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Writing on the English novel since 1950, Steven Connor sets out to view it "not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made and remade." With reference to *Black Dogs* by Ian McEwan, *Troubles* by J. G. Farrell and *What a Carve Up!* by Jonathon Coe, what evidence can you find to support Connor's view?

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A superficial definition of History and Fiction states that 'history purports to deal with "facts", while fiction prides itself on its inventiveness'.[1] However, as Connor's view of the postmodern English novel proposes, there is a tension between these two concepts that elucidates a problematic area of uncertainty. Connor draws on Foucault's argument that people use the narration of history in order to establish man as the 'subject of history'.[2] Connor argues that in the post-war period Britain began to lose its confident belief that it was the subject of its own history'.[3] *Black Dogs*, *Troubles* and *What a Carve Up!* are postmodern texts because they foreground an awareness that history and fiction are human constructs. They illustrate Connor's view because they present an engagement with the ways in which their characters have been traumatised by the past and also with the way in which they create and re-create their histories. This interest in historiography shows a metafictional awareness of the novel form's artificiality.

These novels demonstrate how they have been passively marked by history and actively construct it by subverting the novel's earlier forms. Scanlan argues that the increase in the novel's historical consciousness can be attributed to the 'massive changes in British society'.[4] Hutcheon argues on the contrary that 'its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs has made the ground for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past'.[5] Both stances support Connor's view of the tension in the postmodern novel between passively and actively engaging with history. Modernists tried to reconcile the differences between reality and the novel through formal innovation, to 'make it new'.[6] However, *post*-modernists recognised, after two World Wars and the deployment of an Atom Bomb, that limiting reality to one narrative structure was impossible. Therefore, drawing attention to the way in which the subject constructs his/her history, these novels subvert the modernist desire to portray subconscious truth through formal innovation and present 'realisms', rather than a single truth.[7] The fragmentariness of *Black Dogs*

[1] Earl Rovit, 'J G Farrell and the Imperial Theme', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (Fall, 1998), p. 630.
[2] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), pp. 3-17.
[3] Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 3.
[4] Margaret Scanlan, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 5.
[5] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.
[6] Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 1.
[7] Gasiorek, pp. 18-19.
[7] Ibid.

encompasses the way in which the postmodern subject processes history; the reader is 'surrounded by stories that try to recount and make sense of a whole mass of events'.[8] Each part of *Black Dogs* is a 'mininarrative'; it has its own beginning, middle and end.[9] This technique draws attention to the novel's fabrication and creates a disjointed reading. In order to emphasise the significance of retrospection, McEwan illustrates first how characters process June's encounter with the black dogs before narrating the event itself. June both passively experiences the attack of the dogs and actively re-creates her interpretation. She relays to Jeremy: 'I met evil and discovered God'.[10] But Bernard discounts this: 'She made patterns, she invented myths. Then she made the facts to fit them'.[11] This awareness of the multiplicity of truths is a concern of the postmodern. In trying to deal with the horrors of the war, and with the trauma of her near-death experience, June constructs a fiction. Therefore, what McEwan parodies in his novel is the way in which humans actively create and re-create their experiences in order to comprehend them.

Like *Black Dogs*, the storyline of *What a Carve Up!* and *Troubles* is not chronological. Coe and Farrell employ a reverse chronology, beginning with lines that allude to the ending: 'Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale' and 'In those days the Majestic was still standing'.[12] This has the effect of foregrounding these as pieces of historical fiction. The novels focus on the way in which we attempt to narrativise our lives by editing our own stories. Where the use of the first person narrator in *Black Dogs* emphasises the fact that Jeremy is constantly constructing his narrative, Coe and Farrell make use of different forms of textuality. In *Troubles*, real newspaper clippings from the time of the Irish War of Independence are used. Murdoch critiques the twentieth-century novel as too 'journalistic'.[13] The Major's first-hand experience of the shooting of the old man differs entirely from the newspaper account.[14] This makes a claim for the novelist's privileging of an individual's everyday reality over the collective construction of history through factual documents. Indeed, The Major is shocked by how easily the papers 'classified and accepted' the murder and how quickly it became one of the 'random events of the year 1919, inevitable, without malice, part of history'.[15] The way in which the newspaper cuttings disjoint the reading of the novel illustrates how the empirical facts of journalism do not necessarily present the full truth of historical events. Similarly, Coe presents how journalism preys on society's anxiety for a single 'true' historical discourse by placing Hilary's contradicting articles about Saddam Hussain side by side.[16] Ironically, this journalism undermines the conception of empirical truth. The novel subverts the conventions of its literary history in order to portray the way in which we process history through various sources. Postmodernists reject the modernist principle that there is a way of making the novel 'true to life'. It parodies the way in which humans attempt to narrativise history by drawing attention to historiography; there are as many truths as there are people to make and re-make them.

