

Love and Care for Strangers in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*

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Shortlisted for the 2007 Booker Prize, Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* has received considerable academic attention, although to date there are few critical essays that address the novel. In particular, the author's concern with people's failure to love each other, miscommunication, and the problem of hospitality to strangers has not received the attention it deserves. In this novel, McEwan examines why two lovers fail to love each other, and, by extension, why people fail to do justice to strangers. In presenting a disastrous wedding night in 1962, he exposes love as a construction on both sides and points out the causes of its failure as well as impediments to mutual understanding. Via the implied narrator who delves into the pasts and minds of the central characters, McEwan indicates the importance of keeping love alive and how to better understand each other. He also makes the lovers' problem resonate with people's relationships to strangers, and shows that, in order to respect their own lives and those of others—to achieve a form of coexistence beneficial to all—people should go beyond their obsession with identity and instead care for and try to understand others.

KEYWORDS Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach*, Alain Badiou, event, love, construction, mutual understanding, stranger

Ian McEwan's concern with people's failure to love each other, miscommunication, and the problem of hospitality to strangers has received little attention, despite the fact that critics have long noted McEwan's interest in ethics. For example, Lynn Wells observes that with his "ethical turn" in the 1980s McEwan's fiction has been most acute in its examination of elemental ethics in its depictions of literal face-to-face encounters, moments when he pits individual characters against one another at crucial points of [ethical] decision.¹ The reception of *On Chesil Beach* 'has been marked by continuing attention to its setting, the place but also the time, a particular historical moment in 1962.'² Giorgio Agamben observes: 'the entry to the present necessarily takes the form of an archeology, an

archeology that ... returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living.’³ Indeed, McEwan claims that he does not think of *On Chesil Beach* as a historical novel, and states that the book examines ‘a human universal,’ being about much more than simply sex in the 1960s.⁴

In this novel, McEwan examines why two lovers fail to love each other, and, by extension, why people fail to do justice to strangers. Presenting a disastrous wedding night in 1962, he exposes love as a construction on both sides and points out the causes of its failure as well as impediments to mutual understanding. Via the implied narrator who delves into the pasts and minds of the central characters, McEwan indicates the importance of keeping love alive and how to better understand each other. He also makes the lovers’ problem resonate with people’s relationships to strangers, and shows that, in order to respect their own lives and those of others—to achieve a form of coexistence beneficial to all—people should go beyond their obsession with identity and instead care for and try to understand others.

In this study, I rely heavily on Alain Badiou’s views about an event and love, because they illuminate how the unexpected happens in our lives and how lovers can remain lovers, thereby helping to explain why the central characters in this novel have such a disastrous wedding night as well as how the implied narrator enquires into their failed marriage and what the characters should have done. For Badiou, situations are everywhere. A situation consists of elements that are different from one another, yet are presented (or counted) as if they were the same.⁵ These elements are then re-presented. In terms of human beings, people are the countable ones in a society, while the social groups they belong to come from the second count. Because situations can overlap, a person can belong to different situations,⁶ with each being organized differently (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 101). For example, a musician can belong to the everyday situation he lives in and to the musical situation he constructs when playing. An event refers to something that happens unexpectedly in a situation. No one can foresee it, because people perceive things according to the dominant rules for representing reality in any given situation. Thus an event appears as something that does not belong to the situation.⁷

In each situation, some elements constitute the void, because they are imperceptible according to the rules for representation (Badiou, *Being and Event* 87); when an event erupts it comes from between the imperceptible and the barely perceptible (175). For example, unpredictable revolts can erupt from immigrant labourers who are voiceless and considered as barely visible within a society. Badiou does not take for granted the existence of a subject, which only comes into being when it decides to take an event seriously.⁸ As the event makes appear what was earlier overlooked (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 452), it ‘compels [the enquirer of an event, the subject] to decide a *new* way of being.’⁹ To remain faithful to an event, a subject investigates it by connecting elements in the situation to it,¹⁰ so that they can better understand its nature and cause. In this way, the subject goes beyond social representation in their perception of reality, and the truth they discover is subjective because only the enquirer of an event can grasp this truth. Without knowing all the elements in the situation, no enquirer can exhaust their

examination of these, meaning this subjective truth is a process whose completion remains in the future.¹¹ Badiou does not take morality to be a set of rigid rules, but instead argues that *good* consists of the subject's ability to keep on enquiring about an event, while to interrupt this process of producing truth is *evil* (Badiou, *Ethics* 85).

Badiou also takes the first encounter of lovers to be an event. He contends that lovers need declarations of love to reassure themselves of each other's feelings, because that first encounter is opaque and elusive.¹² 'In no way does love turn a pre-existing Two into One;¹³ rather, before this encounter, lovers are solipsistic *ones*, but the encounter 'brings forth the Two [two-in-one]' (Badiou, *On Beckett* 64). Fidelity to love requires lovers to keep their love alive (Badiou and Truong 45–46). It is to defeat the randomness of an encounter 'day after day through the invention of what will endure' (Badiou and Truong 45–46), and thus love 'is a construction' (Badiou and Truong 31). By continually keeping love alive, lovers can continue to re-invent their world, because they see things from the point of view of the two-in-one. That is, they are one subject of love that views the world through the prism of their difference (Badiou and Truong 26), and so they can be indifferent to the world, and see a world unique to them (Badiou, *On Beckett* 143). Badiou thus also argues that love's main enemy is a person's self-centredness, because a self-centred lover imposes their views upon their beloved, and cannot adopt the point of view of the two-in-one (Badiou and Truong 60).

