

## THE ETHICAL COMPONENT IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WRITING

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It is becoming increasingly obvious that there are signs in contemporary British literature indicating that writers have been turning to the “old” or pre-modern forms, practices and strategies. It seems to me that novels with metahistorical dimension, the ethical component, the revival of realist storytelling in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, Kate Atkinson, Julian Barnes’s novel *Arthur and George* (2005) attest to the new mode which reaches beyond postmodernism. Metafiction, post-modernist experiment with narrative technique, attacks on mimetic referentiality, delight in popular culture became mainstream, they lost their subversive power and shock effect and no longer produce the effect of novelty; thus to reach alterity the postmodernist and modernist novel are deconstructed: old, pre-modern forms are used to achieve defamiliarization.

This point is made particularly well by Herbert Grabes’ comprehensive and illuminating article “From the Postmodern to the Pre-Modern: More Recent Changes in Literature, Art, and Theory” which focuses on the evolution of the postmodern to the pre-modern mode<sup>1</sup>.

A return to ethical values with a revival of narrative, a growing interest in questions of identity is extensively discussed in the collection of essays *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer, among them in Vera Nunning’s “Beyond Indifference: New Departures in British Fiction at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”<sup>2</sup>. Ihab Hassan’s seminal essay in the same collection “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust” advocates for “Truth”, “trust”, “love”<sup>3</sup>.

With the evolution of Postmodernism into Postmodernity (as Ihab Hassan claims in the above mentioned essay) and with the shift of its focus from suspicion to trust, contemporary fiction registers a return to the “basics” – to ethical values and moral

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and Theory”, *Literatūra*, Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2007, 42–53.

<sup>2</sup> Vera Nunning, “Beyond Indifference: New Departures in British Fiction at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer, Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003, 235–254.

<sup>3</sup> Ihab Hassan, “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust”, *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer, Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003, 199–212.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Grabes, “From the Postmodern to the Pre-Modern: More Recent Changes in Literature, Art,

dilemmas alongside with a revival of the narrative. The ethical component is obvious is Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love* (1997) which presents a weird and compelling (almost uncanny) story of delusion and obsession, featuring the drama of the hero in crisis. Against the backdrop of what appears to be problematic intertextuality the novel questions rationalism and moral relativism, as well as engages with such values as „truth“, „trust“, „love“, declaring preference for the “truth of beauty” over the “truth of science”.

In *Enduring Love* the author constructs a peculiar situation of the existentialist and existential drama in the form of a thriller and a love story to test the values the main characters abide by: Joe Rose's a science journalist, stands for scientific and rational logic, Clarissa, a literary scholar, for intuitive romantic love, and Jed Parry, a mad stalker, for religion and irrational distorted values of love. The opening chapter of the novel featuring an accident with a balloon right from the start raises a moral question of choice in an extreme life-and-death situation: Joe Rose faces the dilemma of self-sacrifice against selfishness. John Logan, a doctor who quite by chance happens to appear on the scene of the accident, was prepared to die to save the child in the basket; and he did die, as it turned out, for nothing. While Joe Rose let go of the rope helping to kill John Logan – the act which put him into the crisis of suffering trying to convince himself he was not the first person to let go and that he was right to act like this. Even tormented by guilt, Joe is trying to rationalize all feelings and emotions so as to find a logical justification for his moral choice:

And who was this first person? Not me. Not me. I even said the words aloud. (...) Could this person be blamed? (...) It was hard to think this through. (...) On the one hand, the first pebble in an avalanche, and on the other, the breaking of ranks. The cause, but not the morally responsible agent. The scales tipping, from altruism to self-interest. Was it panic, or rational calculation? Had we killed him really, or simply refused to die with him? But if we had been with him, stayed with him, no one would have died<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly, throughout the subsequent drama which unfolds Joe is trying to produce an explanation in scientific terms to account for any action or emotion. Followed by the stalker Jed Parry, in the beginning Joe is trying to rationalize his fear in terms of pure physiology:

