

ELEMENTS OF PUNK PHILOSOPHY IN IAN McEWAN'S THE CEMENT GARDEN¹

ABSTRACT. The paper singles out defining elements of the 1970s punk philosophy and proceeds to analyze their presence in Ian McEwan's novel *The Cement Garden*. The story of four orphaned protagonists on the margin of society and their renouncement of its norms and mores is regarded as a metaphor for the generation of punk rockers who showed similar disdain for everything considered "normal" by the society. Analysis of the setting, characters and their relationship with the ideas articulated in the works of notable punk spokesmen will lead us to the conclusion that the author has indeed depicted the youthful anarchists of his time in a novelesque form and spoke in the very language of Generation X.

Key Words: 1970s, nihilism, anti-authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism, punk rock.

Introduction

With its unfailing power to shock and appall an unsuspecting reader, McEwan's debut (*The Cement Garden*, 1978) has not lost an inkling of poignancy and notoriety for almost forty years since its publication. Many reviewers, jocularly referring to its author as Ian McAbre, have indeed described the controversial work under our present scrutiny as "horror novella," (Grisewood) "morbid, full of repellant imagery," (Towers 1979: 8) "darkly impressive," (Bartlett) and "wholly bizarre" (Fernando). The uncanny ability of *The Cement Garden* to shake up the world of its reader parallels the force and power of an earnest punk record (take an explosive debut of *the Sex Pistols* from 1977, for example) which, in much the same manner, provokes some sort of an extreme response, be it consternation, shock, or fury. Notwithstanding the fact that the date of the novel's publication overlaps with the height of punk fashion in Great Britain, I shall regard it as an inseparable part of the punk movement precisely because, as shall be demonstrated, it embodies the tenets of the radical political ethos asserted by the musicians and popular public figures of the era.

¹ Based on a seminar paper "Elements of Punk Philosophy in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*" (June 2012) supervised by Zorica Đergović Joksimović, PhD.

Since punk movement of the 1970s resisted authority on so many levels – political, religious, economic – providing all kinds of alternatives ranging from socialism to Nazi and white power ideology, a task of coming up with an umbrella definition of the flamboyant scene is rather difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, punk has in its core been a highly idiosyncratic movement with many of its protagonists *under* the radar of public knowledge, which makes coming with an adequate definition even more difficult. John Charles Goshert comes to the following conclusion:

“precisely when punk becomes popular culture [...] it ceases to be punk, thus it remains to be argued whether there is anything ‘punk’ about the way in which it has been defined and described for the last twenty years of academic treatments of the subject” (Goshert 2000: 85).

The term “punk” comes from prison slang where it used to denote a young male prisoner coerced to be a homosexual partner of an older and stronger one.² The music labeled by the same term begins with a number of 1966 single records (*Question Mark and the Mysterians* “96 tears”, *The 13th Floor Elevators* “You’re Gonna Miss Me”, *The Seeds* “Pushin’ Too Hard”), *The Velvet Underground* and *The Stooges*’ albums and *The New York Dolls* later in the 70s. The loudest generation of punk rockers comes into the limelight with 1976/7 singles *Patti Smith Group* “Gloria”, *The Ramones* “Blitzkrieg Bop”, *The Sex Pistols* “Anarchy in the UK” and *The Clash* “White Riot”. This time, unlike ten years earlier, punk music attracted huge audiences worldwide and brought about an eruption of youthful ferocity and perpetual frustration on the behalf of the civil peace keepers.

The existential revolt of the 70s punk, most memorably phrased in the lines “Don’t know what I want but I know how to get it / I wanna destroy not supply,”³ openly rejected the code of ethics and core values set forth by the conservative society. Unlike the countercultural movement of flower power in the 60s, punk philosophy was a rebellion *per se*, hostility and antagonism embodied for their own merit. Among the spectrum of varied political and philosophical views that different punk musicians/philosophers maintained, the following are most relevant for *The Cement Garden*:

- a) *Nihilism*. Ominously reverberating in the chorus of the Sex Pistols’ *Anarchy in the UK* (“No future”), pessimism and skepticism demarcated the attitude of the late 1970s adolescents as well as those in

² “Punk.” Def. 4a. *Oxford English Dictionary on CD-ROM Version 4.0*. Second ed. 2009.