The following examination consists of four parts. The first part shows why, when Florence talks about sexless love, her speech signifies the eruption of a Badiouean event of love, and why the implied narrator is the investigator of that event. The second part examines the causes of the central characters' failure to reconstruct their love. The third part explains the importance of fidelity in love, and the narrator's suggestion that the way to overcome obstacles to love is to adopt a position of mutual understanding. Finally, the conclusion of this work discusses the relevance of McEwan's love ethics to the contemporary world.

Love and Love's Enemy

Badiou observes that love is a 'source of violent existential crises' (Badiou and Truong 51), because while lovers have to constantly reconstruct their love, there are tests, temptations, and other unexpected obstacles to the lovers' becoming *two*. In *On Chesil Beach*, McEwan focuses the reader's attention on the issue of love and the need for lovers to constantly reconstruct it with an event soon after the novel begins. A disaster happens on Edward and Florence's wedding night. Following the guidance of a marriage manual, Florence tries to guide her new husband in their lovemaking but instead causes him to ejaculate prematurely. Byrnes notes that something irreversible happens in *On Chesil Beach* when the central characters part on the beach (Byrnes 10). This irreversible thing takes place when Florence, frustrated by her failure to live up to social expectations in the bedroom, comes up with the idea of sexless love and enrages Edward, who wrongly assumes that she must be frigid. Their marriage comes to an end soon

after this as a consequence of misunderstandings over what happened on that disastrous night.

Florence's proposal constitutes a Badiouan event, because when she offers it, 'something whose value within the world was null or very weak attains, all of a sudden, in the event, a strong or even maximal intensity of existence.'¹⁴ Florence's proposal is an event about love, because at that moment the nature of love becomes a problem. She says: 'What I mean, it's this—Edward, I love you, and we don't have to be like everyone, I mean, no one, no one at all...'¹⁵ Although she proposes sexless love because she cannot bear the pressure of performing badly in the bedroom any longer, Florence tries to persuade Edward to think in terms of them both, her expression indicating her realization that they have simply been trying to follow social conventions, and that this obedience has made them overlook each other, thus causing their dismal first sexual experience. Florence tries to make possible what has previously been impossible in their situation: the active construction of love from both sides from the point of view of *two*. It is also noteworthy that she aims to be unselfish in order to preserve their marriage since she tells Edwards that he can have sex with other women if he really wants to (190). Unfortunately, Edward sticks to his idea of sexual love, cares only for what he believes he, as a husband, deserves, and fails to understand his wife properly, wrongly seeing her as a frigid woman, which she is too frustrated to deny.

On the beach, Edward and Florence are aware of the possibility that a mutual misunderstanding may have occurred, but they let the various chances to rectify the situation slip away. The narrator speaks little of Florence after the couple's separation on the beach, and there is no sign of her later enquiry into this issue. Byrnes claims that, on the marriage night, Florence seeks distraction in music when she neither wants to remember nor dares to face reality (Byrnes 34). It is more likely that she seeks support from her familiar world of music, because she feels lost in a new situation. Florence's behaviour recalls what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue about territorializing refrains in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: a child in the dark sings a song to find 'a calming and stabilizing ... center in the heart of chaos.'¹⁶ In *On Chesil Beach*, Florence thinks of music, because it is a territory in which she feels familiar and safe, but this reliance on the familiar deprives her of the chance to be *two* with Edward on her wedding night. She also seems to hide in music after that night. She goes on to become a great violinist many years later, and never contacts Edward again, probably because she does not want to know what happened on that fateful night.

Edward also fails to examine the wedding night in any depth. On the beach he accuses Florence of failing to fulfil her wifely duties, and later, when he recalls her, he thinks about their happier times. The narrator says of him: 'This is how the entire course of a life can be changed—by doing nothing' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 202). To highlight Edward's gross mistake, the narrator says of his loss at the end of the story: 'He did not know, or would not have cared to know, that as she ran away from him ... she had never loved him more ... the sound of his voice would have been a deliverance, and she would have turned back' (203).

Instead of the main characters, the narrator is the Badiouan enquirer, because the narrator cares very much for what happens on that wedding night, and tells a

story to explain why love fails to unite the two people. With regard to *On Chesil Beach*, McEwan has said that, when he made notes about the narrator, he used words like 'wry, tolerant, forgiving, and all seeing.'¹⁷ This description indicates that the narrator has tried to understand the central characters' problem as much as possible. However, the narrator as enquirer is also what Edward could have been if he had decided to examine his wedding night in more detail. The narrator enters Florence's consciousness when describing their wedding night and simply talks of Edward's thoughts and actions when the marriage comes to an end. This silence about Florence implies that the narrator enquires into the past for Edward.