Wasn't it an elemental emotion, along with disgust, surprise, anger and elation, in Ekman's celebrated cross-cultural study? Was not fear and the recognition of it in others associated with neural activity in the amygdala, sunk deep in the old mammalian part of our brains from where it fired its instant responses?<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, Joe's explanation of the infant smile in terms of biology and genetics is totally unacceptable to his partner Clarissa who regards it as „rationalism gone berserk“, as „the new fundamentalism“, because for her „the truth of that smile was in the eye and heart of the parent, and in the unfolding love which only had meaning through time“<sup>6</sup> Differently from Clarissa who is guided by emotions and intuition as the way to the truth, Joe relies on logical reasoning, on „information, foresight

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<sup>4</sup> Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*, London: Vintage, 1998, 55–56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

and careful calculation“<sup>7</sup>. This kind of diametrically opposite stance opens up a great divide of misunderstanding and noncommunication between the lovers. Although Joe believes that „logic was the engine of feeling“<sup>8</sup>, ironically, nothing happens according to logic in his life, and in the end, his powers of rationality, deduction and research fail him, even turn against him. Joe’s rational analysis and scientific theories blind him from the true understanding of love – the fact which is evidenced not only by the turns and twists of the plot but also pointed out in Chapter 23, in Clarissa’s letter to Joe after their separation:

You were manic, and driven, and very lonely. You were on a case, a mission. Perhaps it became a substitute for the science you wanted to be doing. You did the research, you made the logical inferences and you got a lot of things right, but in the process you forgot to take me along with you, you forgot how to confide<sup>9</sup>.

The three central characters of the novel are in search of the ultimate value and this value is Love in many guises: Joe’s and Clarissa’s love, Jed Parry’s obsessive love for Joe and for God, Joe’s love for science and Clarissa’s for literature. Will their Love endure? Will it give way under the power of formidable logical reasoning, under the strain of Jed’s obsessive irrationality or will it be preserved? This is the issue inscribed in the ambiguous title and unfolded in the narrative, partly through the process of appropriating other discourses. The author resorts to literary history (life-stories of the Romantic poets

John Keats and William Wordsworth) as well as to the facts of sciences, medicine, of psychopathology to be more exact, thus moving among heterogeneous discourses incorporated into the narrative. This sets the rules of the interpretative game, and it is also instrumental in unravelling the narrative enigma.

The figure of the Romantic poet John Keats, which is referred to right from the start, seems to be central: first, it functions to highlight the pivotal thematic opposition of the novel – that between scientific rationalism and aesthetic and intuitive perception. It is not for nothing that one of the main characters of the novel Clarissa is the Keats scholar, and Keats’s famous lines from the last stanza of his poem *Ode on A Grecian Urn* are quoted: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty...”. Presumably, for Clarissa, as it was for Keats, Beauty is the ultimate criterion of truth – the view which clashes with her partner Joe Rose’s rationalist stance – the stance which will prove vulnerable indeed and which will fail to stand the test of challenging and menacing circumstances of real life.

Furthermore, Keats’s ethereal love for Fanny, which is a constant background presence to the point of turning into a kind of subplot in *Enduring Love*, provides a commentary on love, one of the key issues in McEwan’s novel. It becomes a benchmark against which to measure different kinds of love featuring in the novel. Keats’s love, so innocent and distanced by 200 years, and belonging rather to the realm of the imaginary, both parallels and comments on what at first is Clarissa’s and Joe’s passionate love, then the fading

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

love under strain, as well as on Jed Parry's morbid obsession, the irrational distorted love which will finally invade the couple's lives and encroach on their happiness. Clarissa's and Joe's daily existence and their love gets gradually caught in the gears of the artificiality of Jed Parry's sick obsession – the plight from which, as it finally turns out, there is hardly any solution.