That the protagonists in the three novels are traumatised in some way is significant in the way that the novels present the making and re-making of history. Freud describes the traumatised patient as 'wounded and involuntarily repeating…behaviour connected to the

[8] David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), p. 18.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 60.
[11] *Black Dogs*, p. 86.
[12] Jonathon Coe, *What a Carve Up!* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 3; J. G. Farrell, *Troubles* (London: Phoenix, 2007), p. 3.
[13] Irish Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, (London: Fontana Press, 1990), p. 20.
[14] *Troubles*, pp. 98-99.
[15] Ibid.
[16] *What a Carve Up!*, pp. 63-64.

experience not as memory, but…as if the suffering is ongoing'.[17] Garrett argues that 'Farrell situates trauma at the heart of the novel's story line and underscores how the past becomes a terrifying feature of the present'.[18] The Major's viewpoint of the War of Independence presents a kind of '*re*memory'. His comprehension of the present is frequently obscured by the way in which he associates it with the trauma of WW1. For example, when Edward shoots the Sinn Feiner who tries to blow up the Queen Victoria statue, the Major associates it with the trenches: 'they aren't the Germans or the Bolshevists… This is their country as much as it is ours…more than it is ours! Blowing up statues is nothing!'[19] The fact that he previously thought that the war had been a just cause because 'the great civilising power of the British Empire had been at stake'[20] illustrates that the repetition of his trauma adjusts his Imperialist attitudes towards Ireland. This supports Connor's view because Brandon is both passively marked with a trauma and actively re-makes his interpretation of history through repetition. Farrell states that he prefers to use the past because 'people have already made their minds up about the present'.[21] Indeed, using the Major's disorientated experience of the War of Independence in 1919 resonates with the postwar reader because the recent horrors of WW2 creates a deeper sense of the way in which history is made and re-made through trauma. The atmosphere of 'insecurity and decay' in the Majestic, both reflects that of the trenches and also of the Cold War context of the time that the book was written.[22]

Similarly, the onanism that Michael indulges in with the freeze-frame of Shirley Temple reflects Freud's theory about the compulsion to repeat. Michael is put in a situation with Phoebe that echoes this freeze-frame. Thurschwell makes a valid argument that narrative events in *What a Carve Up!* happen more than once: 'they become a sign of the historically traumatised state of the postmodern subject, a state in which the freeze-frame becomes the only way left to experience history'.[23] Phoebe, who looks a lot like Shirley Temple, says the same line as her double in the film: 'why don't you stay here tonight?'[24] In this instance, however, the fact that he does succeed in having sex with her as he hadn't with Joan or Fiona illustrates the fact that he has, to some extent, worked through the compulsion to repeat his trauma by re-creating his present. However, he is also passively marked with the imprint of history that leads him to inadvertently meet the same fate as his birth-father. In his last moments he recalls the nursery rhyme lines: 'merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily…life is but a dream'.[25] This child-like absurdity is juxtaposed with the more serious contemplations: 'No president can easily commit our sons and daughters to war… This is an historic moment'.[26] The effect of this juxtaposition is that the historical links between this moment and the death of his father are foregrounded and then undermined by farce. He, like his father, is completely annihilated as a result of somebody else's 'greed and madness'.[27]

Jeremy, like the Major and Michael, is obsessed with the past and unable to effectively engage with his present. Michael and Jeremy have been psychologically traumatised as a result of losing their parents. This orphan anxiety, I suggest, symbolises the

[17] Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through', quoted in Robert F. Garrett, *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 35.
[18] Garrett, p. 35.
[19] *Troubles*, p. 422.
[20] *Troubles*, p. 46.
[21] J. G. Farrell, quoted in Earl Rovit, 'J G Farrell and the Imperial Theme', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, (Fall, 1998), p. 632.
[22] *Troubles*, p. 214.
[23] Pamela Thurschwell, 'Genre, Repetition and History in Jonathon Coe', in *British Fiction Today*, ed. Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 34.
[24] *What a Carve Up!*, pp. 469, 48.
[25] *What a Carve Up!*, pp. 492-93.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, p. 493.

break with previous notions of historical certainty, the end of a 'total history'.[28] The trauma of the Holocaust and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shattered the belief in a single dominant historical discourse, now replaced by uncertainty. The fact that Jeremy attempts to reconcile the difference between his parents-in-law at the same moment that he witnesses the Berlin Wall crumbling in 1989 is significant as this can be seen as the 'end of history'.[29] It illustrates his desire for some kind of 'total history' in which the differences between two opposing ideologies are resolved. His failed attempt to re-make Bernard's interpretation of the 'insect's revenge' into June's more spiritual understanding demonstrates Connor's view.[30] Jeremy represents the postmodern subject in that he is both passively marked by the trauma of the loss of parental, historical certainty and in trying to work through this he attempts to re-create it. Therefore, the use of traumatised protagonists in these novels illustrates how the postmodern subject tries, but is ultimately unable to work through the sense of powerlessness in the face of historical uncertainty.

