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Aspects of representation with illustration from Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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In contemporary culture and literature representation is an interesting and challenging issue. This paper presents theoretical aspects of representation, definition and connected concepts, illustrated in a brief discussion of Ian McEwan's novel Atonement.
The systems of representation do not only mirror reality, but construct the mechanisms through which humans understand and process the information coming from the exterior. Ian McEwan explores the diversity and power of impact of these mechanisms. His characters face, imagine and shape reality at the same time.

Key-words: *representation, presence, historiographic metafiction, reference, history*

1. Introduction

How do we know the world? How do we make sense of what we see, perceive with our senses? This paper discusses the issues of representation and presence, with reference to an important novel of contemporary British fiction: *Atonement,* published in 2001 by Ian McEwan, one of the most prominent writers in the British Isles. I think that there is a change of focus in contemporary literature, by contemporary literature meaning here novels published in the last decade. We may be out of the postmodern paradigm that generated an immense theoretical and critical apparatus, as if literature and theory were in a sort of competition.

The paper makes an overview of the relation between modernism and postmodernism, focusing on the changes brought by the latter. Reminding historical moments that brought changes in cultural paradigms is always a useful approach. A presentation of the concept 'representation' is dealt with in the paper, with references to the novel discussed here. This is followed by an application of the concept 'representation' to the novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan.

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2. Defining the terms

2.1. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is the name given to the period of literary criticism that developed in the second half of the twentieth century. As the name implies, it is the period that comes after modernism. But modernism and postmodernism are not separated by a wall, there are aspects of modernism that are transmitted in the new trend. Postmodernism appeared as a reaction to the established modernist era, with its elitist aestheticism, its clear demarcation between the arts, as Ihab Hassan (1987) explained the phenomenon.

What sets Postmodernism apart from the preceding movement is the reaction of its practitioners to the rational, scientific, and historical aspects of the modern age. For postmodernists this took the features of being self-conscious, experimental, ironic, parodic and playful. The postmodernist is concerned with imprecision and the unreliability of language and with epistemology, with the limits of human knowledge.

An exact date for the establishment of Postmodernism is elusive, but it may be said that it began in the post-World War II era, roughly the 1950s. It took full flight in the 1960s in the face of the global, social and political unrest. In 1968 it reached an early flourishing moment. One facet of Postmodernism that separates it from Modernism is the attitude that postmodern authors bring to fiction. While the modernist artist was concerned with precision both in language and presentation, the postmodernist breaks with these established practices and rules. Time lines are often disrupted, leaving it to the reader to determine the order of events, although this is not a postmodernist invention. In other words, narrative expectations are upset, as the author contradicts the narrative or intrudes deliberately into the story line.

As is well-known, the way an author tells a story is through a narrator. Generally the narrator is not identical with the author, but a created persona with a personality, a behavioral pattern and special reasons for telling the story in the manner it is being told. Wayne C. Booth explained all the facets of narrator, narrative voice, narration in his famous *Rhetoric of Fiction*.

The postmoderns' relationship to history is not innocent. It favours parody and irony as forms of approach; postmodernist architecture, art and literature explore historical styles and genres. These are parodically combined with modern ones, thus forming double-coded and eclectic semiotic discourses.

Postmodernism recognises history as a play of texts and intertexts, existing only through the relics of the past and not as a transparent, objective, autonomous entity. Moreover, postmodernist literature self-consciously evaluates the nature of historical knowledge and narration, and rewrites history from current thematic, cultural and ideological positions, with a playful, ironical and detached attitude.

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2.2. Representation

I am aware that the issue of representation was a key topic in the theory on postmodernism. For this paper I chose as main point of reference the definition of representation given by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright in *Practices of Looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture*. The two theorists define representation in the following way:

> Representation refers to the use of language and images to create meaning about the world around us. We use words to understand, describe, and define the world as we see it, and we also use images to do this. This process takes place through systems of representation, such as language and visual media that have rules and conventions about how they are organized. (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 12)

The quotation seems straightforward, and we all know that we use words and images to define the world around us. The theorists' main point though is that this use of language and images creates *meaning* about all that we perceive, and more than that, the *systems of representation* determine the way in which we make sense of what we see.

> Throughout history, debates about representation have considered whether these systems of representation reflect the world as it is, such that they mirror it back to us as a form of *mimesis* or imitation, or whether in fact we construct the world and its meaning through the systems of representation we deploy. (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 12)

To language and images I would like to add mentality, education, as lenses through which we see the world, establish connections with people around us, but this is from another perspective.

There are considerable consequences from the quotation above, and Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright follow their argumentation through:

> …the world is not simply reflected back to us through systems of representation, but we can actually construct the meaning of the material world through these systems. (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 13)

It means that the systems of representation we use determine how we see the world, what meanings we attach to what we see. This is very relevant for one of the main characters in *Atonement*, Briony, who has a particular way of relating to the world, with major consequences for the people around her. But I will come back to this aspect when dealing with the novel, from the theoretical perspective that I am presenting briefly now.

