“The rest is silence”: Picturing the Unseen in *Nutshell*

« The rest is silence » : figurer l’invisible dans Nutshell

Maxence Gouleau
“The rest is silence”: Picturing the Unseen in Nutshell

« The rest is silence » : figurer l’invisible dans Nutshell

Maxence Gouleau

1 Quoting Conrad’s preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, Ian McEwan has claimed to write novels “to make [us] see” (Conrad 7 and Guignery). His 2016 novel Nutshell both illustrates and complicates the author’s self-assigned task, as its narrator is an eight-month-old foetus whose consciousness reaches us from the womb of his mother. The foetal narrator is essentially blind and cannot use sight to convey to the reader an idea of the world around him. Still, his other senses, as well as his unrealistically developed consciousness, allow the reader to see from an impossible perspective. For McEwan, known as a visual writer, a master at making shocking images jump out of the page into the reader’s mind, this is bound to be quite a challenge. It is even more so since Nutshell is also a retelling of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. As Bandín and González note in “Ian McEwan Celebrates Shakespeare” (2021), ”Nutshell entails a transition from the showing mode to the telling mode” (19), from stage representation to novelization. Like the narrator’s blindness, this seems to go against McEwan’s ambition to “make” his readers “see”: such a transition implies getting rid of the directness of the stage/spectator relationship in a story that was however written for the stage, that was written to be seen and heard without the mediation of a narrator.

2 Christopher Tayler writes that “the book [...] is clearly generated by the technical challenges implicit in the opening sentence, rather than a story that McEwan urgently needs to tell”. This is also what comes out of how McEwan describes the genesis of Nutshell:

A sentence came out of the dark—a gift, as I thought later. It rolled like ticker tape through my thoughts: ‘So here I am, upside down in a woman.’ I didn’t know who was speaking. Clearly a foetus. Who else could be upside down in a woman? But who? I knew immediately that I had to write the novel to find out. Another origin was an earlier conversation I’d had with my daughter-in-law. She was heavily pregnant with her first child, who is now three years old. We were talking about the baby and how exciting it all was. I was aware of the enormous bump. There was
someone in there! The thought crossed my mind: ‘What if she could overhear us?’

That night I made a note. (Guignery)

It is clear here that McEwan’s first attraction to this narrator is linked to its unusual position, “upside down” and “in a woman”. What also interested the author is the eaves-dropping such a position would allow one to do. In fact, McEwan’s comment—“What if she could overhear us?”—could be understood not only as curiosity, but also as slight paranoia. The writer continues:

At first I thought I was writing myself into the tightest corner possible. But in fact I’d found an ideal narrator: not yet part of the world, able to learn about it through podcasts and news broadcasts, overhear conversations, including pillow talk, and have an unusual perspective on his mother’s lovemaking. Here was a kind of existential hero, a persona without a past. He will be a witness to an unfolding murder plot. Like Hamlet, he’s incapable of acting. But he has a free mind and therefore mental space and an articulate voice. He can reflect on the state of the world he’s about to join. (Guignery)

Early on, then, McEwan found a way to turn the difficulties implied by his choice of narrator into qualities: the foetus’s physical limitations will be balanced out by his mental capacities. All he can do is perceive and reflect. The author seems convinced that he can “make [us] see” the world differently, despite the narrator’s blindness and in fact, thanks to the narrator’s blindness—or at least what makes him blind, his situation in utero. And it seems McEwan is successful in making his readers see what he wants: in her review of the novel, Kate Clanchy describes the foetal narrator as a “covetous, obsessively physical eye” that can “zoom in with filmic lucidity on crucial dialogue and telling scenes”. That is, in spite of the fact that the narrator cannot use his eyes.

Therefore, the following questions must be asked about Nutshell: how is such visuality, or visibility, made possible in a novel whose narrator is blind? And what is the reader really given to look at? This article will first focus on the novel’s clever but deceptive reliance on sounds, creating what can be qualified as echographic writing, the translation of echolocation into images. Nutshell’s reliance on ultrasound images marks the failure of the novel to move on “from the showing mode to the telling mode”, and this analysis will show how this leaves a dark stage at the centre of the novel, while the narrator lights up all its surroundings, backstage and audience both. Finally, the question must be raised of whether McEwan’s will to “make [us] see” survives itself or not: as it turns out, his own writing seems to turn against itself, leaving narrator, reader and writer in the dark.

