「當時那是自衛，故無妨」：在伊恩•麥克尤恩的《無辜者》中「無罪」概念之問題化

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摘 要

伊恩•麥克尤恩在他的歷史小說《無辜者》中，對於第二次世界大戰後的英美聯軍和蘇德聯軍的國際關係，提供了一些觀察和洞見。此小說描述東西德政治分裂前與柏林圍牆(1961-89)拆除後的這段時期，國際聯盟勢力間彼此不信任的情形與詭譎多變的國際關係。本論文聚焦於主人翁李歐那(Leonard)如何合理化自己的「自衛」暴力，並且闡明此「自衛」暴力，不僅只是出自於主人翁個人的習性，同時也是反應一九五零年代中期，第二次世界大戰後之國際間邪惡的文化氛圍，尤其探討戰後時期的國際間的各國家勢力，如何以愛國主義為由，來合理化自家的猜疑與暴力。本論文最後提出一些思考「遺忘」的道德問題與觀察，且這些觀察皆與此本小說中內蘊以「自衛」為由，並「刻意遺忘」自己的暴力行為，進而欺騙自己「無辜」概念的言說有密切關係。本論文企圖檢視以下的問題：我們正在談論的是誰的邪惡？我們所關注的是邪惡的統治者，抑或被邪惡統治的人們？換句話說，我們所關注的是，無視於民意的統治者，抑或那些擅於合理化自己的暴力，但卻受制於自己內心邪惡的人們？

關鍵詞：伊恩•麥克尤恩、《無辜者》、冷戰、柏林圍牆、道德

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"It Was Self-defense, and That Would be All Right": The Problematization of Innocence in Ian McEwan’s *The Innocent*

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Abstract

With the publication of his historical novel *The Innocent* (1990), Ian McEwan offers several observations concerning the international relationship between British and American allied forces and Soviet and German allied forces after the Second World War. This novel depicts the untrusting and volatile relationship between these nations as a fictional but reflective account of world history before the division of Germany into West Germany and East Germany, and also after the fall of the Berlin Wall (the wall period: 1961-89). This paper aims to highlight the significance of how self-defense is justified as an excuse for individual and national violence, and further contends that this self-justified violence caused much of the cultural evil prevalent on an individual and national scale during the postwar period of the middle 1950s.

This paper explores how the national power during the postwar period of the middle 1950s rationalized suspicion and violence for the sake of patriotism, particularly in social relationships, and how this violence is manifested individually through Leonard’s dismemberment of Otto’s body as an emblem of Germany’s disintegration, which highlights nation-power pairs who emerge as mutually resistant but balanced powers. This paper ultimately offers some observations, on a somewhat more speculative level, in relation to the novel’s discourse on the moral problem of painstaking forgetfulness as a form of internal violence, and thus a more critical, if interrogative, attitude towards the notion of innocence out of this painstaking forgetfulness. This criticism examines the following questions: Whose “evil” are we talking about? Are we concerned with those who govern with evil or those who are governed by evil?; in other words, with those who govern without concern for the consent of the governed, or those who circulate this justified violence but remain landlocked by the evil?

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *The Innocent*, the Cold War, the Berlin Wall, morality

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He was walking past the refugee shacks. It hurt to walk. His collarbone only hurt when he lifted his arm, his ear when he touched it, but his testicles hurt when he sat down and when he walked. When he was out of sight of the shacks, he would stand still. He saw a kid with ginger hair, a carrot-top. He had short trousers and scabby knees. He looked like a little bruiser. He looked like an English kid. … They just stared, as if they had known each other in a previous life.

— The Innocent, 114

With the publication of his historical novel The Innocent (1990), Ian McEwan offers some observations concerning the international relationships between British and American allied forces and Soviet and German allied forces after the Second World War. This novel depicts the untrusting and volatile relationships between these nations as a fictional but reflective account of world history before the division of Germany into West Germany and East Germany, and also after the fall of the Berlin Wall (the wall period: 1961-89). This novel signifies the literature of the “unknown world” around the Berlin Blockade during the time of Cold War Berlin. Although the “unknown world” open to published literature remains a great imaginative space for the historical novelist, the means by which such writers connect the known world to the “unknown world” lying beyond it, still remains as a problem of authenticity. In order to avoid questions of doubt surrounding this problem, Ian McEwan deliberately deploys the technique of a multi-layered narrative point of view in order to approach the spy culture that emerges in the associations and negotiations among these national powers. This essay attempts to explore the paradoxical implications of the cultural evil that is necessary for the individuals to get involved while maintaining a clear sense of guilt, henceforth subconsciously to cling to an imagined (exculpatory) ideal of being innocent.

The protagonist of this novel, Leonard Markham, is an inexperienced British Post Office engineer, sent to Berlin in 1955 to work for a joint British and American Intelligence operation (historically recorded as “Operation Gold”) to dig a tunnel into the territory of the German Democratic Republic in order to tap Soviet and East German military telephone lines. Due to a chance job testing tape-recording equipment, Leonard learns of the tunnel plan first hand (including America’s dominant role in this operation and the allied military defense system). Walking down a Berlin street, Leonard discovers a city that is full of ruins, spies, and hostile zones. Leonard also meets his first American superior, Bob Glass, and subsequently finds that he must relieve tensions generated by his own English submissive diffidence and Glass, demanding American superiority. He also falls in love with an older German woman, Maria Eckdorf, though their love ends after an act of violence and murder.