³ A verse from “Anarchy in the UK” by *the Sex Pistols*.

the 1980s. Clearly estranged from the social scene, which neglected them through recession and crisis during their formative years, punk rockers were famous for many acts of violence against what they perceived as repressive society.

- b) *Anti-authoritarianism*. Mostly reflected in a characteristic non-conformist stance towards acquisitive capitalism as well as its norms and mores. Corporate structures were perceived as violators of one's sovereignty over oneself and any form of cooperation with them was seen as "selling out," that is, becoming the part of the system.
- c) *Anti-intellectualism*. Punk's unique contribution to the tradition of anarchist movements extending from ancient Greece to France and Russia of the late 19th century. Triviality, primitivism and violence were the "virtues" of a punk rocker and both performers and their fans were famous for their frequent offensive outbursts.⁴

The first section of the paper will examine the setting of the novel, one extremely conducive to violence and alienation, while the second will deal with two authoritative figures who stood in the way of our kiddie-anarchists. The third section will analyze the characters of the four children and deal with the regression which took over the participants of a sweltering summer adventure.

The Stagnant Waters of Modernity

The hopeless setting of *The Cement Garden* which informs the characters' motivations is rather reminiscent of depression in economics as well as entire sociopolitical conditions of the 1970s UK. The story of four underage orphans who lock up inside their house and shut the door to the external world along with their deviation from the norms of a civilized society, in a nutshell gives us the situation of the 70s youthful rebels within the unreceptive system of the real world. In staging a story of an anonymous family (we are given only the first names of the children: Julie, Jack, Sue and Tom) in an impoverished district of an unnamed town at an unspecified point in time, McEwan leaves the potential for such metaphorical reading wide open.

The lower-middle class family lives in one of the three buildings left standing among the rubble of dilapidated prefabs that once used to make up a street. The scene, suggestive of the ruins after the bomb attacks of the WWII, strongly implies non-existence of the established social order with only a handful of survivors left to their own devices. Our fifteen-year-old hero Jack, for example,

⁴ See the Bill Grundy interview with the Sex Pistols on Today Show – ITV Network conducted on 1st December, 1976. Available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sraHAz8nqRQ>> (April 20, 2012).

grimly observes that the street he lives on “was hardly a street at all, it was a road across an almost empty junk-yard” (136), and that among the surrounding ruins there was “no order” (47). At one point he refers to the area around his house as “wasteland next door” (50). The soulless system responsible for the family’s isolation is further emphasized by the fact that our Family X is never even visited by anyone. Jack reflects,

“No one ever came to visit us. Neither my mother nor my father when he was alive had any real friends outside the family ... Tom had a couple of friends he sometimes played with in the street, but we never let him bring them into the house. There was not even a milkman in our road now” (20).

Decadence spreads as the story progresses with the refuse collectors on strike and dustbins in the street left unemptied for weeks, the gargantuan mess in the kitchen – “a place of stench and cloud of flies” (82) – and the smell of decomposition coming from the cellar. In the episode where Jack and Derek ride into town, Jack observes “rotting vegetables piled in the gutter” (112), and effectively tells us that putrescence is the sole sovereign over the sociopolitical wasteland of *The Cement Garden*. Similar feeling of nihilism is expressed in Joe Strummer’s “London is drowning / And I live by the river,”⁵ which echoes the depression and despair of an individual trapped by the system which pulls everyone to the bottom indiscriminately.