The narrator as enquirer also can be seen as McEwan's substitute. McEwan has said in an interview that he looked 'on novels as exploratory, forms of investigation, at its broadest and best, into human nature.'¹⁸ The beginning of *On Chesil Beach* is a situation pregnant with possibilities: 'They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible' (3). By expanding on this situation and its consequences, and illuminating the central characters' thoughts and pasts, McEwan creates a problem-solving structure so that he can explore the couple's difficulties on their wedding night.

Impediments to the Reconstruction of Love

A Badiouian enquirer tries to connect as many elements as possible in a situation to an event when investigating it, and thus makes appear elements which have been overlooked. In his study of the event, the narrator exposes various obstacles that aggravate the isolation of Edward and Florence, and make them unable to love each other properly. Showing Florence and Edward in a world in which their situations overlap, while still being very different, the narrator reveals the need for them to go beyond their self-centred worlds in their relationship, and shows that they have to achieve effective mutual understanding or risk the loss of each other.

The central characters' obsession with identity appears in their worries before the marriage. Edward is mesmerized by the thought of putting 'the most sensitive portion of himself ... within a naturally formed cavity' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 8), and, worried about his performance, he refrains from masturbation for over a week. As for Florence, while she is scared by the thought of lovemaking, she has read a marriage manual so that she can better fulfil her duties in this regard. However, because of their lack of experience, the couple do not know that they are in a dangerous position, especially since they are unable to get over their self-centredness and express their worries to each other. Badiou points out that 'love's main enemy, the one I must defeat, is not the other, it is myself, the "myself" that prefers identity to difference, that prefers to impose its world against the world reconstructed through the filter of difference' (Badiou and Truong 60). In *On Chesil Beach*, Edward and Florence's self-centredness becomes not only an impediment, but also a deadly enemy when other obstacles to their love begin to play more important roles.

The first obstacle is that, while sexual satisfaction was seen as fundamental to love and marriage after World War II,¹⁹ society provided young people with little

knowledge about the other sex. With regard to the difficulties contemporary Americans face when talking about sex, Carey M. Noland points out: ‘almost all of our sex education and public service announcements ... largely ignore the reality of our personal relationships. People do not feel comfortable and/or truthful when talking about sex with sexual partners, family members, and medical professionals.’²⁰ In *Enduring Love* (1997), Joe knows that people easily distort reality, because ‘believing is seeing,’²¹ and ‘our sense data [come] warped by a prism of desire and belief, which [tilt] our memories too’ (180). A belief can be dangerous when it is based on insufficient knowledge.

In *On Chesil Beach*, Edward and Florence’s lack of knowledge about sex is almost total since they did not talk about it when they were together and have learned almost nothing about it from their families and acquaintances. Edward’s mother, Marjorie, is brain-damaged. When Edward was much younger, his father cared for his children’s education after school, and, because he was a primary school headmaster, he always ‘expected to be obeyed and the children ... complied’ (81). In other words, there was little real communication in Edward’s family between the parents and children. In Florence’s case, her mother, Violet, was a highly educated academic who married a successful businessman and who ‘had never kissed or embraced [Florence], even when she was small’ (68), something that her father also fails to do. Indeed, as Edward sees it, ‘father and daughter rarely spoke, except in company, and then inconsequentially’ (140). This lack of models with regard to a healthy marriage means that Edward and Florence have little to base the reality of their relationship on, and it is clear that they learned almost nothing from their parents about marital intimacy ‘in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible’ (3).

As for the gendered groups Edward and Florence belong to, they have difficulties understanding each other because honest communication is not encouraged between the sexes, or even between friends of the same sex. In Edward’s circle, boys talk of how they get to know girls superficially, and not of the reality of their sexual relationships: ‘the men ha[ve] to be content with telling dirty jokes, uneasy sexual boasting and boisterous camaraderie driven by furious drinking, which reduce[s] further their chances of meeting a girl’ (48). In Edward’s college years, the ‘few girls he knew’ were ‘apparently under strict parental instruction to be home by six’ (47). Florence was one of those girls, and she buried herself in classical music rather than learning about her sexual and emotional needs.

In addition to their scant knowledge of sex, Florence and Edward lose the chance to ‘replay the “Two scene,” and find the terms for a new declaration’ of love on their wedding night (Badiou and Truong 51), because, in order to ensure their love and marriage, they try to play conventional roles and overlook the otherness of each other. In the bedroom, even when they are alone, ‘a thousand unacknowledged rules still appl[y]’ (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 22). Edward is so eager to have sex with Florence that he neglects her feelings about it, only thinking in terms of the visible. He ‘ha[s] to hold off the thought that she might be terrified of him. If he believe[s] that, he [can] do nothing’ (120). Florence is no better, because although she detests the idea of being ‘entered’ like ‘a kind of portal or drawing room’ (9), she still tries to fulfil her duty. Badiou argues that social

'*opinions* are representations without truth, the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge' (Badiou, *Ethics* 50). He also points out: 'In love the individual goes beyond himself, beyond the narcissistic. In sex, you are really in a relationship with yourself via the mediation of the other' (Badiou and Truong 19). While Edward and Florence fail to consummate their marriage, they cannot experience the otherness of each other because of their preoccupation with sex and obedience to social conventions. Florence learns after the disastrous wedding night that she should never have followed the instructions of the marriage manual. Further, she should not even have hidden her feelings to please him during dinner, and misled him into believing that she was eager to have sex.