**Echographic Writing**

Hearing is not the only sense used by the foetus to experience the world around him, but it is the sense that sustains the narration in Nutshell the most. The novel opens with the foetus regretting his “careless youth” when his “confiding membrane [...] vibrated with”, but still “muffled” exterior sounds, and that he has “no choice” but to hear what goes on around him and his mother now that he has grown and “[his] ear is pressed all day and night against the bloody walls” (1). Yet it is also understood that the narration would have been of very little interest for the reader if it consisted solely of the narrator listening to the sounds inside his mother’s body and describing his “slow-motion somersaults” in his “transparent body-bag” (1). This would perhaps have been
more interesting to look at than to read or hear about. Instead, the first-person narration in *Nutshell* is triggered by the foetus’s ability to hear and the subsequent knowledge of the world and curiosity for the “pillow talk of deadly intent” that he develops.

6 The foetus, however, “[doesn’t] whine in the face of good fortune” (3) and quickly finds out that although his mother’s body, at once too opaque and not dense enough, impedes his vision and interrupts his tranquillity, it also enables him to hear what lies outside of it: “I heard clearly, so efficiently did sound waves travel through jawbone and clavicle, down through her skeletal structure, swiftly through the nourishing amniotic” (5). The amniotic and more generally Trudy’s body are not only “nourishing”, not only life-sustaining for the foetus: they also sustain the narration.

7 Either contradicting his previous statement that he has “no choice” in the matter (listening usually involves the will), and/or making the best of his condition, the foetus learns to “listen” (4). He indeed does not seem to enjoy many of his mother’s choices of conversation partners or auditory distractions. The news he hears “above the launderette din of stomach and bowels” are a “wellspring of bad news”, he “tolerates the BBC World Service and its puerile blasts of synthetic trumpets and xylophone to separate the items” (4), he is forced to hear Claude’s conversation although “you don’t enjoy it the way he does” (5). Still, the foetus wants to listen, sometimes waking his mother in the middle of the night with “a sharp kick” so she will “reach for the radio”, and both of them are “better informed by the morning” (4).

8 In fact, at times, the text reproduces the sounds heard by the foetus, creating a textual soundscape in the novel: “We are advancing on slumbering Claude, a hump, a bell-curve of sound baffled by bedclothes. On the exhalation, a long, constipated groan, its approaching terminus frilled with electric sibilants” (111). Here the alliteration first of the sounds [b], [c] and [d] sketch out the round shape sleeping Claude makes in bed, and the following alliteration of the sounds [t] and [p] reproduce the “groan” marking the transition to Claude’s breathing out, itself mimicked by the fricative [s] and [f]. Quieter moments also have their effect on the text:

I wake into near silence to find myself horizontal. As always, I listen carefully. Beyond the patient tread of Trudy’s heart, beyond her breathing sighs and faintest creak of ribcage, are the murmurs and trickles of a body maintained by hidden networks of care and regulation, like a well-run city in the dead of night. Beyond the walls, the rhythmic commotion of my uncle’s snoring, quieter than usual. (158)

The repetition of the [t] sound in “the patient tread of Trudy’s heart” mimics her heartbeat, and the fricatives transform into plosives in “breathing sighs and faintest cricks of ribcage”, sounding in the text the very noises that reach the foetus in the womb. And the iambic regularity of the beginning of the sentence conveys the peacefulness of the moment. This time we are spared Claude’s snoring.

9 As such, the foetus goes beyond his enclosing mother’s body as a frame and his narration makes sound and sense of it and of the world outside of it. In an upsetting move, the outside world becomes the womb, and the foetus himself becomes the sounding device. The foetus is the ultrasound technician, the sonographer, and he sounds the outside world/womb for the reader, relying on the maternal body that hindered him before. And he seems experienced: in several places parentheses and their contents are like previous pregnancies at different moments in time that the foetus has ultra-sounded and is using as professional reference to convince his readers: “In the dim-lit gore of the delivery room (Trudy has decided that he, not my father, will
be there), when I emerge to greet him at last, my questions will remain” (21). In fact, in the above-quoted alliterating passages, the narrator does such a good job at sounding the outside world that he seems to become the ultrasound machine’s transducer itself, communicating the sounds only, while the reader becomes the sonographer and is made to understand intuitively, poetically, what the narrator witnesses.