Rise in unemployment, high inflation and freeze on wages in the 1970s set the scene for negativism which exploded in the subcultural movement of punk rock. Likewise, the fecundity of *The Cement Garden* breeds little apart from aggression and violence in the few remaining survivors. Jack finds a sledgehammer in a burnt down prefab and carries it home “wondering what [he] could usefully smash up” (36) proceeding to destroy the cement path in the garden. Slay notices that Jack “argues with Julie, antagonizes Sue, manhandles Tom. Becoming a bully is Jack’s only defense; it allows him momentary reprieve in this banal existence” (Slay 1996: 42). The same goes for a group of adolescents from the tower blocks who usually “went up the road to the empty prefabs to kick the walls down and pick up what they could find” (17). Jack mentions that “once they set fire to one [of the prefabs], and no one cared very much,” (22). Indifferent response of the society unwilling to reform itself wastes the energies and efforts of the young rebels and their attempts to be brought out of their imposed invisibility and anonymity eventually end up in failure. The impossibility of communication between a younger generation and anesthetized social institutions corrupts the nature of the initial protest which might have even been meritorious and

⁵ A chorus line from “London Calling” by *the Clash*.

consequently the whole scene of *The Cement Garden* rots. People are estranged from one another and although there are two other houses on the street, Jack never informs of their inhabitants nor do they show any interest for the family of four children living next door. "No one cared very much" (10) is an apt description of the reaction of the large society to its social outcasts but also the reaction of the inhabitants of McEwan's dystopia to one another. Our dysfunctional familial unit will on account of this neglect further depart from normality especially with the children's unsavory decision to dispose of their mother's corpse in a metal tank in the cellar. This, of course, is done to avoid contact with the hardhearted society outdoors and keep the family protected, but at the same time it will reveal a complete departure from the standards and customs of a civilized society. The breaking of rules does not end here and the children once exposed to the vacuity of their day to day life will even find incestuous love perfectly acceptable.

The Ennui of Freedom

A notion of the aftermath of revolution lies in the core of *The Cement Garden* where the four children break free from their parental control and enjoy limitless freedom from familial duties. The forces they were unexpectedly liberated from are the very ones punk generation spoke up against: political, economic and religious. These are metaphorically embodied in the characters of the father (political and economic) and mother (religious authority).

The father enters the scene holding a clipboard, a detail which hints at his economic power. His totalitarian side is ridiculed in his intention "to build a high wall round his special world" (13) as well as his readiness to compete with his six-year-old son for his wife's attention. The flowers for the garden he keeps are chosen on the basis of "their neatness and symmetry" and tulips are preferred over "bushes or ivy or roses" because he "would have nothing that tangled." In order to subdue the unruly elements in his private Shangri-La, he decides to "surround the house, front and back, with an even plane of concrete" (21) because "it will be tidier." Doing away with uncontrollable weeds through the construction of an artificial structure over them reminds of bureaucrats who imagine that sole enforcement of rules and penal system upon the people will take care of the unruly elements on its own. Jack, thus, correctly observes that "mixing concrete and spreading it over a leveled garden was a fascinating violation" (21). Ultimately, the father's efforts to tame nature prove unsuccessful and after his death the unrestrainable energy of chaos quietly proves victorious, as described by Jack:

"Weeds pushed through the cracks in the paving stones, part of the rockery collapsed and the little pond dried up. The dancing Pan fell on its side and broke in two and nothing was said" (21).

The triumph of weeds over not thoroughly thought through political agendas is McEwan's subtle warning of the consequences resulting from keeping people suspended in the timelessness of the lack of ideas and initiative on behalf of their political representatives. Christina Byrnes also sees the cement metaphor as an intrusion upon individual nature and poses it as the central problem of the novel:

“The metaphor contained in the title, a garden stifled by cement, expresses the condition of the children. They are first repressed by their rigid father and then bound by their dead mother's wishes. They are prevented from growing, like the flowers in the garden and are forced ‘underground’ by the distorting limitations of the script they feel obliged to live out” (Byrnes 1995: 20).