Meticulously engineering his characters' movements, the author slowly but steadily reveals how a maniac's obsession and delusions nearly drive a perfectly sane and rational person to the brink of murder and madness. At the outset, there is a strong urge to dismiss the whole story as a madman's delirium; however, what at first sight seems to be absolute absurdity and nonsense soon turns into a nightmare poisoning the protagonist's personal life. The situation gets totally out of hand and dangerous. The stalker Jed Parry's homo-erotic obsession becomes destructive not only for his own personal integrity but it does test to the limits the protagonist Joe Rose's mental stability and scientific rationalism, threatens his and Clarissa's life. Hence the narrative presupposes a few questions:

First, how effective, spellbinding, and plausible is the story presented for the reader's attention? Is it moving, exciting or irritating and unnerving? Does it create suspense? Does it make the reader relate to and empathize with the protagonist? There are various possible answers to this question which in its own turn brings into focus one of the key structural elements of the novel – the issue of the narrative perspective and the narrator.

In the beginning of the novel, right from the moment when Jed Parry confesses his love for Joe Rose, the situation engineered

by Ian McEwan seems to be contrived and far-fetched; and the further one gets into the narrative, the more one is irritated by the seeming artificiality and contrivance of its total set-up. One becomes aware that this irritation is largely caused by the author's narrative technique of avoidance or delaying the information and reverting time and again to what has been previously said or done. This lends the narrative a kind of concentric pattern and is certainly instrumental in creating suspense. In this respect, the opening chapter of the novel, in which the central themes and ideas as well as the key techniques are mapped, could be a good case in point. It features an idyll which abruptly turns into a disaster. Although the straightforward statements in the initial fourth and fifth sentences ("we heard a man's shout"; "saw danger") alert the reader to a catastrophe, however, the author prefers to withhold the information as to what has really happened, playing hide-and-seek with the reader. Resorting to the narrative technique of avoidance, the writer supplies meticulous, precise details of the scene, steps back to give an account of the scene "through the eyes of the buzzard", which takes up the whole of the second passage; then in the third passage he breaks the narrative to wonder what Clarissa was doing at that moment, whereupon in the fourth passage he declares he is withholding the information:

I'm holding back, delaying the information. I'm lingering in the prior moment because it was a time when other outcomes were still possible; the convergence of six figures in a flat green space has a comforting geometry from the buzzard's perspec-

tive, the knowable, limited plane of the snooker table<sup>10</sup>.

Although finally in the sixth passage the narrator does tell us that they “were running towards a catastrophe”, even at this point, however, we are not given any clue of what exactly happened, and the narrative is interrupted again by a lengthy flashback – an account of Joe’s and Clarissa’s reunion after a separation of six weeks, their meeting at Heathrow, going on a romantic picnic in the Chilterns, talking about John Keats – which delays the crucial information for a few more pages and which is intended to keep the reader in suspense. Even towards the end of the chapter when the catastrophe is being described and disclosed, the author carries on using the technique of avoidance or delaying. This is also true of many other chapters of the novel.

However, as the plot story develops, the reader gets gradually involved into the maze of the characters’ unconscious and the explorations of the disturbed and disturbing psyche. The narrative is conducted in the first-person point of view, and the narrator is identified with the protagonist Joe Rose who is presenting his own version of his staggering experiences. Thus the question arises: to what extent can his narrated story be objective, plausible and reliable? Are we not, possibly, dealing with the so-called unreliable narrator? It seems to me that choosing the unreliable narrator is also instrumental in challenging rationalism and credibility of science. This view tends to get more and more support

while the narrative is moving to its climactic point whereupon the issue of the narrator’s reliability is further problematized: it becomes clear that even his wife Clarissa starts having doubts as to his mental sanity and loses faith altogether in his rationality and logical reasoning while the detective constable treats him as a depressed paranoid and in response to his cry for help suggests he take antidepressant pills:“(…) a maniac was trying to kill me and all the law could suggest was Prozac”<sup>11</sup>. Roe Rose’s mental state is clearly being questioned. The reactions of others make the reader doubt his perceptions and his mental sanity:”Clarissa thought I was mad, the police thought I was a fool (...)”<sup>12</sup> The more so that Joe himself reminds us of the unreliability of human perception and memories:

No one could agree on anything. We lived in a mist of half-shared unreliable perception, and our sense data came warped by a prism of desire and belief, which tilted our memories too. We saw and remembered in our own favour and we persuaded ourselves along the way. Pitiless objectivity, especially about ourselves, was always a doomed social strategy. We’re descended from the indignant, passionate tellers of half truths who in order to convince others, simultaneously convinced themselves. Over generations success had winnowed us out, and with success came our defect, carved deep in the genes like ruts in a cart track – when it didn’t suit us we couldn’t agree on what was in front of us. Believing is seeing<sup>13</sup>.