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1 The Cold War ran from 1947 to 1991 (starting two years after 1945, as “forms of Nazism sprung up outside of Germany since 1945” and ending two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989), referring to an international tension between powers in the Western countries (represented by the United States and its military alliance) and powers in the Eastern countries (represented by the Soviet Union and its military alliance). See Heywood, 65-67.
Maria’s ex-husband, the drunken Otto, attacks this couple on the night of their engagement party, and Otto is killed after an ensuing struggle. Rather than going to the police, Leonard and Maria decide to cut up and dispose of Otto’s body in secret. Their dismemberment of the body interweaves with the matter of the tunnel in the later part of the novel. Leonard eventually hides Otto’s body in the tunnel and betrays the operation to the Soviets. Later, it turns out that his betrayal is of no significance at all because both the Russians and East Germans had learned of the tunnel’s existence earlier. Leonard is reluctant to be recalled to London, but returns to Berlin in mid-1987 in order to revisit the places of his youthful espionage. Informed by Maria that she married Glass after their own love affair had ended, Leonard later decides to fly to her home in America.

This novel is concerned on many levels with the “unknown world” beyond narrated history. Peter Childs mentions that Michael Wood has taken up the theme of the loss of innocence in his review of the novel. Wood indicates:

> Intelligence, we learn, is a matter of levels of clearance. One set of persons believes they are building a warehouse. Those whose clearance takes them to the next level know that the radar station is cover for a tunnel which will permit the British and Americans to tap the Russians’ telephone cables. … ‘Secrecy made us possible’, he [fictional character, Bob Glass] says, meaning that the first human who knew something that others didn’t know was the first individual. (Childs 77; emphasis added)

This definition of innocence actually refers, on the one hand, to the individual’s faulty understanding of the international world, and on the other hand, to his “innocent” perception of his own national condition, and also of himself. Glass explains Leonard’s job to Leonard thus: “Yeah, there’s a story behind that. I’ll tell you later” (The Innocent 20). Later, Leonard eavesdrops on “stories” at other tables in the canteen (The Innocent 52). The narrator adds another story about the head of the Berlin CIA base (regarding the official fund to advocate American democratic culture) (The Innocent 52-53). Justifying his role in Otto’s death, Leonard says that, “He needed a sequence, a story. He needed order” (The Innocent 112), arguing before Maria that “We have done nothing wrong, but we have to make them believe it, we have to get our story right” (The Innocent 116). Maria also claims that her letter of confession to Leonard contains “the whole story” about past events with Glass (The Innocent 163).

The narrator implies that each person feels satisfied until he finds his story to be partial: “Everybody thinks his clearance is the highest there is, everyone thinks he has the final story. You only hear of a higher level at the moment you’re being told about it” (The Innocent 18). This narrative

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2 Childs excerpted Michael Wood’s view of the theme of the loss of innocence from Wood’s review of this novel, which is entitled “Well Done, Ian McEwan.” London Review of Books (10 May 1990), pp. 24 & 26. Childs suggests that Leonard’s innocence is “not an innate quality but one based on ignorance.” See Childs 77-78 and endnote no. 2.
unreliability reflects not only a limited point of view but the untrusting and volatile international relationship among these national powers after the Second World War.

Born in the North London suburb of Tottenham, Ian McEwan understood well that international relations between England and continental Europe appeared in the most ambiguous light during the Cold War. McEwan explained in a McGrath interview his motive to make his tunnel metaphor function as “a piece of tunnel equipment he held in his hands” (Roberts 167; The Innocent 92):

A two or three hundred yard long secret tunnel that went into their sector to tap into the telephone lines that connected East Berlin with Moscow. The tunnel was betrayed by an English spy called George Blake. It was one of a series of betrayals that made the Americans immensely distrustful of working with the British again. It was a perfect background for a discussion of political power. The British still enfeebled by the Second World War, the depths of the Cold War, American power beginning to establish itself globally. (Roberts 167-68)

McEwan introduces George Blake into the novel at critically uneasy moments so as to reveal to the reader the complicated politics of being an innocent immersed in espionage intrigue, due to the multi-layered conspiracies beyond discernable reality.

Thus, this novel problematizes the question of how to remain innocent. McEwan reveals in the McGrath interview that “the Wall coming down too, it was not a simple matter of unalloyed joy, it was a moment in which you get the sense that a whole generation, or two generations, had lost time, had lost opportunity” (Roberts 63). For McEwan, the Germans had lost too much time on separation and missed the chance of peace. Even though the Wall had been pulled down, the long-term state of opposition between East and West Germany could not be easily obliterated.

I borrow the title of this paper from McEwan’s fictional narration of the accidental murder of Otto, when Leonard, wondering whether they should tell the police, consoles himself with the observation: “It was self-defense, she [Maria] would tell them, and that would be all right” (The Innocent 113; emphasis in original). McEwan’s consciousness of international distrust during the postwar period of the late 1940s shows his concern about Germany’s disintegration due to its political division. However, it is notable here that the political disintegration of Germany metaphorically refers to the split condition of the union (NATO) among the western European countries. I propose that it is this consciousness of disintegration that motivates McEwan to write the character of Leonard in The Innocent in a way that reveals a multi-dimensional sense of falling apart.

