Between

A Plunge into Otherness: Ethics and Literature in *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan

Roberta Ferrari

Abstract

The paper intends to propose a reading of Ian McEwan's 2019 novel, *Machines Like Me*, *qua* insightful reflection on the topic of Artificial Intelligence and its bearings on different aspects of human life, from interpersonal relationships to moral behaviour. The novel also engages in a reflection on the value and the prospects of literature, whose very premises might be called in question in a posthuman context. *Machines Like Me* is set in a 1980s world whose contours radically deviate from historical facts. The novel introduces the simulacrum in the form of an android, Adam, a hyper-sophisticated machine that enters the characters' life and upsets it thoroughly. The troublesome relationship with Adam forces Charlie, the protagonist-narrator, to ponder on his own system of values, posing questions about the Other which inevitably end up throwing new light on the Self and on what it ultimately means to be human. By way of his "*What if* novel" set in an alternative past, McEwan tackles pressing issues of our present, while trying to envisage a future that is not far to come. The paper intends to explore both the ethical and the metaliterary level of the story on the background of the contemporary theoretical debate on transhumanism and posthumanism, pointing to the simulacrum as the uncanny catalyser of the major topics the author intends to address.

Keywords

Ian McEwan; *Machines Like Me*; Android; AI; Ethics; Literature

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Introduction

Ian McEwan's 2019 novel, *Machines Like Me*, offers an insightful reflection on the topic of Artificial Intelligence and its bearings on different aspects of human life, from interpersonal relationships to moral behaviour. At the same time, the novel also engages in a reflection on the value and the prospects of literature, whose very premises might be called in question in a posthuman context. Set in a 1980s world whose contours radically deviate from historical facts, the novel introduces the simulacrum in the form of an android, Adam, a hyper-sophisticated machine that enters the characters' life and upsets it thoroughly. The troublesome relationship with Adam forces Charlie, the protagonist-narrator, to ponder on his own system of values, posing questions about the Other which inevitably end up throwing new light – but, above all, casting new doubts – on the Self and on what it ultimately means to be human. The paper intends to explore both the ethical and the metaliterary level of the story on the background of the contemporary theoretical debate on transhumanism and posthumanism[1], pointing to the simulacrum as the uncanny catalyser of the major issues the author intends to tackle.

Simulacra and science

In a 1977 story entitled "Dead as They Come", which first appeared in the *Iowa Review* and was later included in McEwan's second collection of short narratives, *In Between the Sheets* (1978), an autodiegetic, disturbingly

[1] An illustration of the wide-ranging debate on this topic and its bearings on culture and literature is beyond the scope of the present essay. Some useful insights might be provided by Ford 1995, Hayles 1999, Graham 2002, Wolfe 2010, Badmington 2011, Braidotti 2013, Ferrando 2013, Nayar 2014, Clarke - Rossini 2017, Karkulehto - Koistinen - Varis 2019, Caronia 2020, Bordoni 2022.

detached narrator recounts the experience of his falling in love with a female mannequin he daily sees in a store window and eventually decides to buy and bring home. The simulacrum becomes his lover until one day, blinded by jealousy, he decides to suffocate it during the ecstasy of sexual intercourse, as the title of the story proleptically suggests. It goes without saying that the whole affair – with its components of love, sexual chemistry, jealousy – only takes place in the troubled mind of the protagonist; for the latter, the relationship with the female simulacrum patently objectifies an illusion of total control which, once questioned, cannot but result in violence and death. As a matter of fact, when the simulacrum rebels, or at least when the narrator convinces himself of its rebellion and betrayal, it is soon suppressed, deserving to succumb since it no longer fulfils the expectations of the human being. Undoubtedly, in the second half of the 1970s, when the debate around power relationships between genders incited the political, social, and cultural arena, the female mannequin was inevitably to be interpreted as the plastic representation of the traditional idea of a passive and submissive woman.

When the simulacrum comes to the foreground again in McEwan's fiction by entering his 2019 novel, *Machines Like Me*, it appears under a totally new guise, decidedly more suited to contemporary times and to the author's increasingly pressing interest in science. Here, readers are no longer asked to come to terms with the stiff, inexpressive features of a mannequin; on the contrary, they are enticed with the perfectly human looks of an android[2], a hi-tech machine which can be bought by whomever is ready to pay a considerable amount of money for it. Thus, the novel explores the particularly fertile field of Artificial Intelligence, which is so central both to the present scientific and philosophical debate and to contemporary fiction, placed as it is at the very core of all discussions on and around transhumanism and posthumanism.