According to Richard Kearney, when experiencing strangeness, people can choose either to understand and accommodate the experience, or to repudiate it by 'projecting it exclusively onto outsiders.'²² Edward and Florence's obsession with identity deprives them of the chance to accommodate the experience of the otherness of each other, undermining their efforts to reconstruct their love when Florence has fled to the beach and is later found by Edward, because this obsession distorts their understanding of the past and makes their present communication all the more difficult. On the beach, Edward tries to talk about the bedroom disaster, but their talk soon turns to mutual accusations. There are several reasons for their antagonizing each other. First, as Peter Goldie points out, to find one's way around the world and gain knowledge about it, one must be of the proper emotional disposition.²³ When Edward and Florence meet on the beach, they have already prejudged each other in order to protect their own self-images, overlooking the elusiveness and selectiveness of their memories. The narrator has earlier exposed the unreliable nature of memory when speaking of the lovers' first encounter, noting: 'Memory unhelpfully inserted what she could not yet have heard—the faint country twang in his voice' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 75). Edward's selective use of memory is most evident when he is about to leave the bedroom for the beach. He would not have gone out of the hotel to seek Florence if he had not selected memories dear to him 'to dispel it [her disgust at his semen on her body and subsequent escape from the room] and feel himself in love' (161), although, before he leaves the room, he also judges her to be 'unsensual, utterly without desire' and 'dishonest' when he considers his 'humiliation' (164). On the beach, Edward has no evidence to prove that Florence is 'utterly without desire,' although she evidently had difficulty accepting his caresses before the marriage, and seemed disgusted on finding his semen on her body. Instead of trying patiently to understand her resistance to sex from different points of view, he rashly infers that she is frigid.

As for Florence, she feels 'ashamed' (170), and cannot face the reality of their disastrous sexual encounter. Agamben observes that 'shame is the index of an unheard of, frightening proximity of man with himself.'²⁴ Frightened by the shattering of her self-image and the possibility of another self, Florence conceives of the possibility of Edward's suffering from 'some form of congenital illness' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 171), and feels cheated, although she should have wondered at her own disgust at his semen. Dominic Head points out that Florence's father may have had an affair with a nanny, and 'there is a series of hints

that her father has been abusive, and that [Florence's] revulsion at the thought of sex may stem from this.²⁵ Speaking of Florence waiting for Edward on the beach, the narrator brings up the story of the nanny to indicate how she has suppressed some aspects of her past, as well as her ignorance of the strangeness of her sudden escape from the bedroom. Because of this inability to face herself, Florence does not defend herself when Edward claims that she ran from the bedroom in order to humiliate him (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 181). Instead, she answers: 'It's no less than you deserve when you can't even control yourself,' referring to his premature ejaculation (181). This answer provokes Edward to more verbal attacks.

Michael Jackson points out that violence is cyclical, 'sustained by the impossibility of both parties ever deciding unambiguously when a score has been settled, when wrongs have been righted, when debts have been paid, and losses made good.'²⁶ Because of their obsession with identity, Florence and Edward easily fall prey to their reciprocal violence and fail to notice that 'English ... is a beautiful language, full of misunderstandings,' when they try to be lovers again.²⁷

Jacques Derrida notes that a user of language is actually a function of language: the user of language 'becomes a speaking subject only by conforming his speech—even in the aforesaid "creation," even in the aforesaid "transgression"—to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences ...'²⁸ Edward and Florence's quarrel on the beach demonstrates this point, painfully, because, instead of using language to communicate effectively, they are spoken by language. For example, when Edward accuses Florence of being an inept lover, she calls him a failure, and the narrator says: 'But it was not what she meant, this cruelty was not her at all. This was merely the second violin answering the first, a rhetorical parry provoked by the suddenness, the precision of his attack, the sneer she heard in all his repeated "you"' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 176). When language, instead of the characters, speaks, such misunderstandings are inevitable.

As Edward and Florence have antagonized each other on the beach, the gap between language and reality becomes a serious problem that prevents them from understanding each other, and thus they cannot untangle their mutual misunderstandings. After all, 'language profoundly colors understanding of reality. One's perception of an object is often determined not by its nature, but by the words used to describe it.'²⁹ Earlier, while Edward tried to caress her in the bedroom, Florence told him that she was 'scared' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 103), but 'nothing registered in his expression to show he had heard her' (104), and Florence did not try to re-express herself. As the narrator observes: 'This was not strictly accurate but ... she could never have described her array of feelings ...' (103). The inability of language to present reality becomes a serious problem when Edward and Florence are on the beach, trying to talk about the disaster in the bedroom. Edward says that 'it was bloody unpleasant, what you did' (175), and when Florence asks, 'Meaning what?' (175), he does not explain, just says: 'You know what I mean' (175). Edward's refusal to explain himself reveals his inability to face the incident and his cowardice in leaving that responsibility to Florence, but his use of a pronoun to refer to the disaster does not really help, since he comes to the beach in order to communicate with Florence. When Edward finally labels her a 'frigid' woman (191), Florence accepts this, even though she is dimly aware that

the word does not fit her well. Edward thus hides himself in social representations and does not question their validity due to the protection they provide, while Florence also accepts such conventions and, as a consequence, prefers to withdraw herself from the game of love.