This political dilemma is the main theme that runs through McEwan’s much celebrated moral narrative—the idea of being externally justified but internally immoral, as implied in the epigraph at the very beginning of this paper. Over the past number of years, many critics have discussed this novel from different perspectives. Lars Heiler interprets the corpse of Otto as the representation of the human abject (according to Kristeva’s view of abject), interrogating the “notions of self and social ability and question[ing] the production of meaning within the symbolic order” (106). Heiler explains
how “Leonard’s betrayal of the tunnel operation could then be seen as a logical consequence of his disbelief in the meaning and significance of spying as a necessary practice of political entities in order to secure their hegemony in the global power game” (106-07). In other words, Heiler stresses Leonard’s destruction of Otto’s body as signifying the ultimate nullification of the self-justified symbolic order in the spying game.

Moreover, David Malcolm points out that the game players are not fighting against evil, but are manipulated as things within an evil game. He says:

The cold war is rarely seen in the novel as a clear-cut crusade against evil, but rather as an enormously complicated boys’ game. Treachery exists in the world of the novel but is not condemned. Blake, MacNamee, Glass, Maria, and Leonard all commit betrayals of different kinds. Otto is a drunken lout, but hardly evil. Killing and dismembering him are accidents and are not overtly condemned in the novel. They are rather presented as things anyone could find him/herself involved in under the right (or wrong) circumstances. (17)

Malcolm’s criticism suggests that human beings were blindly and helplessly manipulated as puppets in the cold war spy games of the late 1940s.

Besides the reproachable spy culture, Claire Colebrook interprets the image of innocence portrayed in this novel as displayed in the media lover age of the lost child, considering that “cultural pornography of the child is a public obsession with figures of infant innocence that is also permanently threatened by the intrusion of an adult world of suspicion” (44). Namely, cultural pornography deceptively offers “the ways in which a certain image, fantasy and structure of the child frames our experience of the time, history, cultural difference, violence and normativity” (Colebrook 44). This cultural aura provides “a paradoxical mode of life as at once fully open and yet tragically unfulfilled” (Colebrook 44). Colebrook’s illumination of the image of innocence seems to indicate a cultural phenomenon whereby innocence is on high demand, but is paradoxically only an unattainable ideal in life. Somewhat ironically, humans can never protect their innocence without incurring suspicion and alienation.

Anne Juranville also uses Freud’s view of the death instinct, contending that Leonard’s sexual violence towards Maria, his self-deceptive excuse for the murder and his political betrayal of the tunnel all stem from his rejection of castration—a kind of existential trauma (229). In fact, this kind of existential trauma is represented as a deep-rooted, self-defense reaction against the intrusion of violence on the child within the self. It thus becomes easy to defend one’s violent and treacherous patriotism as innocent self-defense. This willful misreading of violence is then complicit in the individual and national degradation of morality.

While Leonard’s deceptions and betrayal have been convincingly explored, the significance of how his self-defense is justified, as an excuse for individual and national violence, has not yet been analyzed. It is this self-justified violence that caused the cultural evil prevalent on an individual and
national scale during the postwar period. This essay attempts to examine the following questions: Whose “evil” are we talking about? Are we concerned with those who govern with evil or those who are governed by evil? in other words, with those who govern without concern for the consent of the governed, or those who circulate this justified violence but remain landlocked by the evil?

This paper aims to investigate the paradoxical implications of the cultural evil that is necessary for individuals to maintain a clear sense of guilt but henceforth subconsciously to retain an imagined (self-excused) ideal of being innocent. It will first explore how national power during the postwar period of the late 1940s rationalized suspicion and violence for the sake of patriotism, particularly in social relationships. It then aims to discuss Leonard’s dismemberment of Otto’s body as an emblem of Germany’s disintegration, highlighting nation-power pairs who emerge as mutually resistant but balanced powers. This paper ultimately offers some observations, on a somewhat more speculative level, in relation to the novel’s discourse on the moral problem of painstaking forgetfulness as a form of internal violence—and thus it takes a more critical, if interrogative, attitude towards the notion of innocence out of this painstaking forgetfulness.

I. “The interviews would be opportunities for seduction, surely”: The Politics of Relationship

It is remarkable that in The Innocent, the entanglement of international powers and the violence of patriotism stand out in many chapters. Therefore, it is more insightful to read The Innocent as a novel of international skepticism (skeptical of a nation’s ability to maintain secrecy) during the postwar period of the late 1940s rather than as a novel of deception. Bob Glass, a representative of America’s CIA (American culture fund) in Berlin, stresses the American ascent to political dominance in British-American cooperation. As an American, Glass is deeply concerned with security. As a post office engineer, Leonard Marnham is employed by the Americans to equip the tunnel with the signals that they use to tap the Russians.

Despite their alliance, however, the British and Americans distrust each other. The British are aware that the Americans are ambitious to take command of this tunnel coding, and are worried that they will not be included in the coding process. Therefore, MacNamee, an English scientist, insists that Leonard act as a spy for the British, because Leonard works with the Americans. It is notable here that Glass mockingly puts the Englishman in charge of nursery affairs. Glass holds MacNamee up to ridicule:

“This joker MacNamee. He should be at home with his train set. You know where he did his calculations for the heat output? On the back of an envelope. An envelope! We would have had three independent teams. If they hadn’t come up with the same result, we would have wanted to know why. How can the guy think straight with teeth like that?”

(The Innocent 87)
Glass’s remark here refers to an earlier scene where the Englishman MacNamee says that he still uses his milk teeth: “The other lot never came through. I think perhaps I never wanted to grow up” (The Innocent 55-56). Mocking the Englishman’s incompetence, Glass implies that, because it employs men like him, the British government is unable to be a leader in global power. In view of the individual characters’ remarks in this novel, these representatives of their respective countries serve to embody the image of the British as immature children compared to the sophisticated American adults. The Englishman’s self-perception as “the innocent” becomes in fact a national embarrassment after the decline of British imperial power.