Still, these soundscapes remain rare for a narration which, apart from the last few pages, relies almost exclusively on the sounds that reach its narrator. Rather than expanding on these poetic interludes, which make us wonder whether poetry would not be a better medium for a foetal consciousness relying on sounds, the narrator goes further and on top of his listening skills he develops interpreting skills, that allow him to piece together the sounds he hears to understand their causes and consequences. Like the average parent-to-be, the reader is rarely capable of correctly reading an echography and needs guidance, contrary to the foetus who has honed his interpreting skills. He showcases these skills for the reader by describing a scene at the restaurant between Claude and his mother:

Here’s an example both of Claude’s discourse and of how I gather information. He and my mother have arranged by telephone (I hear both sides) to meet in the evening. Discounting me, as they tend to—a candlelit dinner for two. How do I know about the lighting? Because when the hour comes and they are shown to their seats I hear my mother complain. The candles are lit at every table but ours.

There follows in sequence Claude’s irritated gasp, an imperious snapping of dry fingers, the kind of obsequious murmur that emanates, so I would guess, from a waiter bent at the waist, the rasp of a lighter. (5-6)

A lot of the foetus’s knowledge of what goes on here relies on context: they planned to meet beforehand in a conversation that the foetus must have heard, like the radio, as the sounds travelled through his mother’s body. His knowledge of the lighting is trickier to demonstrate, as the foetus’s anticipation of the reader’s scepticism shows he is well aware of the trick. But he heard his mother complain about the candle, which elucidates the mystery for the reader. It also seems that the foetus has heard fingers snap so many times that he is able to infer the state of dryness of the snapper’s hands just from the sound of it. Finally, the following “murmur” is interpreted as that of a waiter correcting his mistake—a “murmur” for the foetus, perhaps not for the people outside the womb, otherwise it is hard to imagine he would have heard it. The final rasp cannot be anything but that of a lighter at this point it seems, although how the foetus knows what a lighter is remains unknown. Neither his mother nor his uncle or father are known to smoke, though based on Trudy’s alcohol consumption, it is not unimaginable that she would smoke enough while pregnant for the foetus to recognize the sound of the device. The scene moves on to focus on Claude’s “set piece on menu terms”, then on to the foetus’s delight in wine, thus marking a transition, now that the lighting of the scene has been established, from the visual to the vocal and then to the palatable.

However, the insistence on the candlelit atmosphere of the dinner shows that despite the foetus’s heightened listening and interpreting skills, he struggles to think of a lightless world. Like his mother who complains about the candle not being lit, it seems the foetus must have proper lighting to set the scene, even though he cannot see. Similarly, after the previous introduction of the character of Claude, when the foetus introduces his father, he chooses a scene he witnessed between his parents in the library and the accent is placed on sight rather than sound:
We generally go to his poetry library on the first floor. A mantelpiece clock with ratchety balance wheel makes the only sound as he takes his usual chair. Here, in the presence of a poet, I permit my conjectures to flourish. If my father looks towards the ceiling to compose his thoughts, he’ll see deterioration in the Adam-style designs. Damage has spread plaster dust like icing sugar across the spines of famous books. My mother wipes her chair with her hand before she sits. Without flourish, my father draws breath and begins. He recites fluently, with feeling. Most of the modern poetry leaves me cold. Too much about the self, too glassily cool with regards to others, too many gripes in too short a line. But as warm as the embrace of brothers are John Keats and Wilfred Owen. I feel their breaths upon my lips. Their kiss. Who would not wish to have written Candied apple, quince, and plum and gourd, or The pallor of girl’s brows shall be their pall? I picture her from across the library through his adoring eyes. (13-14)

Even though he is in the “poetry library” hearing his father recite poems to his mother—thus bathed in sound—, it is a portrait of his mother that the foetus chooses to paint, although not through his own eyes since he cannot use them, but through his father’s. It is both the absence or near-absence of sound (the clock ticking) and/or its mediocrity (his father reciting modern poetry) that leave him somewhat unsatisfied and drive him to paint another scene on top of the one he hears. The narrator makes “conjectures” as to what the whole room looks like. Paradoxically, he compares himself to his poet father, when what the foetus is accomplishing here is the work of a photographer: he “picture[s]” his mother. And a sham photographer at that, who manipulates pictures to show things that were never seen: he paints his mother’s portrait through his father’s “adoring eyes”, but his father turns out to be as cruel a parent as his mother is.