Badiou observes that love is woven from 'deep and genuine experience of the otherness' of the beloved (Badiou and Truong 8). Florence and Edward finally fail to be lovers again when she accepts the label of 'frigid' that eclipses the reality of her lived experience. In Edward's childhood, before he learned from his father of his mother's brain damage, he had no idea what was wrong with her. Their relationship was not 'defined' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 85), and the family treated his mother as she 'truly was, and they were bound to protect her—in silence' (85). At that time Edward felt a responsibility to his mother, but when his father revealed to him that she was brain-damaged, he 'felt a burden lifting' (86). 'The term dissolved intimacy, it coolly measured his mother by a public standard that everyone could understand' (90), and a 'sudden space began to open out, not only between Edward and his mother, but also between himself and his immediate circumstances ...' (90). By categorizing his mother—and himself—through language, Edward saw his difference from her and sensed his self even though it was alienated by language. Because his mother was deprived of her otherness by being named, Edward did not feel as responsible for her any more. Thus when Edward labels Florence a 'frigid' woman (191), and she slips into that category, they feel alienated from each other and can no longer play the two roles of lovers. For Badiou, lovers can be of the same sex, yet they must occupy the sexualized positions of man and woman (Badiou, *On Beckett* 65). Florence refuses to play the feminine role any more when she accepts her identity as a frigid woman. Her last words are: 'I am sorry, Edward. I am most terribly sorry' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 192). This apology is devastating to their relationship because she does not say it to repair their love, but to end it.

When Edward and Florence part on Chesil Beach, they know neither what caused the disaster in the bedroom nor why they failed to understand each other on the beach. Even though Florence points out their mistake in being obsessed with their identities when she cannot bear the pressure any longer, and instead proposes a sexless form of love, they are still concerned with themselves alone, rather than each other. Their experience of that night thus becomes a suppressed past that haunts them because it remains unexamined. McEwan says of the significant role of the unnameable in *On Chesil Beach*:

You can be afflicted by some mental torment, and if you haven't got the means or entitlement or, as you say, the language to shape it, to describe it to yourself, all you can do is suffer—and often not be fully aware that you *are* suffering. Children in particular can suffer in this way. This is why language is such a precious tool. And this is really what that short novel was about (McEwan, 'Naming What is There' 175).

There are no signs that either Edward or Florence seriously tries to face the 'unnamed disgrace' after the wedding night disaster (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 172). Nevertheless, since the narrator has either briefly pointed out their

difficulties or shown them, an examination of this narrator's enquiry into the event can reveal McEwan's answers to the characters' problems.

Fidelity to Love and Perceiving the Otherness of Others

The narrator leaves clues as to what Edward and Florence should have done to remain lovers, or to overcome their obsession with identity and better communicate with each other. They should both have constantly tried to reconstruct their love, so that they could see things from the point of view of *two*. Indeed, in *Sweet Tooth* (2012), out of her love for Tom the novelist, Serena goes beyond her self-centredness and sees Tom's novella as 'my—our—baby.'³⁰ The narrator's enquiry in *On Chesil Beach* also demonstrates that, by constantly moving between the overlapping situations, or worlds, of the enquirer and other people, adopting different points of view, and telling stories about them, one can overcome obstacles to communication.

Two examples, discussed below, demonstrate that by being faithful to their love—trying to reconstruct it—they could have a better chance to remain lovers, even after their disastrous first night. One is about the couple's stroll to Edward's house before their marriage. Edward has been worried about whether or not to show Florence his poor house and his brain-damaged mother, but she comes to his workplace unexpectedly, relying on a map, and they have no other choice but to walk to his house together. In addition to their enjoyment of the walk, Florence gets on very well with Edward's family. This walk is significant because, when the couple meet, unlike Edward, Florence is not worried about what impressions others may have of her, and her ability to love soon dissolves Edward's worries, so they are able to express themselves and find each other attractive. Florence is proud of her achievement, and Edward has 'never seen her so happy, or so pretty' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 158). Furthermore, on their way to his house, Edward shows off his knowledge of the surrounding country, and wins her admiration. Because of their being *two*, the possibility of their misunderstanding each other does not constitute a significant obstacle to their love at this point.

While, in the above example, Florence's love helps Edward overcome his obsession with identity, it is Edward's love that helps Florence in the following one. When Edward fails to unzip her dress on the wedding night, he apologizes for having made a 'mess' of it (102), and, to comfort him, she says, 'Darling. It happens to me often enough' (102). Edward knows that she is lying, but at that moment identity does not constitute a serious barrier between them. To suggest this boundary crossing, the narrator describes the sounds of waves smacking hard against the shore coming through the open window. Florence then overcomes her pride and confesses that she is scared, and Edward says that he is, too, when actually he is not. To highlight the importance of this scene, the narrator later has Florence repeat the word 'mess' when she speaks of the wedding night on the beach (184). When Edward and Florence apologize and lie to each other, each cares more about the other's feelings than about their own, and thus each is reassured of their love as a result of the other's unselfishness.