Nevertheless, this “innocent” self-perception is not simply defined by adults who are nostalgic for their childhood. In this novel, McEwan examines “English innocence” within a vicious circle of increasing violence. The concept of “English innocence” hence needs to be re-examined and re-defined. It is not hard to discern that Leonard’s confidence stems from his national pride. When he is walking through the residential part of Berlin to his new home, he “swagger[s]” down the street with a grin on his face (The Innocent 11). McEwan here shows how Leonard’s confidence foolishly relies on his British imperial pride, though British imperial power gradually declined with America’s ascent to global power during the postwar period. Leonard’s self-confidence inappropriately emerges from an attitude of British arrogance over past national power.

The fact that Leonard’s illusion as to his individuality derives from his national pride is evident through his subjection to the British uniformity presented in his suits:

> He luxuriated in the choice of bedroom, and unpacked with care. His own place. He had not thought it would give him so much pleasure. He hung his best, second-best and everyday gray suits in a wardrobe built into the wall whose door slid at the touch of the hand. On the bureau he placed the teak-lined, silver-plated cigarette box engraved with his initials, a going-away present from his parents. By its side he stood his heavy indoor lighter, shaped like a neoclassical urn. Would he ever have guest?  

(The Innocent 10)

McEwan here shows that Leonard is largely concerned with the British icons of his domestic commodities because he believes that these typical British icons may impress his guests and further make them associate his individuality with the values of British national identity. However, Leonard’s initials on his cigarette box remain ironic given his lack of individuality and his uniform of no military significance.

What is worth our attention here is that Leonard’s national superiority is clearly discernable as he

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3 Kumar separates the “English” from the British”, indicating that “Non-English members of the United Kingdom rarely say ‘British’ when they mean ‘English’, or ‘English’ when they mean ‘British’.” On the contrary, they are usually only too gratingly aware of what is peculiarly English, and are ultra-sensitive to the lordly English habit of subsuming the British under the English. For them it is a constant reminder of what they perceive to be—rightly, of course—England’s hegemony over the rest of the British Isles.” Please see British Cultural Studies, 41.
walks around the still bomb-damaged Berlin. That is, his national superiority lies in the brutal attitude used towards those with a different nationality. In other words, Leonard’s perception of “English innocence” results from a mistaken sense of purity and a purposeful forgetfulness of his nation’s brutality towards another country’s inhabitants. Through cold ignorance and selected forgetfulness, Leonard’s sense of English innocence (which is created through his justification of national injustices) is secured; it is this self-deceiving innocence that sustains his conscience.

Notably, not only the British but also the Americans impose this national brutality of domination on postwar Berlin. McEwan describes how Leonard is fascinated, but at the same time irritated, by his sense of national superiority. Leonard is obsessed with playing American football with the American army sergeants (*The Innocent* 21), but feels uncomfortable about eating the un-English food available in the staff restaurant. Beyond this pleasure and discomfort, Leonard “took satisfaction in dancing in a way his parents and their friends did not, and could not, and in liking music they would hate, and in feeling at home in a city where they could never come. He was free” (*The Innocent* 95). Manifestly, although Leonard is aware of the fact that British imperial power has gradually decreased with American dominance in the Anglo-American cooperation, his sense of superiority does not disappear, but is sustained by the national alliance. Unfortunately, it is this deficient self-knowledge that invalidates his sense of “English innocence” and turns it malicious. What is worse, this “wicked child” is not circumspect enough to cope with all the traps set by its American ally.

Playing upon this inexperience and American-catering “English innocence”, Glass forms a dramatic conspiracy to entrap Leonard. Leonard treats the tunnel as a child’s “toy town” (*The Innocent* 56). The conspiracy to eavesdrop through taping the military secrets of the Russians and the East Germans is nothing more than a child’s game to Leonard. The American sergeants also strike Leonard as childish: the game of softball reminds this Englishman of a British game for children (*The Innocent* 76); American music and dancing fascinate Leonard with his childish freedom from British cultural suppression. When Leonard goes back to Britain for Christmas, the innocent Tottenham resident knows nothing of the destruction in Berlin (*The Innocent* 162). In contrast to Leonard’s inexperience and ignorance of the political crisis around him, Glass is politically speculative and sophisticated. The tunnel for Glass is a place characteristic of “a certain virile cult of competence” (*The Innocent* 21).

Leonard’s first night out with Glass makes him feel like he is part of an intellectual and moral political party. Leonard recalls this party atmosphere while he returns to Britain after he is dismissed from the tunnel officer job, as is cited in this section’s title: “The interviews would be opportunities for seduction, surely” (*The Innocent* 76). Maria’s love and sexuality is nothing more than a seduction devised by Glass in order to learn Leonard’s secret, and in order to test his loyalty to America during the Anglo-American cooperation. Glass’ motive for making Maria a sexual and seductive trap can be evidenced through MacNamee’s remark to Leonard about how America belittles Britain, which must take second place in their Gold Operation:

“So, very generously, we let the Americans into our tunnel, gave them facilities, let them make use of our taps. And you know what? They didn’t even tell us about
Nelson’s invention. They were taking the stuff back to Washington and reading the clear text while we were knocking our brains trying to break the codes [...] Now that we’re sharing this project, they’ve let us in on the secret. But only the outline, mark you, not the details. That’s why I can only give you the simplest account.”