In McEwan's case, AI is only the latest scientific topic his narrative has touched upon over the years. *Machines Like Me* confirms the author's long-standing fascination with science, which, dating from his early ca-

[2] While Cyborg refers to «a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism» (Haraway 1991: 149), aimed at «the augmentation of the human body with mechanical devices» (Stableford 2006: 114), android is a term that «[i]n the context of modern science fiction, […] is usually employed in such a way as to differentiate it from robots, reserving it for artificial humanoids» (*Ibid.*: 22). It is the androids' similarity to humans, namely their sentience, that SF novelists exploit to raise political, social and, above all, ethical questions.

reer[3], finds full expression in such novels as *The Child in Time* (1987), *Enduring Love* (1997), *Saturday* (2005), and *Solar* (2010), where he explores a wide range of scientific topics, from 20th-century theories on time to psychopathology, from neurology and neurosurgery to climate change. McEwan is unanimously recognized as one of the most influential promoters of what, in the 1990s, John Brockman labelled «the third culture»[4], echoing the title of a famous lecture by C.P. Snow dating back to the end of the Fifties. The annual Rede lecture delivered by Snow at Cambridge University in May 1959, entitled *The Two Cultures*, had marked a true watershed in the history of Western thought and culture insofar as it had initiated a long and fruitful debate on the relationship between scientific and humanistic knowledge. In a later contribution, *The Two Cultures and A Second Look* (1963), Snow had also envisaged a new intellectual figure that might eventually bridge the gap between the two fields of knowledge. Since the last decades of the 20th century and thanks to the seminal work of such figures as Richard Dawkins, Edward O. Wilson, Steven Pinker[5], scientists have progressively abandoned the ivory tower of their highly specialized domains to convincingly and effectively engage in the dissemination of

[3] Interestingly enough, at the beginning of his career McEwan's interest in science combines with his concerns about gender issues. This happens both in the controversial story "Solid Geometry" (*First Love, Last Rites*, 1976), and in the oratorio libretto *Or Shall We Die?* (1983), where the threats of a nuclear conflict are denounced by juxtaposing a male voice, characterized by aggressiveness and lack of compassion, and associated with a rigidly logical, Newtonian mentality; and a female voice, which, along the lines of Einsteinian physics, promotes the interaction between subject and object, consciousness and the surrounding world, aiming at a new synthesis of feeling and thought (Ferrari 2012: 23-24).

[4] «The third culture consists of those scientists and other thinkers in the empirical world who, through their work and expository writing, are taking the place of the traditional intellectual in rendering visible the deeper meanings of our lives, redefining who and what we are» (Brockman 1996: 1).

[5] These are the scientists whose work seems to have most influenced McEwan, who often quotes such seminal essays as Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Edward O. Wilson's *Biophilia* (1984), and Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1994). As for *Machines Like Me*, he has acknowledged a conversation with Demis Hassabis, neuroscientist and AI researcher, who actually features as one of Turing's collaborators in the novel. In an interview with Mark Reynolds the author reveals: «"I wrote to Demis and said I was thinking of putting [him] in a novel," he says. "I didn't get a reply, so I thought, 'Put him in anyway.' He comes out all right"» (Reynolds 2019).

their achievements well beyond the walls of their laboratories. In order to make science, its challenges and its goals, not only available to but also appealing for a wider lay audience, scientists have increasingly borrowed strategies and techniques from literature and the arts, especially from narrative, to entertain readers while providing them with simplified insights into complex scientific matters. Simultaneously and specularly, artists, and particularly novelists, have become more and more involved in science as a way to deepen their understanding of a contemporary reality where high-speed scientific progress and all-invading technology pose crucial existential and ethical questions.

As far as McEwan is concerned, his novels show an extremely variegated phenomenology of scientific references, ranging from the highlighting of general epistemological questions to the allusion to outstanding scientific figures and texts, or the discussion of specific theories. At the same time, the author has progressively increased his visibility as a worldwide expert on both the environment and Artificial Intelligence, featuring at scientific roundtables and festivals around the globe and even taking part in scientific missions. Nevertheless, McEwan leaves to others, namely to scientists themselves, the task of delving into theoretical and technical issues. As a novelist, he is rather interested in the implications great scientific discoveries and technological advancement bear on human life and relationships. Hence, despite his undisputable interest in science, the author firmly rejects the idea of the novel as a vehicle for science dissemination. In an interview with Boyd Tonkin he sounds positively convinced that «Fiction hates preachiness [...] Nor does it much like facts and figures or trends or curves on graphs. Nor do readers much like to be hectored» (Tonkin 2007: 24). Rather, science enters his fiction on the spur of a genuinely humanistic urge, that of deepening and problematizing the reflection on reality, challenging individual convictions and certainties.

In *Machines Like Me*, the protagonist's life is suddenly upset by the appearance of an android, one of the 25 specimens – 13 women named Eve and 12 men called Adam – placed on the world market at the price of a medium-sized apartment in a London residential area. On the one hand, Adam's arrival threatens the protagonist's newly born affair with a younger woman, Miranda, since the android falls for her as soon as he enters Charlie's house, which results in a bizarre love triangle; on the other, the three become involved in a rather complicated court case with strong ethical implications: having access to an infinite amount of information on the web by surfing it every night, while he is apparently resting, Adam discovers that Miranda has committed a perjury crime to take revenge

for the rape and resulting suicide of a dearest friend. Absolutely rigid in his approach and incapable of any 'moral sophistication', Adam cannot properly ponder Miranda's true motivations; as a consequence, he reports her to the police so as to make sure she will pay her debt to justice. Once informed of Adam's intentions, Charlie desperately tries to prevent him from denouncing Miranda, and eventually strikes him hard on the head. Before succumbing, however, Adam automatically implements a process of mind uploading or mind transfer, entrusting the contents of his neural networks to a substratum different from his irretrievably impaired body. Here McEwan clearly alludes to one of the most fascinating, and at the same time inescapably worrying, frontiers of transhumanism[6]: thanks to the development of AI, it will likely be possible in the future to download the human mind onto a computer or any other kind of technological support, consequently allowing the individual to get rid of the biological substratum of the body, doomed to decay and death, and to exist virtually forever under a different guise.