The mother, on the other hand, with her chastising Jack for masturbating is a disturbing moralizer. This “quiet sort of person” (15) does not shy away from persuading her son with an old wives' tale – “Every time ... you do that, it takes two pints of blood to replace it” (35) – by which she attempts to maneuver Jack into doing what she believes is right. Thus she is exposed as a ruthless and scheming manipulator much like religious authorities with their history of instilling fear into their flocks with similar stories of hellfire awaiting the unrepentant. That her effort is intrusive is additionally intimated by her sitting “in such a way as to trap [Jack's] arms inside the bedclothes” and looking at him “defiantly” while trying to motivate him to discontinue his daily practice of gratifying himself. According to Kiernan Ryan, the upstairs room she occupies while languishing shortly after her husband's death corresponds to superego, which is where we would generally place aspirations of religious agencies. The children burying her corpse in the cellar symbolically stands for the “interment of the lost mother in the unconscious” (Ryan 1994: 20) and indeed the erasure of the religious authority (mother) is going to prove more difficult than the obliteration of the political one (father). Although Julie discovers that she cannot “remember how it used to be when Mum was alive” (149), the mother returns with a vengeance to haunt the house with a miasma of corruption emanating from her cracked cement tomb. The noxious odour will eventually raise suspicion in Julie's boyfriend who will lead the police to their doorstep and shut down the small commune.

From the present historical distance, it is hard to escape the impression that punk movement essentially existed as an opposition to authority and as long as powers that be did exist so did the flame of the protest feeding on them. McEwan criticizes its insubstantiality and naivety in *The Cement Garden* by imagining the unlikely scenario of punk becoming triumphant over the system, showing its subsequent grotesqueness. Adolescent Jack, Julie and Sue, along with their little brother Tom, live out a teenage dream (“life without parents”) and circumstances put them in the situation where no set of rules is to be observed and no code of

ethics is to be followed. One would imagine that the children (people) were happy with the prospect of not having their parents (governments) interfere but soon enough “a sense of freedom” (59) Jack feels as the mother is taken to hospital turns into his meaningless meanderings around the house with nothing to do. With no force to threaten the development of their confrontational personalities the prospect of unlimited freedom turns into a vast phantasmagoria for our immature heroes. The road from “beneath my strongest feelings was a sense of adventure and freedom” (63) at the death of mother and “Blackness return[s], and significance drain[s] from the events of [one’s] day” (84) as Jack puts it, does not depict a liberated person but a teenager without an inkling of an idea what to do with his prematurely acquired sovereignty. Other three members of the commune are also deluged by floods of depression and Sue locks herself up in her room, Julie has an attempt at a relationship but discovers love for her own brother, while Tom, yet a little child, regresses further still.

As well as the Sex Pistols’ chorus “Oh we’re so pretty / Oh so pretty – we’re vacant,”⁶ McEwan speaks disparagingly of the 70s punk movement and exposes stifling boredom and lethargy within its inchoate adherents once the powers they confront have disappeared. Jack complains that there “was no excitement now. The days were too long; it was too hot; the house seems to have fallen asleep” (64). Since with the deaths of the father and mother there is no one else to oppose and defy, the children’s personalities come off to reveal a gaping void. Slay similarly notices that “[McEwan’s] characters subsequently succumb ... to the stagnation of modern society. They become torpid, unconcerned, bored” and that the children in fact “suffer from, rather than exalt in, their freedom.” (Slay 1996: 37, 8) Jack and the rest of the children sink into monotony and deterioration and faced with stupendous nothingness revert to the roles their parents used to play (Julie and Jack even end up in sexual union) attempting to emulate the only order they ever knew. Unlike Golding (*The Lord of Flies*) and Wiggins (*John Dollar*) who warn of savagery beneath a civilized and cultivated shell, McEwan predicts that if adolescent anarchists had it their way they would most likely, confronted with freedom they can scarcely endure, reestablish the very same order they once disdained. “Not with a bang but a whimper” became the confluence of all the anarchical efforts of the masses of anti-authoritarian youth of the late 20th century who attempted to dismantle the order with no clear picture of the alternative in its stead.