*(The Innocent 58)*

Being only too aware of his nationality as an Englishman, Leonard knows that he has been isolated from the true conditions of their cooperation, and he is soon held back by Glass, who is politically speculative and dominant.

It is not until Leonard leaves England that he realizes that he is feigning maturity in order to build his confidence for working with Americans with their international superiority. His adulthood has been built on imitation: “He could never read a paper, especially this one [The Times], without feeling he was imitating someone else, or in training for adulthood” *(The Innocent)* 85). Leonard’s adulthood is immorally based on the indifference of his community towards national brutality and its passive participation in disaster. This purposeful ignorance of others’ suffering is as immoral as the evil itself.

According to Alain Badiou, an external evil does not exist, but instead relies on deception: “human beings, in the course of pursuing their natural interests, are sometimes seduced by circumstances which appear to be true, formally obeying all the protocols of the truth-event, but which in the end turn out to have been based on deception” (Barker 57; emphasis in original). Human beings tend to cater to the external conditions which are favorable to their own interests (both those interests favorable to their desired self-identity and those favorable for economic profit). They are easily seduced by external temptation, ignorant of the fact that these favored conditions are nothing more than illusions they have made up for themselves. Therefore, the external empirical world becomes just a projection of their internal world.

That is, “English innocence” comes from false purity and ignorant brutality towards others; in the case embodied by Leonard, while the American society around him becomes more aggressive than other societies, the way society is structured also plays a part in how Leonard becomes aggressive. Leonard is obsessed with the “virile insistence” of the iconic American rock music song “Rock Around the Clock” *(The Innocent)* 76). George Blake, his downstairs neighbor and a British double spy who covertly works for the Soviets, is also a masculine model of aggressive competence *(The Innocent)* 164). Leonard’s aggression, learned from his American associates, is commonly supposed to be either intentional or due to cognitive failure; however, this analysis rather argues that Leonard’s cognitive failure in realizing his real position in the spy culture is essentially the result of the intentional self-justification of his ignorance and transgression.

I wish to highlight here that, as to lesser violations, Leonard’s arrogant justification, aggression and competence can be reinterpreted as a normal, gratifying cognitive process. It can be inferred that an inability to develop a plausible justification can worsen one’s self-perception; hence, Leonard would rather choose an easy avenue to self-deception in order to override his conscience. Steven Hitlin suggests that “At the root of conscience, for most people, is the biased idea that ‘I am a morally...
「當時那是自衛，故無妨」：在伊恩・麥克尤恩的《無辜者》中「無罪」概念之問題化

worthy person.' We feel we are morally good enough, even if most of us are not moral exemplars. We are biased in interpreting our actions and the world around us in ways that support this view” (200). Readers can see Leonard’s moral deception through secrecy in the rest of his life: his changeable relationship with Maria and sexual fantasies of her; also, the accidental murder of Otto and his later private dismemberment of Otto’s body.

II. “This was the order of things, the order of battle: everything twice, except the head”: Symbolic Dismemberment

This section aims to discuss Leonard’s dismemberment of Otto’s body as an emblem of Germany’s break-up, highlighting the link between the corporeal pairs and character pairs who emerge as balancing powers and restraints upon self-reflection. The title of this section is quoted from the scene where Leonard dismembers Otto’s body after Maria’s self-defensive and accidentally lethal attack on Otto. McEwan describes how Leonard and Maria try to cover up the murder by taking the body apart so as to fit into a luggage case:

Straight through the bone, a sturdy piece of two-by-two, and a good saw to cut it with. Trouser, skin, fat, flesh, bone, flesh, fat, skin, trouser. The last two he took with the knife. This one was heavy, dripping at both ends when he took it to her. His carpet slippers were black and heavy. The gin, and the other leg. This was the order of the things, the order of battle: everything twice, except the head.

(The Innocent 125; emphasis added)

McEwan’s above narration implies that there is always “the order of the things” to maintain among the international powers.

The novel begins with the portrayal of an innocent Englishman’s involvement in an international conspiracy at the start time of the Cold War. It then develops through Leonard’s recollection of what happened in the Gold Operation (before the establishment of the Berlin Wall) after his return to Britain, and ends in his reunion with Maria in Berlin (after the fall of the Berlin Wall). McEwan evidently deploys the physical dismemberment of Otto’s corpse to signify the political division of, and hostile opposition emerging between, West Germany and East Germany. Therefore, the corporeal pairing symbolizes the geographical pairing, and most important of all, the dichotomy of their political ideologies. Although the opposing powers of the national alliances generate unnecessary hatred and conflict between West Germany and East Germany, it is this precarious polarity that sustains international balance and peace.

It is indicative here that Leonard’s painstaking efforts regarding the murder of Otto do not disappear after the dismemberment of the corpse: these efforts do not vanish when he delivers the corpse to the tunnel, or when he betrays his work project to the Soviets. Readers can discern this in McEwan’s narrative about Leonard’s remembrance of his position in the American spy group, and
particularly of his romance with Maria. It is also not hard to see the order of the balance of power existing in Leonard’s relationship with Glass, Maria, and Otto (Maria’s ex-husband). As discussed in the previous section, the relationship between America and Britain after the Second World War is embodied in the relationship between Leonard and Glass in their Anglo-American cooperation. England’s descent from its leading power status during the Cold War is manifested through Leonard’s ignorant (and arrogant) position in the American circle as elaborately created by his job supervisor, Glass. It can be said that even though America and Britain are united into one international alliance, each nation is engaged in its own political speculations; in this case, America calculates on being the leading global power, while Britain strives to maintain its imperial authority. To some extent, America restrains England’s blind arrogance for past imperial position while Britain partially resists America’s ambition to be the global leader.

