cet article est d'examiner la forme et la fonction du cadre énonciatif d'une nouvelle de Ian McEwan, « Conversation with a Cupboard Man » (*First Love, Last Rites*), qui semble imiter (pour mieux la parodier) une communication orale. Il apparaîtra qu'en fait cette nouvelle se joue, jusqu'aux limites de la vraisemblance, du hiatus qui existe entre le dit et ce qui peut effectivement être énoncé, ou entre la littérarité des énoncés et l'incompétence linguistique des narrateurs. L'absence de traitement réaliste du « dialogue » entre un travailleur social et le narrateur de « Conversation with a Cupboard Man », un « bébé » de 18 ans, maintenu en enfance (c'est-à-dire privé de langage articulé, maintenu infans) par sa mère, est un commentaire ironique sur l'activité de lire l'illisible, autant que sur la représentation du langage oral dans un texte écrit. Dans cette conversation monologique, le langage est mis en avant comme dépossession, et finit par ressembler à une sorte de donjon déserté par un sujet toujours insaisissable. L'acquisition tardive du langage pour le narrateur, ainsi que son envie de retrouver une existence pré-linguistique, son désir de « retourner dans la poussette », sont l'expression du traumatisme qui consiste à se voir imposer une langue qui, comme le suggère Derrida, n'est jamais la sienne : à voir sa langue, comme le remarque le narrateur, faire des choses par elle-même, « as if it belonged to someone else ».

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