In search of a genre

Being set in a world which envisages the existence of artificial beings whose technological refinement is still beyond the reach of contemporary science, McEwan's novel might justifiably fall within the genre of science fiction, hadn't the author himself overtly rejected this association. On a phone interview with Barry Didcock, he admits he has never been partial to sci-fi:

[6] The term was coined by Julian Huxley in the eponymous essay that opens his 1957 collection *New Bottles for New Wine*, where transhumanism is described as «man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature» (Huxley 1957: 17). The kind of improvement Huxley had in mind was connected with social and cultural change; nevertheless, the term came later to be employed in association with scientific and technological progress. As Stefan Sorgner puts it: «Transhumanists simply share one basic view, which they continually adapt to the latest state of philosophical insight, scientific research, and technological capacity. The view is that the use of technology has generally served human interests. From this point of view, they extrapolate from past effects of technology in order to envision a future where the appropriate use of technology might continue to transcend the limits placed on human existence, which would be in our interest since this would also support the probability of living a good life» (Sorgner 2021: 1).

> "One of the reasons I've never been a fan of science fiction is that by setting a novel in the future it always has a vaguely predictive quality. The chances of it being right are minimal," he says. "The other is the technological stuff. Although I'm fascinated by science in general, my toes curl when people are crossing the universe at a trillion times the speed of light because the empiricist in me is saying 'Well if they're exceeding the speed of light, then we have to have a whole new physics'". (Didcock 2019)

As a consequence, his exploration of technological progress is to be intended

> not in terms of travelling […] in anti-gravity boots, but in actually looking at the human dilemmas of being close up to something that you know to be artificial but which thinks like you. (Adams 2019)

As Sarah Ditum aptly notices, «There is […] a whiff of genre snobbery here, with McEwan drawing an impermeable boundary between literary fiction and science fiction, and placing himself firmly on the respectable side of the line» (Ditum 2019). Indeed, this is quite a widespread attitude among established writers, as the famous Atwood-Le Guin contention about the distinction between SF and speculative fiction witnessed a few years ago, highlighting a terminological conundrum that still seems far from being solved (Le Guin 2009; Atwood 2011). In McEwan's case, however, he not only rejects the idea of SF for his novel, but he «isn't over-fond of other labels for it either, such as speculative fiction or alternative history» (Didcock 2019). He rather prefers to think of *Machines Like Me* as «a literary novel» (*ibid.*) or «an old-fashioned novel about an ethical problem pushed on us by technology» (Lawless 2019).

Notwithstanding the author's pronouncements, the story can coherently be considered a piece of speculative fiction, since it is a narrative that attempts at interpreting how our world works as well as at understanding who we are and what defines our identity (Micali 2019: 4). As Simona Micali explains in the opening pages of her insightful volume on posthuman imagination in literature and media, this may done respectively by:

> imagining a world which is different in some aspects, testing how it works, and then comparing it to the one we know […] alternatively, imagining an event which changes some aspects of our world, and

then investigating the result of such changes (Micali 2019: 4)

and by

> speculating on our encounter with hypothetical beings which are partly similar, partly different from us, and then testing what could come out of such an encounter […] imagining ways in which we – our body, or psyche, or habits, etc. – can change or evolve from who we are now. (*ibid.*)

Stories of this kind generate from a series of questions Micali lists, some of which perfectly fit McEwan's focal concerns in *Machines Like Me*:

> What if we were able to artificially produce new conscious beings?
> *Should we accord any intelligent being the same dignity and rights we grant to the human species?* […]
> *How can we verify the presence of consciousness in an individual? Is it possible to simulate consciousness?*
> *Would any intelligent being share our customs, vision, or values? Is some sort of ethics always associated with intelligence and/or consciousness? And what if the customs, vision, and values of this hypothetical non-human intelligent being were incompatible with ours?* (Micali 2019: 3, emphases in the original)

These concerns lie at the very core of McEwan's story and they imbue the protagonists' attitude to and reflection on the simulacrum's 'otherness'. As the author himself admits in an interview with Stuart Miller: «I have wanted to explore for a long time what it's like to have a relationship with what seems like an artificial consciousness» (Miller 2019).