This pair’s mutually resistant but balanced power can also be seen in the sexual relationship between Leonard and Maria. Leonard justifies his sexual attack on Maria as “a game, an exhilarating game” that Maria “mistake[s]” for a real sexual attack (The Innocent 66). McEwan implies here that Leonard excuses his own childish high-mindedness for the privilege of exercising imperial brutality. Leonard’s sexual fantasies and later sexual assault show his self-image as a manly hero who assumes the role of conqueror in order to satiate his English sense of superiority over Germany. He imagines himself as “a soldier, weary, battle-marked and bloody, but heroically rather than disabingly so” (The Innocent 64). His soldier’s dream of imperial conquest is at stake in his sexual brutality towards Maria. Excusing his sexual fantasies as “alien to his obliging and kindly nature”, Leonard defends “his sense of what was reasonable” (The Innocent 63).

Leonard’s differing thoughts about his attack on Maria, on the spot in Berlin as opposed to back home in London, shows his final awareness of his sexual morality. McEwan describes what he imagines at the moment of attack:

He appealed to an imaginary court. If this had been anything other than playfulness, if he had meant her harm, he would not have stopped when he did, the very moment he saw how upset she was. She was taking it literally, using it against him, and that was quite unfair. … There came to him an image of a blue clockwork locomotive, a present on his eighth or ninth birthday. It pulled a string of coal trucks round a figure-of-eight track until one afternoon, in a spirit of reverent experimentation, he had overwound it. (The Innocent 66-67)

Leonard’s immediate association of this act with the childhood image of a birthday present makes him feel temporarily free of guilt. During the assault, Leonard puts his innocent fantasy into practice, and considers that Maria “gave off a childish smell of toothpaste and soap” (The Innocent 65; emphasis added). The male materialization of sexual desire can also be observed in Leonard’s hunger to eat English food: “he thought about food, about sausages. Not Bratwurst or Bockwurst, but English sausages, fat and mild, fried brownish-black on all sides, and mashed potatoes, and mushy peas” (The
Innocent 64). This materialization satiates Leonard’s sexual desire to subjugate Maria, and also signifies his illusion of English imperial conquest over Germany.

The figuration of Maria’s verbal and physical counterattack also serves as a reflectively restraining form of opposition. Maria also “had a memory, but [it was] only ten years old and more burdensome than a broken toy train” (The Innocent 67). Maria associates Leonard’s sexual assault with her witnessing the sexual assault of a wounded German citizen by a Russian soldier. Upon thinking of this national and sexual brutality, Maria defies the sexual violence lurking behind Leonard’s self-deceptive arrogance propped up by this sense of English privilege and decency. As a lover, Maria appreciates Leonard’s innocence (free of political calculation), but as a German, Maria feels disgusted at Leonard’s sexual violence and exploitation. The pair’s mutual emotional attraction and repulsion, according to Jack Slay, is a “symbolic political union, a reuniting of forces torn asunder by the upheavals of the twentieth century. … In The Innocent, then, McEwan presents politics of love, individual union as the derivation for transcultural pacification and acceptance” (136; emphasis added).

In other words, this couple’s love is still conditional, just as a global alliance of national powers is conditional. This analogy of the opposing balanced powers can be seen again in Leonard’s vision of the international political conditions after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as his reunion with Maria is emblematic of the new Europe expected after the collapse of the Wall.

Moreover, it is significant that the low-class drunken figure of Otto also serves to polarize the high-minded civilian, Leonard. As Leonard tends Maria, who was beaten seriously by her ex-husband Otto, he laments how little he understands people and what they intend to do. He says to Maria: “Why am I so ignorant?”; Maria replies: “Not ignorant. Innocent” (The Innocent 100). Maria’s remark, on the one hand, seems to express appreciation for his simple mindedness, and on the other hand, it mocks his deficient knowledge of himself and others around him. As the violent ex-husband, Otto had kept on abusing Maria following their divorce. Comparatively speaking, Leonard’s treatment of Maria is relatively much gentler than Otto’s.

It is notable that in their first sexual encounter, Leonard is appalled by the initial sexual dominance of Maria, who usurps the traditional role of male sexual superiority. Besides, when Maria reveals her past story of suffering with Otto to him, Leonard tries to “recount in an amusing way a sermon he had once heard at school about the devil and temptation and a woman’s body” (The Innocent 49). It is clear here that Leonard is belittling Maria’s past suffering from Otto. Not different in kind from Otto’s brutal sexual treatment of Maria, Leonard too uses Maria’s bed for “excavations” (The Innocent 60), while exploring her body. He also associates Maria’s body parts with parts of the tunnel: numerous wires in the tunnel are “held in bunches like a little girl’s hair with a bright new clip” (The Innocent 118), and are compared to the “childish clips” which Maria usually wears (The Innocent 40). Leonard’s sexual desire to conquer Maria’s body derives from his wish for masculine superiority over women.