Curiously enough, here the moment comes when the rational Joe agonized by the turn the events have started tak-

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

ing, all of a sudden becomes aware that „disinterested truth“ and objectivity have no redeeming power and „could not save us from ourselves.“<sup>14</sup> He becomes all the more confused and fails to make sense of his feelings and behaviour.

And when on coming back home the same evening after the shooting incident at the restaurant Joe Rose starts checking the locks on the skylights and goes from room to room securing the windows, and when finally with the help of his old-time friend buys a gun for self-defence from drug-dealers and ex-hippies, it is at this point especially that the reader begins to consider in earnest whether the protagonist-narrator may not be really turning insane while the writer may be gradually and methodically presenting to us one more case of psychopathology. The recurrent affirmations of a paranoiac that he is absolutely in his right mind are no guarantee and no valid proof this is really so, rather the other way round. In fact, at this stage we are tempted to assume that all the story is the deluded narrator's own invention. After all the writer does hand us but only minor tools to counterbalance this version implicated in the narrative: they are Clarissa's revealing letter at the very end of the novel, which does not greatly alter the situation because at that point it has already been clarified, as well as a few letters by Jed Parry which obviously qualify as a product of the insane mind, and presumably Jed himself cannot be regarded as a reliable narrator either.

Joe Rose is 'acquitted' and the reliability of his narrative is finally proved only

in Appendix I which is claimed to be reprinted from the medical journal the *British Review of Psychiatry*. It is here that a detailed account of "a homo-erotic obsession, with religious overtones: a clinical variant of de Clerambault's syndrome"<sup>15</sup> is produced, which is Jed Parry's case history, its causes, development and prognosis. However, this very syndrome crops up in the narrative as early as in Chapter 14: talking to Jean Logan and her children, Joe's memory is suddenly triggered and the whole chain of associations springs readily to his mind. Joe snatches at it gladly seeing in it a comforting possibility to explain his own obsessions, and a solution to his own ordeal:

Even before we reached it, I was back with de Clerambault. De Clerambault's syndrome. The name was like a fanfare, a clear trumpet sound recalling me to my own obsessions. There was research to follow through now and I knew exactly where to start. A syndrome was a framework of prediction and it offered a kind of comfort<sup>16</sup>.

As Appendix I indicates, the earliest references to 'erotic delusions', 'erotomania' and the associated pathologies of love are to be found in Plutarch, Galen and Cicero, and in 1942 de Clerambault carefully delineated the syndrome that bears his name and termed it 'pure erotomania'; he also "described a 53-year-old French woman who believed King George V was in love with her. She persistently pursued him from 1918 onwards, paying several visits to England: She frequently waited for him outside Buckingham Palace. She once saw

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

a curtain move in one of the palace windows and interpreted this as a signal from the King”<sup>17</sup>. A perfect illustration of this syndrome is the stalker Jed Parry’s case history which is further analyzed in the same appendix.

Hence another question is presupposed: to what extent is this theory sound and scientifically valid and whether this syndrome does exist in medical practice? Or is it just the product of the author’s fancy? And are the references following the publication and allegedly supplied from the fields of psychiatry and forensic sciences real or invented? Finally, may not the overall reprinted publication itself be a concoction altogether? Judging by the novel’s last page “Acknowledgements” one might be inclined to assume that all of these things are authentic and that the writer is not playing tricks on the reader. In it the author expresses his indebtedness to really existing people (e. g., the Oxford university don Tim Garton Ash, Chief Inspector Amon McAfee and others) as well as authentic well-known books. If these are not fake, thus going along with this logic one might deduce that the supplied medical references are not a mere contrivance on the author’s part; then, consequently, Jed Parry’s case is absolutely believable, well-motivated and a fact of life. It is at this point, however, that the medical discourse incorporated into the narrative changes its status, and the reader has to accept the rules of the game, suggested by the text. The supplied material in Appendix I allegedly reprinted from the journal of psychiatry turns out to