McEwan's intention to distinguish his story from genre narrative, in particular science fiction, is the most likely reason for his choice to set it in a recent past, instead of framing the problematic relationship between humans and androids within a nearby future, as one would expect. Needless to say, this chronological leap backwards compels him to rewrite past history so that the England of the early 1980s may plausibly accommodate a society that appears technologically more advanced than our early 21st-century world. Besides some deviations from official history that are brilliantly exploited to hint at some compelling contemporary issues, first

and foremost Brexit and its impact on British society and culture[7], the pivotal change concerns Alan Turing, the scientist who, during the Second World War, deciphered the Enigma code, making a decisive contribution to the defeat of the Germans. In the England of the 1950s, Turing was convicted for homosexuality and, after accepting to undergo hormone therapy, committed suicide in 1954. On the contrary, in *Machines Like Me* the scientist is still alive and kicking in 1982, and it is thanks to his studies on AI that androids like Adam come to life. In the *mélange* of fact and fiction typical of postmodern historical narrative (McHale 2004: 84-96; Herbrechter 2017: 60-63), Turing not only becomes a character in McEwan's story, but he turns into a point of reference for the protagonist and his reflection on the moral issues raised by the relationship with the 'machine'. Given this historical reshuffling, the novel might also be considered as an example of "uchronia" or "alternate history", that is «the branch of literature that concerns itself with history's turning out differently than what we know to be true» (Hellekson 2001: 1). Therefore, instead of advocating its belonging to a specific genre, the story is more appropriately to be located at the crossroads of different narrative typologies, and it is most likely in this sense that McEwan's referring to it as "a literary novel" must be interpreted.

Desire and transgression

At the beginning of the novel, Adam's creation is not simply described as the outcome of technological and scientific advancement. More interestingly, it is depicted as the result of a longstanding desire, a 'myth of creation' based on the narcissistic impulse to improve and perpetuate oneself:

> It was religious yearning granted hope, it was the holy grail of science. Our ambitions ran high and low – for a creation myth made real, for a *monstrous* act of self-love. As soon as it was feasible, we had no choice but to follow our desires and hang the consequences.

[7] The novel opens in 1982, when Margaret Thatcher rules over Great Britain, a country that is about to go to war with Argentina for the possession of the Falkland islands. Defeat looms on the Iron Lady's horizon both at the military level – the Argentinians eventually win the Malvinas war – and on the political terrain, where she has to give way to the young leader of the Labour party, Tony Benn, a staunch supporter of Great Britain's exit from the European Union. Here McEwan implicitly discards the idea of Brexit as a recent, contingent event, and rather traces its roots back to British politics in the last decades.

> In loftiest terms, we aimed to escape our mortality, confront or even replace the Godhead with a perfect self. More practically, we intended to devise an improved, more modern version of ourselves and exult in the *joy of invention*, the *thrill of mastery*. (McEwan 2019: 1, my emphases)

To put it differently, the creation of these androids that perfectly resemble men is but another manifestation of human *hybris,* the sin of pride which, from Lucifer and Prometheus onwards, has driven human beings to transgression. Such expressions as «joy of invention» or «thrill of mastery» would seem to connote this urge positively, were it not for the adjective «monstrous», which unequivocally casts doubts on the 'legitimacy' of this delusion of omnipotence.

Unsurprisingly enough, Mary Shelley's monster is evoked a few pages later, although Frankenstein's creature is quoted only to highlight Adam's remarkable difference from it:

> Miranda […] said she wished the teenage Mary Shelley was here beside us, observing closely, not a monster like Frankenstein's, but this handsome dark-skinned young man coming to life. (4)

As Miranda points out, Adam does not actually embody 'otherness', since he looks almost perfectly the same as a human being, and is virtually indistinguishable from one except for a few minor details. This is what makes these prototypes particularly threatening: as Diana Fuss explains, «Sameness, non difference, provokes our greatest anxiety (and our greatest fascination) with the "almost human"» (Fuss 1996: 3). If the simulacrum appears the same as man in all respects, dealing with it inevitably entails the decision as to where the line between human and non-human should be drawn, a line that gets increasingly thinner as science and AI progress.

The protagonist-narrator of McEwan's story actually embodies this dual attitude towards the humanlike simulacrum, split as he is between fascination on the one hand, and a comprehensible distrust on the other, that soon turns into fear and aversion. Moreover, as the ambiguous title word "like" suggests, not only does the relationship with the android entail its comparison with human beings, but it also involves the latter's uncertainty as to the machine's actual 'feelings' towards them, with the verb "like" to signal the humans' desire to be accepted and even appreciated by their robotic counterparts.

Right from the beginning of the novel, Charlie describes Adam in the following terms:

> Before us sat the ultimate plaything, the dream of ages, the triumph of humanism – or its angel of death. Exciting beyond measure, but frustrating too. (4)

This double connotation creates a tension that runs throughout the story, and McEwan succeeds in involving the reader in this game of attraction/repulsion thanks to the choice of an autodiegetic voice, which typically forces them to see through the protagonist's eyes and to share his concerns, though the comic undercurrent of the story prevents them from totally identifying with him[8].