That Wonderful Little Age

Jack, our narrator and a central character, is not a particularly amiable adolescent—he watches his own reflection in the mirror and tells profanities to it,

⁶ A chorus line from “Pretty Vacant” by *the Sex Pistols*.

he is anti-social and emotionally flat—with a singular orientation: “the impossibility of knowing or feeling anything for certain gave me a great urge to masturbate” (98). His father gets “helped on the way” (1) to death by his own son in the episode with bags of cement where Jack, fully aware of his heart condition, pays special attention that father carries the same amount of weight as him. Father’s death coincides with Jack’s first ejaculation and his initiation into manhood thus symbolically takes place at the moment of the dismantlement of old power structures. In order to stress the fact that one era gives in to another McEwan has Jack smooth out the imprint of his father’s face in the fresh cement with no thought in his head. Since popular punk of the 70s was characterized by anti-intellectualism, Jack is appropriately reduced in intellect and his days are spent in moronic boredom. He is “potentially and actually violent” (Malcolm 2002: 58) but more of a follower than a leader: McEwan stresses the fact in the novel by having Julie being the one in charge. Although his incestuous relationship with his older sister is an act of “true anarchy,” (Batchelor 1978: 110) Slay comments that Jack is not even to be regarded as a true anarchist, since he is “ignorant of the fact that his acts of transgression, his breaking of tabooed barriers, his desires for alienation, are, indeed, anarchic” (Slay 1996: 42). He reads a science fiction book (his first book ever) which he receives on his fifteenth birthday from his sister Sue and correctly perceives himself as “not the kind Commander Hunt would have had on board of his space ship” (32), where Commander Hunt stands for the large society. Unbeknown to himself, Jack is “a colossal monster who fed off X-rays” that clean and orderly Commander Hunt is out to destroy. The question that fascinates Jack and reiterates the motif of social abandonment and neglect, is whether Commander Hunt “would have cared about the state of the mess room, or about world literature, if the ship had remained perfectly still, fixed in outer space” (92). With this episode McEwan suggests that social immobility and dismal torpor created in the absence of care and cooperation unavoidably heralds the creation of the monster that is threatening the system which is how punk movement was conceivably perceived within conservative circles.

Julie – who has the “deep look of some rare wild animal” (15) and is “one of a handful of daring girls at school” (25) – is a natural born leader. She assumes the authoritative position, but her role is disputed by Jack – “she was exploiting the position, that she enjoyed ordering me about” (50) – who in his opinion has been cheated since “mother had gone without explaining to Julie what she had told me” (61). Julie treats Tom cruelly when he is disobedient and once even tears his clothes and sends him off to bed at five o’clock in the afternoon, having him “utterly subdued” (80). She is the bright one in the family and the only one who reaches the state of nirvana – “I’ve lost all sense of time. It feels like it’s always been like this ... Everything seems still and fixed and makes me feel that I’m not frightened of anything” (123). She notices her boyfriend Derek’s intrusion upon the privacy of her own family and comments to Jack: “He wants to be one of the family, you know, big smart daddy. He’s getting on my nerves” (148). Her love stays within the

family circle and she loses virginity over to her own younger brother whom she finds cuddled up inside the cot. In the end she addresses Tom woken up by the blue lights of the patrol cars outside – ‘There!’ ... ‘wasn’t that a lovely sleep’ (150) – dispelling the stupor that enveloped the children like the captives of Prospero’s island and announces separation and unpleasantness that is bound to ensue as soon as the system takes the children under its wing.

Sue, who is thirteen years old, is the odd ball in the family, described by Jack as “a girl from another planet” (30). She also plays the part of a “specimen from outer space” (15) investigated by two German scientist in the game her brother Jack and sister Julie play behind the locked door in which she lies naked on the bed. She is another one who does not fit in and seeks safety in retreat. She frequently locks herself up in her room and spends days with her books. On one occasion when Jack tears the book she is writing in from her hands, we learn that she writes letters to her dead mother on a daily basis. She is a family chronicler and the only one who cries at the news of the death of the father, which separates her from the insensitive reception of Julie and Jack, for example. For this reason, Slay paradoxically considers her “not the ‘alien’ but the most conventional, the most normal, of the four children” (Slay 1996: 47).