Things might have turned out very differently if Florence had not wiped Edward's semen off and run away in disgust, or if they had not been antagonistic from the very beginning when they met on the beach. However, the danger always exists that lovers could fail to reconstruct love because of unexpected obstacles, and fail to communicate. After all, they not only share the same situation, but also live in different situations at the same time, and love is not born of perfect, mutual understanding, but instead often from the lack of it. According to Badiou: 'Love is an enquiry into the world from the vantage point of the Two, and not at all an enquiry about each term of the Two about the other.'³¹ Edward and Florence fall in love because of misunderstandings and, although this lack of mutual understanding constitutes no problem before their marriage, it becomes fatal on the wedding night because their obsession with social roles disrupts their fidelity to love.

The narrator highlights the importance of good communication by having Edward discover, forty years after the disastrous wedding night, that: 'Love and patience—if only he had had them both at once—would surely have seen them both through' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 202–03). Love here refers to the reconstruction of love, while patience refers to the need to take pains to perceive the otherness of the other. This need for patient understanding explains the lovers' failure to investigate the stones on Chesil Beach. Before the wedding night, the couple planned to take a walk on the beach because Edward had read a guidebook which said: 'thousands of years of pounding storms had sifted and graded the size of pebbles along the eighteen miles of beach, with the biggest stones at the eastern end' (23). However, when they finally go to the beach, they quarrel and forget to examine the stones. By noting their failure to investigate the pebbles, the narrator suggests their inability to go beyond the world of representation in their perception of reality, and thus their inability to perceive the uniqueness of each other.

McEwan uses the narrator's enquiry to show how to achieve mutual understanding and cope with the forces that control people. First, the narrator makes visible elements that were earlier invisible in the central characters' different situations when examining the overlapping part, thus shedding light on their common difficulties. In addition to highlighting the inability of language to present reality and the distortion of meaning caused by emotions, the narrator studies the world of 1962 to show how this cultural context 'provides "individuals not only with views of how relationships are supposed to develop, but also with vocabularies for representing relationship growth"' (Noland 48). Thus the narrator points out that Edward and Florence 'lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 3). Theirs 'was still the era—it would end later in that famous decade—when to be young was a social encumbrance ...' (7). Social contexts are also significant because individuals are not really masters of themselves. Before the marriage, Edward's 'desire for Florence [is] inseparable from the setting' when he lives in Florence's house (146). In Florence's case, when she enters the bedroom on the wedding night: 'Her thoughts [do] not seem her own—they were piped down to her, thoughts instead of oxygen' (98). Badiou claims that, without the eruption of an event, only an external observer can notice the uncounted in a situation

(Badiou, *Ethics* 134). In *On Chesil Beach*, the enquirer can see things as an outsider because of the multiple points of view adopted.

In addition to examining Edward and Florence's shared context, the narrator probes into their different situations because an enquirer cannot foresee what elements are relevant to an event, thus revealing facts about their families and acquaintances, and their possible influences on the couple. This investigation can further illuminate the otherness of each of the two lovers. Speaking of Edward's stay at Florence's house before their marriage, the narrator writes: 'It crossed Edward's mind, barely seriously, that he [Florence's father] was rather too keen to give his daughter away' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 141), suggesting the possibility of some scandal between the father and daughter, which may have caused her disgust with sex. Indeed, the wedding night disaster might not have occurred if Edward had paid more attention to this.

Lastly, the existence of echoes of past experiences in Edward's life illuminates another aspect of the narrator's lesson: achieving understanding by echoes in storytelling. Speaking of resonance, Nancy points out that 'difference in sense' is the condition for resonance.³² 'Still, what we are thus calling "relativism" in turn constitutes an empirical material that makes a condition of possibility for any "sensation" or for any "perception" as well as for any "culture": it is the referral of one to the other that makes both possible' (Nancy 11). As one can explain a confusing experience by giving examples, an author makes an experience meaningful by producing echoes of it. In *On Chesil Beach*, there are echoes among Edward's experiences, and also among some other situations. In Edward's case, there is his street fight during his college years. After he attacks the man who hit his friend, Harold Mather, Edward is surprised to learn that the latter does not thank him, and later even withdraws from him. Still later, Edward realizes that he 'was guilty of a lapse of taste' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 117). Edward could have learned from this experience the need to consider the views of others. Instead, when he recalls this experience, on his wedding night, he does not consider Florence's different approach to reality, but only tells himself to refrain from violence. Another significant echo that has the potential to help the couple is related to Edward's failure to unzip Florence's dress (102), because things could have been very different if either of the couple had apologized when Edward prematurely ejaculated. Echoes also exist among the marginalization of Edward's brain-damaged mother, Florence's parents' lack of attention to the common people and the formerly colonized countries, and Edward and Florence's neglect of the unnameable elements in their relationship. Edward realizes in his old age their mistakes on the wedding night. He knows more because he has had more experience with love in an age of sexual liberation and has learned from the resonances among them.