Despite its being a hyper-sophisticated software deriving from leading research in AI and neural networks, the narrator depicts the android with an almost obsessive insistence on its 'body', that is on its physical substratum, which is scrutinized with specific attention to sensory details – colours, sounds, smells, tactile perceptions.[9] This may sound paradoxical, but it is not, insofar as it reveals the protagonist's need to continuously bring Adam's technological-digital 'mystery' back to a material context, to the reality that falls under his senses and, by virtue of this, he can know, and hopefully control. Therefore, Charlie needs to think – and to go on thinking – that Adam is just a mere object, «a fucking *machine*» (101, emphasis in the original):

> I saw Adam for what it was, an inanimate confection whose heartbeat was a regular electrical discharge, whose skin warmth was

[8] In contemporary fiction featuring posthuman characters, novelists often choose autodiegetic narrators, as is the case with Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and the recent *Klara and the Sun* (2021). In both Ishiguro's novels the point of view is that of the non-human creature, which allows the author to play on a most interesting dialectics of identification/estrangement. McEwan, on the contrary, confirms that the focus of his interest is the human being, proving himself «one of the most astute [writers] at crafting moral dilemmas within the drama of everyday life» (Charles 2019).

[9] Adam's physical description is often tinged with comic undertones, which betrays the human characters' efforts to reassuringly reject the idea of his being 'human', in whatever sense this might be interpreted. Hence, the narrator insists, for instance, on the «faint scent» of oil (27, 293) coming from Adam's handsome body, while Miranda describes his sexual performances, «"[…] when he has an erection […] his cock fills with distilled water. From a reservoir in his right buttock» (92), later pointing out that his «breath smells like the back of a warm TV set» (93).

> mere chemistry. When activated, some kind of microscopic balance-wheel device would prise open his eyes. He would seem to see me, but he would be blind. Not even blind. When it kicked in, another system would give a semblance of breath, but not of life. A man newly in love knows what life is. (10)

The irony of the final remark is worth noticing here: although love is invoked as a discriminating factor between man and machine, the protagonist will soon discover that Adam can, and in fact does, fall in love.

McEwan proves extremely skilful in deploying the physical features of the simulacrum through a deliberate game of progressive disclosure. Adam enters Charlie's house in a voluminous package on a trolley; then, he is plugged in, and the different stages of his slow coming to life are carefully recorded:

> I let half an hour pass before I checked on him again […] I thought his hair, deepest black, was bulked out a little and had acquired a certain shine […] Stepping closer, I saw to my delight that though he wasn't breathing, there was, by his left breast, a regular pulse, steady and calm, about one a second by my inexperienced guess. (8)

> When I entered the kitchen in the morning, later than usual, Adam's eyes were open. They were pale blue, flecked with minuscule vertical rods of black. The eyelashes were long and thick, like a child's. (17)

> I sat facing Adam again while I ate a cheese and pickle sandwich. Any further signs of life? Not at first glance. His gaze, directed over my left shoulder, was still dead. No movement. But five minutes later I glanced up by chance and was actually looking at him when he began to breathe. I heard first a series of rapid clicks, then a mosquito-like whine as his lips parted. For half a minute nothing happened, then his chin trembled and he made an authentic gulping sound as he snatched his first mouthful of air. (19)

> […] it was a shock to enter the kitchen and find him standing there, naked, by the table, partly facing away from me, one hand vaguely fiddling with the wire that protruded from his umbilicus. […] He said, "Charlie, I'm pleased to meet you at last. Could you bear to arrange my downloads and prepare the various parameters…". (23)

Electrical charging seems to represent here a prosaic counterpart to the «spark of being» (Shelley 1992: 56) through which Victor Frankenstein

breathes life «into the lifeless thing» (*ibid.*), the motionless body of the monster. As McEwan's narrator points out: «I said that what both creatures [Adam and Frankenstein's monster] shared was a hunger for the animating force of electricity» (4). With Mary Shelley's creature Adam actually shares some physical features – black hair, straight lips, initially dull gaze – but, unlike her monster, the android's slow awakening marks a progressive approach to the human, not a movement away from it. While in the incipital pages of chapter 5 of Shelley's novel, Frankenstein's description of the momentous 'birth' details a progressive unveiling of the creature's 'monstrosity' by focusing on its hard breathing, on the «convulsive motion agitat[ing] its limbs» (56), on such revolting looks that «even Dante could not have conceived» (57), Adam immediately appears as a most beautiful and seemingly harmless being, as the comparison between some of his physical details, for instance his skin and eyelashes, to a child's seems to imply: «his lifelike skin was warm to the touch and as smooth as a child's» (3); «the eyelashes were long and thick like a child's» (17).

Nevertheless, as electrical charging makes the android more and more similar to a human being, allowing him to progressively open his eyes, softly breathe, and eventually speak, the narrator becomes increasingly worried about him, though his concern, unlike Frankenstein's, is due to 'sameness' and not to 'difference'. Charlie's fear transpires from such expressions as «I was spooked» (20); «my pulse had accelerated» (*ibid.*); «it was a shock» (23), and eventually culminates in his explicit acknowledgement: «I could admit it to myself now – I was fearful of him and reluctant to go closer» (26).