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Sturken and Cartwright point out the logical consequence of what they stated:

> Language and systems of representation do not reflect an already existing reality so much as they organize, construct and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion and imagination. The distinction between the idea of reflection, or mimesis, and representation as a construction of the material world can often be difficult to make, (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 13)

add the researchers. In his novel, Ian McEwan reveals precisely these mechanisms of construction of representations of reality, given the framework each person or group of people have. One major part of the novel deals with the retreat of the British troops in Dunkerque, in 1940, and the writer captures with subtlety the differences between how the British and the French relate to a major event in their life.

Coming back to the theoretical discussion, the process of attaching meaning to the world around us is very complex, as Sturken and Cartwright point out. As literature uses language as its tool, I would say that literature is actually a way of presentation of reality from this point of view. Each paradigm in the history of literature has a specific set of topoi, favourite themes, obsessions, recurrent narrative techniques, that show a particular way of organizing, constructing, understanding reality and representing that understanding of it. The repertoire of procedures typical of postmodernism has been dealt with in detail, in theory, inductively, deductively, in various approaches.

For example, the classical, I would say, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* by Linda Hutcheon, indispensable for a discussion of any postmodern novel is, in my opinion, very relevant for the present topic, as it deals with the issue of representation in the chapter "The Problem of Reference". Here Linda Hutcheon connects historiographic metafiction with the relation between language and reality – be it fictive or historical. According to the theorist, all assertions about historical facts come from a social and institutional context, as the author of those assertions – the historian – writes from a perspective that is bound to his/her frame of mind, intellectual formation etc.

As Hutcheon points out, following Sparshott (1986: 154-155):

> Historiographic metafiction always asserts that its world is both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical, and that what both realms share is their constitution in and as discourse. (Hutcheon 1996: 142)

From the perspective of postmodern art forms reality is "repressed" by postmodern representation. In postmodern literature the real world is not the main focus of the writer, but the reflections on it, the writer's struggle to find the most suitable words to express his/her vision of the world, the characters' meditation on the world, if we remember John Barth's *The Floating Opera*, or Thomas Pynchon's

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The Crying of Lot 49. These are not historiographic metafictions, of course, but they are novels that make an implicit commentary on "how much reality is dealt with in the novel", so to speak. This is not the case with *Atonement,* from my perspective. I think that this novel focuses on the perceptions of the individual on reality, on life as it is for the characters. But I will deal with this topic later on.

Linda Hutcheon (1996)'s discussion of the problem of referent seems to be extremely relevant because it clearly explains the theorist's view on reference and representation, and the typically postmodern artistic approaches to reality, repressive. Linda Hutcheon speaks rightfully about "an already existing and now general problematizing of the entire idea of reference. Reference is not correspondence, after all." (1996: 145) The nuance that Hutcheon brings is that, from her perspective, historiographic metafiction does not simply repress or deny the referent. Nor does it assert unproblematically "factual immediacy".

> Historiographic metafiction renders problematic both the denial and the assertion of reference. It blurs the distinction which Rorty (1985) makes between "texts" and "lumps" – things made and things found, the domains of interpretation and epistemology. It suggests that there were lumps – historical personages and events - but that we know them only as texts today. (Hutcheon 1996: 145)

What Goodman (1978) asserts, connects with Sturken and Cartwright's view, discussed above. Goodman says that "frames of reference appear to be a matter of systems of description rather than of things described" (1978: 2-3).

Hutcheon continues, pointing out that the term referent implies

> that the "reality" to which we refer is not a given, a lump, but rather "that of which we speak". In other words, perhaps by definition, the referent is a discursive entity. (…) It is this definition that historiographic metafiction foregrounds in its paradoxical use and abuse of the conventions of novelistic and historiographic reference. (Hutcheon 1996: 145)

3. Illustration – Ian McEwan

Ian McEwan is concerned with history, and with the extent to which major events in the history of mankind have collided with the individual destinies of individuals. The author of *Atonement* has a very alert social and artistic consciousness, as the interview he took to Milan Kundera in 1984 shows. In that interview McEwan asked pertinent questions to the Czech writer, as for example how Kundera feels for being "cut off from his native readership", or how the experience of exile is transfigured in material for art. We see a sharp and flexible Ian McEwan, changing the tone and area of questions very quickly: the political dimension of Kundera's writings is put

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under scrutiny, and one of McEwan's questions is very direct, blunt: "Have people been tempted to manipulate you and your work for their own political purposes?' To which Kundera replied diplomatically: "To be completely frank I've never felt that."

What I would like to underline from this brief reference to this interview is McEwan's interest in issues such as the relation between the writer and the social, political context he/she lives in, the degree to which writers involve or should get involved in voicing the anxieties, problems, identity marks of the nation they spring from. After discovering Ian McEwan's social consciousness, the novel *Atonement*, hugely acclaimed and awarded prestigious prizes both in Britain and the United States, does not come as a surprise, though it reflects the fantastic development of this writer, who started from "dark themes and perverse, even gothic material".