It turns out, then, that the sounds that the foetus perceives are most often transformed into images (that he imagines), which is in fact the purpose of medical ultrasonography: using ultrasound to create images of internal body structures which otherwise remain invisible. Unlike in bats or dolphins, the ability to use echolocation is limited in humans, so sounds must be transformed into images to be made sense of. And our narrator, who passes at first as a competent ultrasound technician, is revealed to be a rather poor, fanciful one. It is as if the foetus prints the echograph then goes on to colour its shapes and add flourishes and details, which he either infers more or less reliably, or which he completely makes up, at times confessing the illusion. The irruption of a living-dead, John, in the kitchen in the final chapter of the novel is a prime example of this.

In fact, instead of faithfully sounding the world outside the womb, the narrator spends most of his time sounding the reader. The unusual narrative perspective is hard to sustain, and the narrator is constantly seeking to justify the information he gives. The novel is populated with questions and suppositions by a narrator whose knowledge is limited, therefore whose reliability is in question, and so who fears his lack of connection with the reader. The anticipation of the reader’s question in the above-mentioned “How do I know about the lighting?” is one example. Similarly, when he asks, “What kind of being is this?” after having described his father, the narrator seems unsure whether he has chosen the right way to picture his character. Later on, when faced with Elodie, he appears this time to be creating the character as he writes her, anticipating an imaginary reader’s reaction to her:

This is my Elodie problem. What is she doing here? She dances like a wild Corybant, in and out of focus. Overpraising my father may be a style of comforting my mother. If so, that’s poorly conceived. Or sorrow distorts her judgement. That’s
The foetus’s story at times appears to be written not so much according to what happens, but rather according to what would be the most fitting or even the most satisfying for the reader at that moment. The narrator has understood that while he does not see, his readers know what it is to see, and that they rely on sight almost exclusively. According to the foetus’s narration, the “telling mode” needs its opposite, the “showing mode”, to be tolerable. The passage “from the showing mode to the telling mode” (Bandín and González) that *Nutshell*, as a novelistic rewriting of *Hamlet*, a play, is bound to operate, fails very early on. But then, what kind of a play and what kind of a novel are we left with?

**Staging Blindness**

*Nutshell* flips the problem on its head, and instead of keeping up with a blind narrator, it makes the subject of his sight invisible—that is, the play, *Hamlet*. As Adam Mars-Jones argues, “*Nutshell-Hamlet* and the play can’t exist in the same universe”. Instead of representing *Hamlet*, then, *Nutshell*’s narrator circles the obscured stage trying to report what goes on. It is not the foetus who is blind, it is the stage that is blacked out. *Nutshell* turns all the lights on except those that light the stage. Mars-Jones further writes:

McEwan’s narrator is self-conscious, but he’s not aware of being a literary thought experiment—that is, he’s aware that his mother Trudy and his uncle Claudie are plotting to kill his father, but he doesn’t detect the pattern they’re following. If there’s one thing, surely, that can’t exist in the world of the book then it’s *Hamlet* itself [...]. [...] Tony Tanner in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* refers to the “ripples of ontological unease” produced by *Hamlet*’s staging of *The Mousetrap*, but there are also uneasy ripples when we’re confronted not by a play-within-a-play but a novel-without-the-play-inside-it. Both *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth* created a paradoxical kind of fictional space, where the inside and the outside were made ambiguous by the revelation that a character could also be a partial author, but the dimensional anomaly, the Klein bottle effect, brought some new energy with it. *Nutshell* risks being an impossible object of a lesser order, an object with no inside for the reader to inhabit at all.

The foetal narrator in *Nutshell*, his “ontology” made “uneasy”, shifts from one satellite position to another around the play he is only half-witnessing. Most of the time he finds himself taking the place of the reader/spectator, as it is the only one available for him. His tendency to sound the reader’s mind highlighted previously is one example of this, and the foetus occupies other positions more directly connected to the theatre. Due to his foetal condition, *Nutshell*’s narrator is generally passive, and witnesses the action without being able to intervene in any significant way, with the notable exception of the scene when he tears the amniotic sac and triggers his own birth. In theatrical terms, he would therefore be confined to the role of audience, but he refuses to stay in place and instead keeps shifting from one position around the stage to the other, from audience to backstage and technical crew, on to understudy and stage director, at times even to an actor speaking only in asides, unknown of the rest of the cast.