Importantly, McEwan shows that an enquiry into an event does not easily come to an end. Badiou says: 'The universe always contains more things than those it can name.'³³ Also, to interrupt the search for truth is *evil* while *good* consists of the subject's ability to keep enquiring about an event (Badiou, *Ethics* 85). When Edward, in old age, gains some insight into his time with Florence, instead of talking to her or examining that night, he 'prefer[s] to preserve her as she was in

his memories, with the dandelion in her button-hole and the piece of velvet in her hair ...' (McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* 202). The narrator says of Edward's failure to seriously enquire into the wedding night: 'Like poor Sir Robert Carey [whom the young Edward talked about to Florence], he simply fell away from history to live snugly in the present' (197). This comment recalls Edward's youthful decision to write of neglected people, and his neglect of Florence's suffering, thereby implying the narrator's disapproval.

Indeed, even the narrator's enquiry remains incomplete, as McEwan deliberately leaves some points unexplained. One of these is the possibility that Florence has been sexually abused by her father. McEwan has said that, in earlier drafts of the novel, this abuse was much clearer, and 'in subsequent drafts I made it less obvious' (Byrnes 26–27). Another mystery is the narrator's silence about Florence after the wedding night, since the two characters receive similar treatments when the narrator talks about their pasts and that specific event. This silence about Florence arouses the reader's curiosity and suggests the need to continue the enquiry.

Conclusion

In *Solar* (2010), when 'entirely rational' people, going to the Arctic to study earth warming, steal from one another in the boot room, the main character, Beard, wonders how they can 'save the earth ... when it [is] so much larger than the boot room.'³⁴ McEwan does not believe that reason can prevail against selfishness, and this understanding retrospectively sheds light on his concern with love in *On Chesil Beach*. But this concern is not limited to the issue of love. Badiou points out two threats to love in the contemporary world: people's belief in safety-first love and their tendency to deny that love is important (Badiou and Truong 8–10). People should not be afraid of the risks involved in a chance encounter, and they should accept the 'deep and genuine experience of the otherness from which love is woven' (Badiou and Truong 8). Badiou's concern here is wide: 'Safety-first love, like everything governed by the norm of safety, implies the absence of risks for people who have a good insurance policy, a good army, a good police force, a good psychological take on personal hedonism, and all risks for those on the opposite side' (Badiou and Truong 9). War on the other side of the world is thus acceptable as long as there is no death here.

Like Badiou's observation about love, McEwan's study of the difficulties in such relationships in *On Chesil Beach* is significant not only for lovers but also for the wider world. His wider concern appears in Edward's disapproval of his future father-in-law's 'views on the decline of British business, demarcation disputes in the trade unions and the folly of granting independence to various African colonies' (139). Florence's mother cares little for the sufferings of socially marginalized people, and condemns the Soviet Union by comparing it to Nazi Germany due to its expansionism, while Florence feels that her mother is ignoring the reality of Soviet Communism, believing that it stands 'for liberating the oppressed and standing up to fascism and the ravages of greedy capitalism' (66). By paralleling Edward and Florence's failure to acknowledge the otherness of each other with her parents' lack of interest in the oppressed, McEwan draws attention to the socially marginalized others, and the need to take risks for them.

Therefore, in addition to its concern with love, *On Chesil Beach* is timely because resistance with regard to welcoming strangers remains a serious issue in the present world. Christian Moraru points out that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, relationships with strangers have been a major concern for many Americans.³⁵ Speaking of Western democracies and their lack of interest in people suffering in other countries, Badiou observes: ‘the century’s real problem is to be located in the linkage between “democracies” and that which ... they designate as their Other—the barbarism of which they are wholly innocent.’³⁶ Also, bearing in mind Jean Baudrillard’s views about how the media reduced the Gulf War to a spectacle, Nick Mansfield observes that such a spectacle ‘reinforce[s] certain truisms about the New World Order, announced to be the consequence of the end of the Cold War.’³⁷ While the administration of violence in one place serves to secure peace elsewhere (Mansfield 155), the rights of outsiders are not taken into account. The question of paying attention to outsiders is complicated by people’s fear of strangers. Slavoj Žižek observes: ‘the almost central obsession of our time has become how to maintain a proper distance.’³⁸ ‘[M]oney means I pay you so that we don’t get involved’ (Žižek and Daly 73). Žižek’s observation describes many people’s mentality in this age in which outsiders are everywhere; this mentality is not right, because it is based on forgetting others.