I will start the brief discussion of this very complex novel, in the aspects of representation and presence, with the words of the author himself, who states that he prefers a work of fiction to be contained, supported by its own internal struts and beams, resembling the world, but somehow immune from it. McEwan likes stories, and he is always looking for the one which he imagines to be irresistible.

Against all this, McEwan values the documentary quality, and an engagement with a society and its values; he likes to think about the tension between the private worlds of individuals and the public sphere by which they are contained. Also, another polarity that fascinates McEwan is of men and women, their mutual dependency, fear and love, and the play of power between them.

Indeed in *Atonement* we find the "documentary quality" that McEwan values, represented by the presentation of the war episode of the retreat of the British troups from France, known as the Dunkerque episode, and the heroic life of the London soldiers on the French front during the Blitzkrieg of 1940.

McEwan depicts with cinematic acuteness, with a kaleidoscopic view the march through the bombed territory of France made by Robbie Turner and the soldiers Nettle and Mace. The second part of the novel offers a revelation in the new and powerful sense of history, of the pattern of individual lives and actions within the sweep of great events.

It is indeed a new sense of history, with its great events that collide with the individual life and change it for ever. The historical events are presented from Robbie's perspective, with his thoughts and memories of the woman he loves. We are given a presentation of the crude facts, episodes that cannot but stir emotions of compassion in the reader's consciousness. The evocation of a bombing scene, for example, resulting in the death of a child and the despair of his mother is so vivid, that the reader finds herself again reading literature that tells a story, a profoundly human one. It seems that the role of the novel is again that of creating a world of its own, in McEwan's own view, resembling the world, but somehow immune from it.

The pages dedicated to the retreat from Dunkerque are the result of intense research work, as the author mentions, at the end of his novel. The books he is indebted to are the following: *Destination Dunkirk*, by Gregory Blaxland, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, by Walter Lord, *No Time for Romance*, by Lucilla Andrews.

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To give an example of the moral dimension that is captured in the novel, I will make reference to the scene when Robbie Turner says good-bye to one of his hosts:

> Henri Bonnet said:
> - How bravely we fought twenty-five years ago. So many dead people…And now the Germans have come back to France. In two days they will be here and will steal everything we have. Who would have thought?
> - Turner felt for the first time how undignified the retreat was. He was ashamed. He said, less convinced than before:
> - We will come back to chase them away, I promise you.
> (McEwan 2003: 254)

Interestingly enough, the issue of representation is thematized in the novel. Robbie meditates:

> Who cared? Who will be able to describe one day all this mess, to find all the names of villages and all the necessary data for the history books? Who will judge impartially and will distribute guilt? Nobody will really know what it meant to be here. Without details you cannot have a detailed painting. (McEwan 2003: 288)

The aspect of the tension between the private worlds of individuals and the public sphere, in McEwan's vision, is particularly powerfully captured in *Atonement*. Apart from the representation of History, this novel has a well-defined plot, a precise articulation of character, a story that keeps the reader in suspense. Robbie Turner's life is dramatically changed once he is on the French front. He keeps thinking of Cecilia, the woman he loves, and the memories of their brief moments of intimacy keep him alive, give him the strength to move on, in the proper sense of the word. McEwan succeeds to alternate the inner monologue with the description of scenes of war, with a precision that is achieved only by the finest artist.

The most intriguing aspect of the novel, that gives the title, is the error of perception made by Briony Tallis, Cecilia's sister, who makes a confusion and as a result sends Robbie to prison. Briony has her own system of representation of the world, with an acute sense of justice and order. An adolescent that will become a writer, Briony wants to observe the world carefully, only that she interprets what she sees according to her vision of the world. She sees what she wants to see, and her interpretation of facts proves to be mistaken, with consequences for the members of her family – her sister Cecilia and Robbie, the housekeeper's son. Sean Matthews argues that the atonement to which the title refers becomes the goal of her life, and her text, as she struggles somehow to make amends for the irrevocable damage she has caused. There was, therefore, a problem of representation for Briony.

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4. Conclusion

For our discussion about representation, it is obvious that the case of Briony Tallis illustrates very well what Sturken and Cartwright sustained, that the systems of representation make us construct our meaning of the world, which is a subjective one, because human knowledge is subjective.

To come back to the question that I asked at the beginning of the paper – how do we know the world? – I think we know the world as we see and interpret it through the lenses that each of us has, given by our frame of mind, education, sensibility.

The present paper looked into issues of representation, postmodernism, 'historiographic metafiction', illustrating these concepts with an example from contemporary British fiction: the novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. This novel clearly illustrates the challenges to the traditional modes of representation. It can be considered a 'historiographic metafiction', because it presents a mirror to events from history, and it also raises questions to the capacity of human mind in general to make adequate representations of the world.

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