His role as a spectator is made explicit rather early in the novel: the novel opens with the sentence “So here I am, upside down in a woman” (1), and is echoed, twenty pages.
later: “Here I am, in the front stalls, awkwardly seated upside down” as Trudy and Claude’s intercourse is likened to “a minimal production, bleakly modern, a two-hander” (22). The narrator clearly seats himself among the audience here, listening to his uncle’s “soliloquy”. But he quickly promotes himself to a more important role, as he starts reciting what sound like stage directions: “He neatly folds his clothes across a chair”, “He wanders about the bedroom, upstage, downstage, bare-skinned [...]”, “And my mother? On the bed, between the sheets, partly dressed, wholly attentive, with ready hums and sympathetic nods” (22), “The briefest pause. Exit Claude” (23). These lines turn him into the author of the play, or perhaps its stage director. Very disturbingly, the foetus becomes the director of a voyeuristic, pornographic podcast involving his own mother. He even has intimate knowledge of his mother’s secret masturbating: “Known only to me, under the bedclothes, a forefinger curls over her clitoral snood and rests a sweet half-inch inside her” (22). The dramatic irony this detail creates gives him the upper hand over Claude, who is now a mere actor who doesn’t know half of what goes into creating the scene he stars in, contrary to the foetal narrator/director who pulls the strings.

However, Claude remains the main actor, despite the foetus’s efforts to upstage him. At times, the narrator appears to be Claude’s overlooked understudy, impatiently waiting for his uncle’s downfall to take his place, in oedipal fashion, as his mother’s better lover. During Claude’s “set piece on menu terms” at dinner, the foetus is “silently mouthing [Claude’s] exposition before he’s begun” (6), showing off his own knowledge of Claude’s lines. During his birth, the foetus “travel[s] a section where a portion of [his] uncle has passed too often the other way” but he is “not troubled” because he is “greater than [Claude] was” and his “casual cock” cannot “compete” (196). During birth, the foetus is finally allowed to come onto the stage and believes he shines there brighter than Claude ever has.

But until his birth, the only time the foetus is allowed on the stage is as an actor speaking asides, unseen by the rest of the cast, giving us readers/spectators witty comments and inside knowledge about the scenes we are witnessing with the foetus. When his father congratulates Claude and Trudy for their newly formed relationship, saying they “truly deserve each other”, the foetus tells us aside that “[t]his is a curse, though my father sounds impenetrably sincere. To be tied to a man as vapid but sexually vigorous as Claude is a complex fate. His brother knows it. But shush. He’s still talking” (70). It is as if a small portion of the stage is lit by a single spotlight in which the foetus is evolving and reporting, from up close, closer than the audience, what goes on in the portions of the stage that remain in darkness.

This supporting role is not enough for the foetus, however, whose “lowering, high-flown thoughts” he “long[s] to declaim alone somewhere”—alone and centre stage, surely—“oppres” him (91). The whole novel being the foetus’s long soliloquy, his longing seems capricious. He is after all the only voice we hear, except when he mediates outside voices, and his reflections about the world go on for pages on end at times. The narrator’s frustration comes rather from the fact that he is almost completely ignored or discarded by the other characters in the novel. If at dinner Trudy “covers her glass with her priggish hand” saying because she “ha[s] to think of baby” (7), a few days later she finishes a whole bottle of wine by herself, and a few more with the help of Claude. The foetus’s father never mentions him: “What was I in my father’s peroration? Dead. [...] Not even a mention, not in an aside, not even dismissed
as an irrelevance” (72)—the foetus wishes his father could join him in his “asides”. Even the police fail to mention him. Although the foetus imagines he detects “the double respect owed to the heavily pregnant bereaved” in the officers’ voices as they come to announce John’s death to Trudy (107), no mention is made of him when the chief inspector visits (“As we settle around the table I note and resent the absence of polite queries about me”, 171), except for a subtle allusion in which the foetus is compared to the baby spiders found in the glove that Claude planted in John’s car (182). Finally, Claude only mentions him when he is thinking of how to get rid of the foetus: “And we’ve placed the baby somewhere” (42).