This British male unwillingness to treat the opposite sex equally is particularly immoral in the
case of sexual exploitation of a German woman. This immorality can also be associated with that of the Western Bloc power alliance’s infringements in Germany by a secret tunnel which attempts to eavesdrop on the Eastern Bloc power alliance. In both cases, the individual and national attempts to dominate and even to subjugate others are manifested as immoral. Obviously, the connections between Leonard’s “gentle” sexual fantasies and Otto’s barbaric sexual exploitation are ironically manifested to readers. Otto can be regarded as an ugly version of masculine violence; this ugliness, however, is most perceptible in Leonard’s well-skilled and unsympathetic severing of Otto’s body.

To sum up, the corporeal pairs figuratively signify mutually restraining powers that seem opposed but are substantially balanced. What is worth our attention is how these polar roles provide some reflective contrast. It is this contrast that aggravates Leonard’s distress (over his sexual assault of Maria, his murder of Otto, his betrayal of the tunnel to the Soviets) to hover around him, even when he leaves Berlin for his hometown of London.

III. “Berlin was full of people with heavy luggage”: The Morality of Forgetfulness

This section aims to further highlight the link between Leonard’s distressing individual memory of self-defensive murder and Germany’s memory of ideology-oriented opposition. McEwan utilizes Leonard’s personal distress as a metaphor to satirize Germany’s gradual build-up of ideological death-defying opposition. The title of this section is quoted from the scene where Leonard hurriedly leaves Berlin for London. McEwan depicts Leonard’s mood at the moment of departure:

Once he began on the next stage, there would be no time for reflection. But he had few thoughts now. Beyond the spinning tiredness, he was aware of his pleasure in going. … He picked up his bags and started down. By bumping the cases on the steps, he was able to manage both at once. He paused for breath on each landing. A man just in from work nodded as he passed on his way up. Two boys pushed past him while he was resting. There was nothing strange about him. Berlin was full of people with heavy luggage. (The Innocent 129; emphasis added)

Berlin is the city where Leonard begins to explore himself in all his innocence, but where he suffers purposeful forgetfulness—there are too many distressing memories related to his associations with people (and with “heavy luggage”) in Berlin. Although there is no time for him to reflect on all of this painful experience at the moment he leaves Berlin for London, all these complicated knots of distressing events occur to him and become gradually unraveled in his mind, as he ponders over the course of events he has experienced in Berlin.

Although Leonard has offended Maria, she never loses her belief in Leonard’s goodness. Maria believes that Leonard intended her no harm: “[S]he had come slowly to the decision that Leonard was not malicious or brutal, and that it was an innocent stupidity that had made him behave the way he
had” (*The Innocent* 81; emphasis added). McEwan seems to place Leonard’s stereotyped English innocence⁴ in the complicated spying game in implied contrast with the stereotyped cynicism of the depressed city. However, Leonard’s stereotyped innocence is at stake and is in question. It seems to transform into self-deception or self-justification in a dehumanizing world. It is remarkable that, in Chapter Fourteen, when Leonard returns to his childhood home in the North London suburb of Tottenham, he recalls so vividly his love for Maria, his relationship with Glass and even the psychological complex (pride in the secret dominance but shame from the immoral infringements) imbuing the tunnel itself.

It is worth indicating again that Leonard’s *innocent stupidity* in Berlin is not authentic innocence. Instead, real innocence does not imply stupidity. Rather, *innocent stupidity* means any unwise act of cunning or speculation or shrewd calculation out of self-interest. It is not hard to discover that Leonard’s lack of wisdom exists both in his subjection to American authoritative dominance, and in his inflation of Britain’s imperial superiority. Both of these—subjection and inflation—are emblematic of masculine dominance. Therefore, it is inferable that his overblown sense of the male privilege of masculine dominance has denied the two sexes the equal status that would allow respect for women.

It is significant that this masculine dominance is not merely seen on the individual level but also on the national level. Although Leonard wildly imagines that he may become a Hollywood “peaceable tough guy, hard to provoke, but once unleashed, demonically violent” (*The Innocent* 93) at his first fight of Otto, he knows well that his falls far short of Otto’s stout strength, which correlates with Britain’s subordinate role among the global powers after the Second World War. In other words, his tragedy originates from his lack of knowledge about his (and his nation’s) limited capability during the Cold War.

All the pain of suffering through his reflections cannot be reduced until he comes to terms with these distressing memories confronting his deficient self-knowledge and his self-deception. His sense of morality goes wrong here. His memory of his brutal sexual assault of Maria and his savage dismemberment of Otto’s corpse can never be obliterated by his purposeful forgetfulness; he must confront all the roots of all these violent and unsympathetic acts: i.e., his motives. His immorality stems from an initial ignorance of what he does not understand, and also from his later intentional forgetfulness of what he has done to Maria, to Otto, and finally in the tunnel. It can be said that if Leonard had initially understood his position in the American circle concerning his job, his supervisor, Glass, and the terms he might reach with Maria and Otto, then the sexual assault, the homicide, and the betrayal of the secrecy of the tunnel would not have taken place.

All the consequential troubles are generated from Leonard’s lack of clarity concerning the moral line he should keep to within himself, and also from his successive transgressions of this line. But in

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⁴ This has been discussed on pages 8-10 of this paper. Although Leonard is aware of the fact that British imperial power has gradually decreased with America growing dominance, not only in Anglo-American cooperation but also in international politics, Leonard’s British national pride and sense of superiority (deriving from the age when British imperialism flourished) does not openly manifest itself; but, rather, is sustained by Britain’s international alliance with America.
what location is this moral line grounded? According to Roy Baumeister, not a few murderers are unclear about this line. He maintains:

If evil begins when someone crosses a moral line, then it may be promoted by anything that tends to make the line fuzzy or unclear, including ambiguity and misinformation. When the line between right and wrong is clear, most people will consistently do what is right. They cross the line into doing wrong most readily when they cannot even see for certain that the line is there. (255)

The fact that Leonard’s painful memories keep disturbing him shows readers that Leonard is initially uncertain about where the moral line intersects with his tunnel job in the American spy circle, so he therefore makes consequential moral errors.