be the play of the author’s fancy, a textual construct, although the syndrome as such does exist in psychiatry. It is very bizarre indeed that the patient and his case history delineated in the scientific journal should coincide with the character Jed Parry’s case which Ian McEwan attempts at disentangling. Thus merging facts and fiction the author supplies answers to questions implicated in the narrative. All the loose ends are neatly tied up in the conclusion to Jed Parry’s case history: the reader finds out that Joe and Clarissa „were reconciled and later successfully adopted a child.”<sup>18</sup> Thus the narrative is brought to a closure with the trust in Love.

What has started in the foregrounded artificiality, ends in truth, as if echoing Clarissa’s statement in Chapter 19 when she refers to the famous episode of Keats being put down by the arrogant Wordsworth: “It isn’t true, but it tells the truth.”<sup>19</sup>

Needless to say, the use of the medical discourse as a background for the narrative development of a psychological condition and of the effective/erotic relationships between the characters brings to mind Michel Foucault’s historisation of medical discourse in its relation to sexuality<sup>20</sup>. The fact that the medical text, with all its appearance of rationalism, scientific objectivity and finality, is a made up one works along Foucauldian lines in order to suggest that all discourses, including scientific ones (or especially scientific ones) are “artificial” in the sense that they have

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 234–235.

been carefully constructed in order to participate in the power game. This might also imply that art, because it consciously presents itself as artificial, and therefore is more honest, is more capable of reaching truthfulness than the pseudo-objective discourse of science. This is, of course, a return to the Renaissance debates between poetry and history.

On the other hand, the different ontological status of the two intertexts is itself a manipulative act on the part of the novelist: the artistic intertext (Keats's poem) is a real one, the scientific one has been made up, so we end up giving more credence to the real one, that is the artistic one, and that hierarchization of the "reality value" of the two intertexts reproduces the novel's preference for the "truth of beauty" over the "truth of science". In fact, the novel does not do much with romantic poetry, neither

does it play with or parody its conventions; it simply pits it, as a superior option, against rationalism, something that could have been found in any 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic text. However, it seems that, on the one hand, by accepting canonical romantic poetry on its own terms (without any parody, refraction or transcontextualisation) and in a sense deriding the excesses of intertextuality as a critical practice in the fooling of the reader with the made-up text, and, on the other hand, by suggesting, like the romantics, that truth can be attained through beauty, Ian McEwan is calling here for a "return to basics", an abandonment of the ironic and relativising strategies of postmodernism and even a return to textual autonomy and the superiority of the individual work of art over the postmodern blurring of boundaries of which intertextuality is a prime exponent.

## ETINĖ PROBLEMATIKA ŠIUOLAIKINĖJE ANGLŲ LITERATŪROJE

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S a n t r a u k a

Postmodernizmui peraugus į Postmodernybę (kaip teigia Ihabas Hassanas) ir dėmesio centrui persikėlus nuo įtarumo prie pasitikėjimo, šiuolaikinėje anglų literatūroje fiksuojamas grįžimas prie pamatinių tradicinių etinių vertybių ir moralinių dilemų kartu su siužeto, pasakojimo atgimimu. Etinis komponentas išryškėja ir šiuolaikinio anglų rašytojo Iano McEwano romane *Tvari meilė*, kuriame vaizduojama egzistencinę krizę išgyvenančio herojaus drama.

Rašytojo pasirinkta pasakojimo strategija kreipiamą siekiant išryškinti pagrindinę tematinę romano priešpriešą tarp racionalaus mokslinio pažinimo ir estetinio intuityvaus suvokimo; romane taip pat atveriamos tokios vertybės, kaip: tiesa, pasitikėjimas, meilė, pirmenybę aiškiai teikiant „grožio tiesai“, o ne „mokslo tiesai“. Problemiško intertekstualumo fone romane kvestionuojamas racionalizmas ir moralinis reliatyvizmas.

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