Therefore, it seems the foetus is confined to asides and offstage not only because of his being a foetus and as such separate from the rest of the world, but because the other actors on the scene refuse to acknowledge him. Trudy’s eight-month pregnancy is more than noticeable, after all, difficult to forget. It is not only he who is blind, but the other characters in the novel who are, or pretend to be. Yet, strangely enough, all of the foetus’s attempts at taking control so far are for the benefit of the reader/spectator, to direct the way the foetus is seen by those who read him. Only rarely does the foetus really seek to be noticed by the other characters, even though he does have ways of doing so.

The foetus states the ambiguousness of his responsibility in the plot very obviously at the beginning of the novel, in contrast with his inability, or perhaps, reluctance, to act: “My mother is involved in a plot, and therefore I am too, even if my role might be to foil it. Or if I, reluctant fool, come to term too late, then to avenge it” (3). Mars-Jones remarks upon the “suspended time” of *Nutshell*, also to be found in *The Child in Time* or *On Chesil Beach* and expresses some impatience, which the reader might admit to feeling too: “McEwan’s narrator, in addition to being attuned to the outside world […], has memories that seem to stretch back indefinitely”, as shown as early as the first page of the novel. Yet “[m]ore than 190 pages later”, Mars-Jones writes, “he’s still in the womb”. It seems the first role of the foetus, before foiling or avenging the plot, is to let it happen, and even further, to let more than the plot happen. His narration is constantly interspersed with his thoughts on this or that subject: the meeting with Elodie after John’s death is interrupted by a whole chapter of the foetus’s (or McEwan’s) take on identity politics, and he himself admits that “[t]his digression may seem unimportant” (145).

Mars-Jones too questions the foetus’s lack of agency:

At the moment of birth the narrator will enter the world of action, but even now he has some tiny ability to intervene, by kicking. Couldn’t he communicate with his mother by kicking in Morse code? This would admittedly be bizarre, a sort of internal séance (“Is there anybody there?”), but then the donnée of the book is already extreme. In any case, it’s a possibility that isn’t floated, and the reason may be that the narrator, despite any amount of helpless love, has no reason to trust his mother.

Kicking his mother is not always very successful, indeed. During the toast Trudy gives in order to make sure John drinks the poison in his cup, the foetus kicks to try and stop the murder but fails. His presence is once again completely ignored, and it is not his unborn child that John is reminded of by the kicking, but his brother: “Again, with both heels I kick and kick against his fate.—‘Oh, oh, little mole,’ my mother calls out in a sweet, maternal voice. ‘He’s waking up.’—‘You failed to mention my brother,’ John Cairncross says” (99). The next time he tries, the foetus is more careful in using this
power. To stop a row between Claude and Trudy, whom the foetus has decided at first must dupe the police and so can only do it together, the foetus kicks his mother three times, then thinks: “I was considering a fourth strike, but Trudy’s mood is dangerous. She might go on the attack and invite a dangerous response” (167). His intervention is successful this time as Claude continues speaking in a “mollifying mode” (167).

26 The foetus’s agency becomes more and more obvious as the novel goes on, and the reader wonders whether it is the foetus himself who pulls the strings and keeps the stage in darkness by refraining his own actions and postponing his birth. In fact, perhaps the role that fits him best is that of a member of the technical crew of the theatre. When his mother refuses a glass of wine at dinner with Claude, the foetus tells us: “That’s when I have it in mind to reach for my oily cord, as one might a velvet rope in a well-staffed country house, and pull sharply for service. What ho! Another round for us friends!” (7). On top of a service bell, could the “oily cord” be the rope that opens the curtains hiding the stage, that the foetus refuses to open? And could the three kicks he gives his mother later on be like the three traditional knocks before the beginning of a play in French theatres, as he reminds his actors of the roles they have to play, or as he announces his upcoming entrance?

27 At times the foetus plays the role of the theatrical sound engineer, too. “Like a DJ hunched over his turntable”, the foetus “sample[s]” and repeats “the line” in which Claude says they should “dump” him once he is born (43). In fact, repetitions occur throughout the novel, through the foetus’s variations on his situation and feelings, on the state of the world he will be born in, and on the relationships between his parents and uncle—which participate too in the “suspended time” of the novel (Mars-Jones). The foetus also “sample[s]” and remixes a lot of lines from other sources, mainly from *Hamlet*, creating echoes between the two texts: “She thinks I protest too much” (89), “It’s what we should have used. Diphenhydramine. Kind of antihistamine. People are saying the Russians used it on that spy they locked in a sports bag. Poured it into his ear” (117), and “He’s abandoned Indian for Danish – open sandwiches, pickled herring, baked meats” (132).