Regarding the nature of evil, Alford defines it thus:

Evil is the attempt to inflict our dread on others. Evil is the presentiment of something which is nothing. Evil is a hot relationship to warm a cold heart. Evil is a discourse on suffering and loss. Above all …, evil is a refusal to submit to the conditions of being human: that the vitality of life is fed by the autistic-contiguous experience that lives just next door to dread—not just the dread of pain, helplessness, and abandonment, as though that were not enough. Autistic-contiguous anxiety is about the way these experiences evoke the fear of losing oneself, falling through the net of the world. (119; emphasis added)

It can be discerned that Leonard’s dread exists in his fear of the loss of male dominance over Maria as well as in his fear of defeat by Otto. Hence, it can be understood that he must self-deceptively excuse his violent acts to square them with his British sense of superiority given Britain’s still leading role around the globe. Leonard inflicts his dread on Maria and on Otto in order to maintain the “dignity” of his life. He assaults Maria’s body in order to deny the possibility of the loss of his male dignity, and he cuts up Otto’s body in order to “dismember” his role in Otto’s death (to forget the loss of his good conscience). Ironically, he is to be reminded of these distressing acts for the rest of his life.

Judging from this perspective, it is necessary to ask whether Leonard can successfully clear away all these painful memories. Are all of these self-deceptive acts forgettable? McEwan reveals the narrative of Leonard’s distress, and he drives the reader’s attention to the undercurrents of Leonard’s internal world. As to the nature of evil, Adam Morton presents its ferocious side:

Evil centers on atrocity: death, pain, and humiliation imposed on others. Evil acts produce atrocities deliberately, and with a specific kind of deliberation, in which evil-doers look away from the fact that the victims are fellow human beings. There are many ways of looking away: one of them is to think of the victims as themselves evil, or as sub-human, inferior, or disgraceful, or alternatively as enemies or
Violent individuals tend to have distorted and inflated beliefs about their own capacities and others’ attitudes towards them. However, these beliefs are necessarily at odds with the facts. Leonard’s self-esteem is based on beliefs that are contradicted by the facts.

In McGrath’s interview with McEwan, McEwan reveals his motive in writing this novel: “The idea was then lodged in my mind that I could write a novel set in the Cold War which would conclude with the beginning of the end of the Cold War, and that would be mirrored in some personal reconciliation” (61). He particularly points out that this individual reconciliation is analogous to national reconciliation:

[H]aving been involved in at least a manslaughter, and having betrayed his country, and by an act of extraordinary paranoia rejected the woman he loves, because he suspects her of having an affair, he still manages to leave Berlin with an idea of his innocence intact. … There is a degree of reconciliation, but it’s a reconciliation very much against the background of wasted time. … Perhaps because the moment I rather cling to, or exaggerate, [is] the sense of reconciliation that lies at the end of the novel…. That, for me, was the Wall coming down too, it was not a simple matter of unalloyed joy, it was a moment in which you get the sense that a whole generation, or two generations, had lost time, had lost opportunity. (62-63; emphasis added)

McEwan’s above remark indicates that Leonard will eventually reconcile himself to his past arrogant innocence and stupidity in Berlin. He has no choice but to recognize his wasted time in order to understand his internal lacerations, his internal facts.

Likewise, this internal opposition is mirrored in the pulling down of the Berlin Wall. The division has deeply harmed people’s consciousness; it was a past deeply rooted in people’s minds, and cannot be easily uprooted. People’s good conscience can only be recovered as they bravely recognize their faults in history. They have mistakenly wasted much energy fabricating an untrue self, so they now need much soul-searching in order to rectify their delusional thoughts. McEwan suggests the following in relation to the Wall:

I mean part of the problem too, was, the wall was a fantastic shaming monument to the dreams of the left or of Soviet Communism. And it was odd that so many people, so many writers on the left felt that if they were going to condemn the wall in the madness of polarizing thought, people would think they were right wing, working for the CIA. (154)

The Wall did not bless Germans with security from people of different political ideologies, but instead, raised a terror that had to be blotted out.
IV. Conclusion

To sum up, McEwan deploys the demand for personal reconciliation in *The Innocent* in order to highlight the issue of the problematization of innocence, and further to disclose the moral problem of painstaking forgetfulness in the novel. Both Leonard and England need to take a hard look at the evidence to refute inflated but implausible views of themselves, and so they need certain signs of respect as well as disrespect from others. In some situations, this need is connected with fear: someone does not respect you unless he trembles in your presence. Leonard’s inflated patriotic pride correlates with England’s blind sense of glory at their imperial dominance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Britain’s implausible view of itself in the twentieth century makes it blind to its decline as a world leader. Just as Leonard needs to return to the locus of trauma in order to recognize his own self-betrayal, England also needs to compromise and adapt itself to a new national order. This demand for new knowledge about the self, both on an individual and national level, means facing embarrassment, not to mention humiliation. This confrontation may be disturbing but it is imperative.

Works Cited