McEwan offers his own answer to the issue of strangers in *On Chesil Beach* and, in addition to showing a way to understand them, emphasizes the need to make constant expressions of goodwill, which can be supported by taking one’s own identity lightly. Moreover, McEwan also addresses the problem of trusting strangers. Derrida notes a significant issue when people deal with strangers: ‘I cannot address the other, whoever he or she might be, regardless of his or her religion, language, culture, without asking that other to believe me and to trust me.’³⁹ In the novel, McEwan shows the indispensability of mutual understanding and the expression of goodwill—or the construction of love when it is a question of dealing with the beloved. This expression of goodwill recalls one of Badiou’s claims about neighbourhood: ‘Any part that contains a neighborhood of a point is itself a neighborhood of this point’ (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* 221). A stranger can be a neighbour, too. Instead of arguing for self-sufficiency, or placing personal safety above contact with others, McEwan proposes that hospitality starts with the expression of goodwill, which then can serve as a basis for mutual understanding, although both must continue if such efforts are to be successful.

It is perhaps because of the difficulty of practising both that McEwan focuses on the couple’s failure to do either in *On Chesil Beach* in order to highlight the dangers of a safety-first attitude to love. Because of their primary concern with personal safety, Florence gives up sexual love for fear of being hurt again, longing secretly for Edward’s return, while Edward engages in several love affairs, ‘like a confused and happy child’ (196), enjoying ‘the sudden guiltless elevation of sensual pleasure’ (196). Edward has a brief marriage, and cares little about others in the society: he distrusts ‘the “straight” press because everyone [knows] it [is] controlled by state’—a view that he later disowns’ (197)—and forgets his ambition to write history books about insignificant people and thoughts of serious scholarship. Edward’s forgetting about socially marginalized people resonates with

his failure to pay attention to the otherness of Florence on their wedding night, while his later changed understanding of the press and his becoming godfather to five children in his old age recall the importance of caring for socially marginalized people and the difficulties in trying to understand the eclipsed realities of others.

The major problem in achieving mutual understanding is people's obsession with identity, which can undermine their attempts to understand each other. Because understanding the otherness of others takes patience and love, it is little wonder that the most striking image in the novel is the pebbles on Chesil Beach that separate Edward and Florence, which are sorted into different sizes due to the actions of the waves. By ending the story with Edward's failure to call Florence back—and she would have turned back—when she was walking away on the beach, McEwan emphasizes the need for the characters to go beyond their obsession with identity and perceive the otherness of each other. Perhaps McEwan also hopes to produce a deep sense of loss in his readers by this image so that they might take his study seriously.

The writing of *On Chesil Beach* thus can be seen as an event too, since the central characters' world resonates with ours. Speaking of where the new comes from, Badiou notes the importance of the uncounted in a situation, because, by making visible what was formerly invisible, an enquirer makes the reformation of the situation necessary. When readers of the novel take its message seriously, in addition to considering the mistake of safety-first love, they also can begin caring for others who are easily overlooked in everyday life. At the end of *On Chesil Beach*, what is needed is not a resumption of the central characters' quarrel, but a simple declaration of love. By ending with an emotional appeal, McEwan tells his readers that, in order to cross the distance that separates people, we should begin with the expression of goodwill, and follow this with sincere attempts to understand others.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the National Science Council, Taiwan, ROC and the resources offered by the University of Sydney.

Notes

¹ Lynn Wells, *Ian McEwan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15.

² Earl G. Ingersoll, 'The Moment of History and the History of the Moment: Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*,' *Midwest Quarterly* 52.2 (2011): 131–47 (133).

³ Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 51.

⁴ Quoted in Bernie C. Byrnes, *Ian McEwan's On Chesil Beach: The Transmutation of a 'Secret'* (Nottingham: Pauper's Press, 2009), 14.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 24.

⁶ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 36, 114.

- ⁷ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, ed. and trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2005), 46.
- ⁸ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 63–64.
- ⁹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 41.
- ¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 89.
- ¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum Press, 2004), 114–19.
- ¹² Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (London: Serpent's Tail, 2012), 24.
- ¹³ Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), 28.
- ¹⁴ Alain Badiou, 'Appendix Two: Beyond Formalization,' in *Badiou and Politics*, ed. Bruno Bosteels (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 318–50 (345).
- ¹⁵ Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2007), 189.
- ¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 311.
- ¹⁷ Ian McEwan, 'Naming What is There: Ian McEwan in Conversation with David Remnick,' reprinted from the *New Yorker* Festival, 6 October 2007, in *Conversations with Ian McEwan*, ed. Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 174.
- ¹⁸ 'A Novelist on the Edge,' interview with Dan Cryer, *Newsday* 24 April 2002: B6.
- ¹⁹ See Steven Seidman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Norton, 2010), 155.
- ²⁰ Carey M. Noland, *Sex Talk: The Role of Communication in Intimate Relationships* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 10.
- ²¹ Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love* (London: Vintage, 2004), 122, 181.
- ²² Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.
- ²³ Peter Goldie, 'Emotions, Feeling, and Knowledge of the World,' in *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91–106 (99).
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- ²⁹ Rachel M. MacNair, *The Psychology of Peace: An Introduction* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 2.
- ³⁰ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), 223.
- ³¹ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), 193.
- ³² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 11.
- ³³ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (Manchester: Continuum Press, 2009), 219.
- ³⁴ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2010), 80.
- ³⁵ Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 2.
- ³⁶ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 5.
- ³⁷ Nick Mansfield, *Theorizing War: From Hobbes to Badiou* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 145.
- ³⁸ Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Malden: Polity Press, 2004), 73.
- ³⁹ Mustapha Chérif, *Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 57.