Little Tom, described by Jack as “just the kind to be picked on ... clever in a giggling, argumentative way—the perfect playground victim” (52), is an odd-ball himself through his cross-dressing, a hint at punk fashion and sexually deviant London scene of the late 70s. One morning he gets beaten up at school and decides to wear girl clothes from then on in order to avoid repeating the unpleasant experience drawing a conclusion that “you don’t get hit when you’re a girl” (54). Julie and Sue welcome this change and help him with his baby steps into transvestitism. Surprisingly, his strange new guise passes unnoticed by the friends he plays with in the neighbourhood, additionally revealing general consensus to ignore everything that takes place in the grandiose rancidity of the world of *The Cement Garden*.

Regression that takes its sway over little Tom and Jack alike is a major point that McEwan makes and a rather prophetic one since that is what precisely followed the rebelliousness, irrationality and ill-informedness of the 70s’ subculture. Since intellectual component is absent from the situation, the feeling of insecurity takes over the “liberated” ones and they seek the consolation of infantilism. Towards the end of the novel Jack realizes that freedom is not as exciting and that having a guide is far more favourable to the stupefying emptiness one feels on a daily basis. In the scene preceding Jack’s sexual initiation he sits in the cot with Tom and thinks to himself,

“The last time I had slept here everything had been watched over and arranged ... lying in [the cot] now it was familiar to me – its salty, clammy smell, the arrangement of the bars, an enveloping pleasure in being tenderly imprisoned” (146).

The regression of our fifteen-year-old anarchist is further confirmed by Julie who upon seeing them together in a cot exclaims, “Two bare babies!” (146). Zerzan shrewdly observes that “punk in the late ‘70s drew on a vital rage, rock today, to generalize grandly, is more about powerlessness, fear, violation, confusion” (Zerzan) and goes on to illustrate the point of kiddie-culture becoming increasingly popular in today’s society by making mention of oversized sweaters and shirts worn by young people today that implicitly tells of their fear of taking responsibility and their desire to be young children again. One stark example of this tendency is *Nirvana*, a band which started out as a new wave of punk in the early 1990s, whose third and final album is called “In Utero,” which bespeaks of a tendency to retreat to childhood in its most extreme manifestation—a desire of the safety of mother’s womb.

Conclusion

The paper has investigated the relevance of punk philosophy for *The Cement Garden* by establishing chief elements of the late 1970s punk movement and placing them against the backdrop of the motifs present in Ian McEwan’s first novel. If indeed nihilism, anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism provide an adequate generalization of punk movement, McEwan’s book gives a dark prophecy to it and warns of its imminent downfall. In much the same way as punk subculture made a deep recess in the stagnant cultural scene of the 1970s and made the outrage of the forgotten generation audible, the shock value of *The Cement Garden* closely resembles the rebellion of the social outcasts of the time and speaks without barriers of their inclination to break away from society at large and seek an alternative to the overwhelming boredom of the world obsessed with consumerism. Since its insubordination and abandonment of societal norms was not vertical (it did not strive for a higher sense and/or transcendental vision) but merely horizontal – running and hiding away from the intolerable situation – punk movement did not result in any real transformation on behalf of its adherents and consequently disintegrated, much like the private utopia of Julie, Jack, Sue and Tom doomed to a final meltdown.

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ELEMENTI PANK FILOZOFIJE U "BETONSKOM VRTU" IJANA MAKJUANA

Sažetak

Svrha ovog rada je istraživanje elemenata pank filozofije u "Betonskom vrtu" Ijana Makjuana. Polazeći od premise da nihilizam, antiautoritarnost i antiintelektualizam predstavljaju pogodno uopštavanje osnovnih načela pank pokreta, u radu se traga za ovim načelima i ona se identifikuju, kako u ambijentu, tako i u protagonistima Makjuanove fikcije. Premda je roman bio objavljen na vrhuncu pank pokreta u Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu, Makjuanova fikcija, ne samo da metaforički predstavlja trenutno stanje stvari, već čini i iskorak u budućnost, navodeći precizne razloge za dezintegraciju pokreta, okrivljujući nezrelost i nemaštovitost njegovih pristalica, koji su simbolično predstavljeni u liku četiri protagonista bez roditelja.

Cljučne reči: 1970-e, nihilizam, antiautoritarnost, antiintelektualizam, pank rok