The focalisation of the narratives through the lens of trauma creates an element of unreliability to the stories of the protagonists. This multiplicity of truths, however, I argue, illustrates the fact that these writers are parodying a tendency to look for consoling empirical fact.[31] The anxiety these novels portray in relation to a dominant historical discourse is in accordance with Connor's concept of history being 'made and remade'. Murdoch argues that we require a 'renewed sense of the…complexity of moral life'.[32] Through the character Bernard, McEwan engages with Murdoch's idea that 'a simple-minded faith in science…engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing it'.[33] Bernard categorises insects without seeing the beauty of them: 'They represented what he knew, or wanted to know'.[34] His failure to recognise any transcendental reality beyond the myths with which he has consoled himself is juxtaposed with June's spiritual experience with the black dogs. Both of these illustrate how these characters deal with traumatic historical events by consoling themselves with myths and re-making history without recognising subjectivity. McEwan engages with Murdoch's concept of 'dryness' — 'self-containedness'[35] — by describing the landscape where June encounters the black dogs as being an 'enemy' to any transcendental reflection of their human goodness 'by its *dryness* alone'.[36] The way in which they impose a single meaning on this manifestation of human evil illustrates the way in which they make and re-make their own narratives by consoling themselves with myths. Malcolm argues that *Black Dogs* demonstrates that it is 'possible to give a worthwhile, accurate record of what happens'.[37] However, the fact that Jeremy never resolves the 'separate realms' of June and Bernard's and fails to find any transcendent reality to console himself with, defies the concept of an objective, factual version of events.[38]

Coe and Farrell also illustrate how their protagonists attempt to console themselves with empirical truth. They endeavour to be the subjects of their own histories but it is revealed that they are largely powerless in the hands of historical events that are beyond their comprehension. *What a Carve Up!* presents a damning critique of Thatcherism in Britain. Due to the fact that the collective Britain is controlled by a privileged, corrupt few, the moral responsibility of people like Michael is largely taken away from them. In writing the story of

[28] Foucault, p. 9.
[29] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', in *The National Interest* (Summer, 1989), p. 4.
[30] *Black Dogs*, p. 81.
[31] Murdoch, p. 18.
[32] Ibid., p. 22.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Murdoch, p. 148.
[35] Ibid, p. 20.
[36] *Black Dogs*, p. 142.
[37] Malcolm, p. 10.
[38] *Black Dogs*, p. 120.

the Winshaws, Michael illustrates how writers try to author history. However, as Eagleton points out, 'the autobiographer is at once subject and object of his or her narrative'.[39] That Michael is killed in a plane by the maniacal pilot, Tabitha, is a farcical metaphor for the fact that despite his attempt to fly away from the web and claim moral responsibility, he is unable to do so. Due to a cycle of events that are out of his narrative control, his history has come to an abrupt end. His biography of the Winshaws is left unfinished. Similarly, in *Troubles*, the Major's Imperialistic attempts to maintain the Majestic fail and it is only thanks to the rescue efforts of a few old ladies, the frail remnants of the Anglo-Irish tradition, that his head is literally kept above the water. Coe, Farrell and McEwan illustrate that, like the characters in their books, they, as writers of the post-war English novel, are ultimately unable to author their interpretation of the past, or the present, without the imprint of history influencing the way in which they structure their narratives. This tension between being passively marked with the imprint of history and actively making and re-making history results in the writers of the post-war novel eluding moral responsibility over a single, 'dry' version of events.

Troubles, *Black Dogs* and *What a Carve Up!* demonstrate the validity of Connor's view through an awareness in their narratives about the process of the way in which an individual constructs and reconstructs their histories. In stating that these novels present multiple versions of reality, I am not suggesting that there is an alternative perspective in which the Holocaust or the Atom bomb did not occur. Rather, these novels engage with these historical events which attempted to annihilate individuals entirely from history. Their novelistic intricacy lies in the way that they convey how a single version of events destroys any sense of moral complexity. In this we see how History and Fiction overlap and the postmodern novel illustrates this through historiography. The novel is a useful form, as Connor reflects, in portraying individual accounts of history. By using unreliable, traumatised narrators and defying consolation, the authors engage with the complexity of the post-war difficulty in representing history. These novels can be seen to be historical documents from the times that the authors wrote them. This illustrates how they have been passively marked by the contexts of their times *and* how the reader might interpret and re-interpret the narratives.

[39] Terry Eagleton, 'Theydunnit', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 16, No. 8 (April, 1994), p. 2.

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