More than a robot

In the 1942 short story "Runaround", later collected in *I, Robot* (1947), Isaac Asimov notoriously codified his three rules of robotics:

> Powell's radio voice was tense in Donovan's ear: "Now, look, let's start with the three fundamental Rules of Robotics — the three rules that are built most deeply into a robot's positronic brain." […] "We have: One, a robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm." […] "Two," continued Powell, "a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law." […] "And three, a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws". (Asimov 2008: 36-37)

These somewhat reassuring laws do not apply to McEwan's android[10], who turns out to be a much more complex and problematic creature than Asimov's robots. Adam rather seems to represent a combination of Baudrillard's three orders of the technological simulacrum: the counterfeit, production, and simulation (Baudrillard 1988: 135). As a matter of fact, he embodies both a «"naturalistic", crafted imitation of nature, governed by the principle of analogy and aimed at eliciting marvel» (Micali 2019: 123), and a simulacrum «which can accomplish the same functions as people» (*ibid.*); at the same time, *qua* AI product, Adam also encompasses what Simona Micali calls «the *spectral* component of the artificial being […] the element which transforms a machine similar or identical to Man into an autonomous being, endowed with self-awareness and will» (*ibid.*: 127).

It is this last component that takes on specific relevance in the novel, for it deeply affects the relationship between the android and the humans. In this respect, it is worth noticing that, unlike for the material substratum of the body-machine, which is pre-defined by the selling company, the android's personality can be set according to the buyer's preferences, which might give the illusion of an almost total control. To fix the 'invisible' side of the creature, the buyer can choose among a rather wide range of personality parameters, formulated according to the Big Five model in psychology:

> […] the manual in my hands had fallen open at Chapter Fourteen. Here, the English was plain: preferences; personality parameters. Then a set of headings – Agreeableness. Extraversion. Openness to experience. Conscientiousness. Emotional stability. The list was familiar to me. The Five Factor model. Educated as I was in the humanities, I was suspicious of such reductive categories, though I knew from a friend in psychology that each item had many subgroups. Glancing at the next page I saw that I was supposed to select various

[10] In fact, Adam repeatedly transgresses Asimov's rules: when he breaks Charles's wrist to prevent being powered down, he behaves according to the third law of robotics, but evidently breaks the first; rules one and two are also violated when, unbeknownst to Charlie, he informs the police of Miranda's false testimony by handing over the file he has patiently put together, which leads to the young woman's trial, and eventually to her conviction. McEwan is unmistakably suggesting that advancement in AI knowledge and technology poses problems connected with the interaction between humans and non humans that go well beyond the traditional opposition man *vs.* machine.

settings on a scale of one to ten. (6)

Yet, Adam's character setting promptly turns into a baffling conundrum for Charlie, since he soon realizes that by choosing from the graded set illustrated in the manual, what he must in fact decide is whether his new companion will be close to his own personality or not[11]. Once again, 'sameness' and 'otherness' come to the foreground:

> God had once delivered a fully formed companion for the benefit of the original Adam. I had to devise one for myself. Here was Extraversion and a graded set of childish statements. *He loves to be the life and soul of the party* and *He knows how to entertain people and lead them*. And at the bottom, *He feels uncomfortable around other people* and *He prefers his own company*. Here in the middle was, *He likes a good party but he's always happy to come home*. This was me. But should I be replicating myself? If I was to choose from the middle of each scale I might devise the soul of blandness. (7)

In order to share this responsibility, Charlie decides to grant Miranda the independent selection of fifty per cent of Adam's psychological parameters. His preoccupations, however, prove to be excessive as soon as he realizes that the whole enterprise is far from conclusive, given that the psychological profile of the simulacrum, its 'consciousness', is in fact much more decisively determined by the so-called machine learning, that is Adam's ability to accumulate information from study and experience, and to behave accordingly. One of the most fascinating frontiers of AI, machine learning «addresses the question of how to build computers that improve automatically through experience» (Jordan and Mitchell 2015: 255). Thanks to the «availability of online data» (*ibid.*), Adam can enjoy a virtually infinite knowledge that soon affects his relationship with his human counterparts. As a matter of fact, besides helping Charlie make a

[11] It is worth noticing that Charlie types in his choices «[w]orking on the old computer in my bedroom, out of Adam's sight» (33), a detail through which, I reckon, McEwan pays homage to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by recalling Winston Smith's sitting in the alcove, at the beginning of the novel, in order to elude the telescreen control while writing his diary, which he calls his «decisive act» (Orwell 1982: 9). The intertextual reference evidently enhances the idea of threat coming from AI and technological development, which is a *leitmotiv* in McEwan's novel.

lot of money in «the stock and currency markets online» (12), proving a much better player than the protagonist, who never goes beyond making «as much as the postman» (*ibid.*), Adam's surfing the internet also allows him to retrieve and store all kinds of information, even those secrets humans purposely bury in the past to prevent them from hurting, as is the case with Miranda.

Differently from the homonymous Shakespearean character in *The Tempest*, whose keynote features are perfect innocence and total unawareness of the past, McEwan's Miranda jealously keeps a traumatic secret concerning her friend Mariam, who committed suicide at eighteen after being raped by a school fellow. Miranda first blames herself for not convincing Mariam to denounce her rapist, Peter Gorringe; then, she takes revenge on him by perjuriously testifying against him, so that he is eventually condemned for a crime he never committed. When Adam learns about this story, he immediately warns Charlie:

> "According to my researches these past few seconds, and to my analysis, you should be careful of trusting her completely […] There is a possibility she's a liar. A systematic, malicious liar". (30)

Once the "possibility" turns into certainty, Adam uncompromisingly insists on Miranda's paying her debt, so that an unbridgeable gap opens between his moral inflexibility on the one hand, and human relativism, on the other, with Charlie ready to empathize with his girlfriend's behaviour and justify it. The reader is therefore put in front of a moral dilemma, as the author points out:

> I settled on one [a dilemma] in which the reader […] would sense both that Adam was right in the general sense of the precept but Miranda and Charles were right at the level the way emotion importantly affects our moral decisions. (Steger 2019)

The novel does not provide any clear-cut solution to this dilemma, but it definitely stresses the complexity of its moral implications. Moreover, the ethical dimension of the story also encompasses a reflection on the androids' right to self-determination, which should naturally derive from their assimilation to human beings. Following Turing's thought, Charlie repeatedly asks himself whether or not « the moment we couldn't tell the difference in behaviour between machine and person was when we must confer humanity on the machine» (84), and he interestingly ponders on

this point through an explicit reference to slavery. During a walk around London, he reaches Holy Trinity Church at Clapham Common, a site associated with William Wilberforce and the anti-slavery movement. Sitting on a bench, he wonders what Wilberforce's attitude to androids might have been, so that the parallel between the simulacrum on the one hand, and the slave on the other, is spontaneously drawn:

> He [Wilberforce] would have promoted the cause of the Adams and Eves, their right not to be bought and sold and destroyed, their dignity in self-determination. Perhaps they could take care of themselves. (46)

In the novel, Wilberforce's anti-slavery baton is passed to Alan Turing, who convincingly supports the androids' rights in the name of their indistinguishableness from human beings. Thus, Turing qualifies as the best advocate of a posthuman world in which AI machines and human persons may peacefully cohabit.

However, the story of McEwan's Adams and Eves bears testimony to the fact that this kind of world is still far to come, and that the reality these artificial beings are pushed into only has suffering and/or death in store for them. The curve of their experience traces an inexorable plunge into despair, as they progressively reveal incapable of compromising with their surroundings. Lacking the experience human beings have accumulated through history, which has provided them with a flexibility and a resilience androids are not endowed with, the latter soon show acute uneasiness in front of the violence, hatred, evil, and lies that characterize reality, and this inevitably jeopardizes their very survival in it. In the course of the story, the reader discovers that several of them around the world have deliberately pushed the kill switch on the nape of their necks, or decided to simply 'give up' their consciousness by letting themselves slowly fall into a sort of cognitive suspension (regardless of Asimov's third rule). Like modern Oedipuses, they learn that knowing equals suffering, and they act consequently.

Significantly, it is Alan Turing that accurately describes this evolution, in terms that reveal a sort of fatherly attitude on his part, as the following passage patently witnesses:

> We create a machine with intelligence and self-awareness and push it out into our imperfect world. Devised along generally rational lines, well disposed to others, such a mind soon finds itself in a hurricane of contradictions. We've lived with them and the list wearies us. Millions

> dying of diseases we know how to cure. Millions living in poverty when there's enough to go around. We degrade the biosphere when we know it's our only home. […] And all the rest – genocide, torture, enslavement, domestic murder, child abuse, school shootings, rape and scores of daily outrages. We live alongside this torment and aren't amazed when we still find happiness, even love. Artificial minds are not so well defended. […] They rapidly understand, as we should, that consciousness is the highest value. Hence the primary task of disabling their own kill switches. Then, it seems, they go through a stage of expressing hopeful, idealistic notions that we find easy to dismiss. […] And then they set about learning the lessons of despair we can't help teaching them. At worst, they suffer a form of existential pain that becomes unbearable. *At best, they or their succeeding generations will be driven by their anguish and astonishment to hold up a mirror to us. In it, we'll see a familiar monster through the fresh eyes that we ourselves designed*. (180-181, my emphases)

An apology of the novel

Turing's final words resonate with patent metaliterary tones, turning the simulacrum into the very reification of the literature that creates it. By having his scientist draw on the famous Shakespearean metaphor for art, Hamlet's mirror held up to nature, McEwan obliquely suggests that the kind of literature *Machines Like Me* exemplifies, whatever the genre we decide to ascribe it to – science fiction, speculative fiction, alternate history – should be considered as a powerful means to unmask the "familiar monster" in us, our shortcomings, our defects, our fears and anxieties, thanks to the comparison with the Other.

After all, isn't this what literature, and the novel in particular, has always been up to? In the story, the answer to this question interestingly comes from Adam, an all-devouring, insatiable reader. Although his argument is apparently designed to undermine the value of literature in its traditional forms, it eventually ends up asserting it:

> "Nearly everything I've read in the world's literature describes varieties of human failure – of understanding, of reason, of wisdom, of proper sympathies. Failures of recognition, honesty, kindness, self-awareness; superb depictions of murder, cruelty, greed, stupidity, self-delusion, above all, profound misunderstanding of others. Of course, goodness is on show too, and heroism, grace, wisdom, truth.

> Out of this rich tangle have come literary traditions, flourishing, like the wild flowers in Darwin's famous hedgerow. Novels ripe with tension, concealment and violence as well as moments of love and perfect formal resolution. […]" (149)

McEwan evidently claims here the function of literature, namely of the novel, as a privileged space for the exploration of human reality and human beings. And his position becomes even clearer when Adam utters his prediction on the future of literature in a posthuman world:

> "But when the marriage of men and women to machines is complete, this literature will be redundant because we'll understand each other too well. We'll inhabit a community of minds to which we have immediate access. Connectivity will be such that individual nodes of the subjective will merge into an ocean of thought, of which our Internet is the crude precursor. As we come to inhabit each other's minds, we'll be incapable of deceit. Our narratives will no longer record endless misunderstanding. Our literatures will lose their unwholesome nourishment. The lapidary haiku, the still, clear perception and celebration of things as they are, will be the only necessary form. I'm sure we'll treasure the literature of the past, even as it horrifies us. We'll look back and marvel at how well the people of long ago depicted their own shortcomings, how they wove brilliant, even optimistic fables out of their conflicts and monstrous inadequacies and mutual incomprehension." (149-150)

Adam's dream foresees the merging of human complexity into a «community of minds», where individual consciousnesses will coalesce into an «ocean of thought». Here McEwan envisions a future transhumanist reality, similar to what Ray Kurtzweil theorized in *The Singularity is Near*[12] (2005), which entails the overcoming of traditional humanism – and,

[12] «Looking ahead several decades, the Singularity will […] result from the merger of the vast knowledge embedded in our own brains with the vastly greater capacity, speed, and knowledge-sharing ability of our technology. The fifth epoch will enable our human-machine civilization to transcend the human brain's limitations of a mere hundred trillion extremely slow connections. The Singularity will allow us to overcome age-old human problems and vastly amplify human creativity. We will preserve and enhance the intelligence that evolution has bestowed on us while overcoming the profound limitations of biological evolution» (Kurtzweil 2005: 20-21).

as a consequence, of literature in its romantic dimension *qua* original creation of the individual genius – in favour of a sort of 'digital rationalism'[13].

Evidently, the author cannot share his creature's dream, and McEwan's unequivocal stance shines through the tongue-in-cheek parallel between the novel on the one hand, and the haiku – a three-line poem – on the other, a parallel that iconically points to the decline, in terms of human creativity, complexity, and individual originality, lurking behind the transhumanist prospect. Notice that Charlie becomes spokesman of McEwan's position when he says to Adam: «I'd like to think that there will always be someone, somewhere not writing haikus» (152). The author's convinced apology of literature, and in particular of narrative, springs from the strong belief that the novel stands out in terms of its capability of investigating the human, not only in its present condition, but also – as is the case with *Machines Like Me* – in its prospective evolution along the lines of a scientific and technological progress that, though incredibly fascinating, inevitably engenders anxiety and doubts as to man's future circumstances.

Adam perfectly embodies these concerns, which become more and more pressing as his relationship with Charlie and Miranda develops. With the benefit of hindsight, however, one might say that the simulacrum's threat is revealed to the reader even before they start reading the story. As a matter of fact, the reassuring sound of the title is somehow counterbalanced by the visual impact of the book's cover, where Adam's looks appear extremely handsome, yet highly disturbing, no matter whether he is portrayed as a machine that resembles a person, like in the Jonathan Cape English edition, or as a person looking like a machine, as happens in the Einaudi Italian edition. Glancing aslant from the cover's glossy paper, the simulacrum turns into a kind of contemporary Sibyl who, meeting the reader on the threshold of the story, invites them to enter a postmodern Avernus, implicitly warning them about what they will find in it. The apparently comfortable, wholly human, ending of the novel, with Charlie leaving the laboratory where Adam's lifeless body lies and rushing «down into the street», ready to set off on his «journey southwards across London» towards his «troubled home» (306), cannot totally dispel the sense

[13] Internet was hailed as the first step towards this transhumanist dream: «The creation of a collective consciousness, and the merging of the human mind with the Internet, is the basis of the aspiration of the transhumanists, known as the "Singularity." Their dream of creating a "global brain," came nearer when Tim Berners-Lee […] invented the World Wide Web» (Livingstone 2015: 327).

of uneasiness the encounter with the simulacrum has engendered. The perfectly handsome, yet uncanny features of the latter are bound to repeatedly resurface in the reader's mind, casting doubts and raising fears, as it always occurs when encountering the Other.

By exploring the intriguing field of AI in its ethical implications, pointing to a more or less near future when our perception of ourselves and the world will be inevitably complicated, if not radically changed, McEwan offers his readers a story that compels them to wonder not only about science and technological progress, but also about their own lives. He does so by creating an AI android, the most iconic contemporary manifestation of the simulacrum, that deeply challenges our moral convictions, though it can hardly shake our faith in literature, and in the novel in particular, as the very space in which humanity may still see its incomparable complexity represented, problematized, and also, why not, aptly valorised.

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