28 *Nutshell*, however, is supposed to ignore its own origins, to be a “novel-without-the-play-inside-it” (Mars-Jones)—the stage is supposed to remain dark. But Mars-Jones remarks that *Nutshell* fails to maintain this convincingly:

> Introducing his father’s protégée and perhaps lover, a poet whose favoured subject is owls, he defends the narrowness of her specialism by meditating on the benefits of limitation: ‘To be bound in a nutshell, see the world in two inches of ivory, in a grain of sand.’ He must ‘know’ that the second of these phrases derives from Austen, the third from Blake, but where does he think the first one comes from? It’s like a strange party game, in which books have to guess their own epigraphs, written on scraps of paper and stuck to their foreheads.

29 The DJ foetus’s sampling of *Hamlet*, like Claude’s habit of “[v]ibrating the air a second time with his thought”, creates a “problem of reference” (5) in the text of *Nutshell*, between narrator and reader. The foetus says that “[Claude] knows you know he’s repeating himself” but that “[w]hat he can’t know is that you don’t enjoy it the way he does” (5). As highlighted by Mars-Jones, what the foetus doesn’t seem to know is that we readers do not see the play the way he does—we recognize the plot and spot the references to the play despite the stage being left in darkness. And this leads the reader to wonder whether the foetus knows he is repeating himself, repeating *Hamlet*—whether he is voluntarily keeping the stage in darkness.
“Obliterated” views

Given McEwan’s well-known motto, borrowed from Joseph Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, “by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see!”, the dark stage at the centre of *Nutshell* is surprising. His choice of narrator is also a departure from the writer’s confessed preference for “the real, the actual” as opposed to “magical realism”. In “Narrative Artifice”, David James quotes McEwan in an interview: “When interviewed by Zadie Smith as *Saturday* appeared, McEwan confessed to having ‘a sneaking sympathy with the view that the real, the actual, is so demanding and rich, that magical realism is really a tedious evasion of some artistic responsibility’”, and that it is “a position that has endured despite his diegetic adventures in recent works like *Nutshell*” (185). The black hole at the centre of the novel—*Hamlet*—could therefore be said to stand for the obviousness of the real when ignored, the “artistic responsibility” that the reader is due, according to McEwan, but does not get in *Nutshell*. The reader, despite or thanks to the seemingly ignorant narrator, picks up on this absence in the novel and is made to feel, like McEwan, the “tediousness” of the narrator’s point of view, and the lack of real, that here is summed up by the lack of the visual. *Nutshell* could thus be read as a satire of magical realism, and the foetal narrator as a satirical portrait of the authors of that genre. As such, the birth of the foetus in the final chapter is a welcome, though overdue, release: finally, the stage is lit and the visual, so far inferred, imagined, or replicated by ultrasound pictures and theatrics, takes over—or so it seems.

Still in “Narrative Artifice”, David James addresses McEwan’s “asserted [...] ethical conviction about fiction’s accountability toward the material world” (185), showing however that “narrative artifice is something McEwan has little interest in evading” (194). James points out that when McEwan himself admits the difficulties of applying his “ethical conviction” (“‘The real, the actual, they place heavy demands on a writer—how to invent it, how to confront it or pass it through the sieve of your own consciousness’”, James 185), the author also admits using, up to a point, the very artifice he denounces: ‘yet, answering to those ‘heavy demands’ requires its own level of artifice, not least if one has to ‘invent’ ‘the real’, as McEwan advises, in the process of refracting the material world via one’s ‘own consciousness’. What’s more, even the most autochthonous form is also an artifice; the specificity of ‘regional’ naturalism is itself a calculated style of observation, specification and exactitude” (186). About *Nutshell*, James more precisely writes that “despite its fantastic setting, *Nutshell* showcases what has become a familiar preoccupation of McEwan with the rhetorical artifice of mentation; or, more precisely, with the distance between the vicissitudes of thought and the language in which thinking is evoked, a distance that may remain insuperable for fiction but which writers since modernism have aspired to bridge” (192). James identifies such “artifice” in “characterization and voice” in *Nutshell* (194) and writes that “[w]hile diegetically outlandish, the novella’s scenario could not be more recognizably allusive: an embryonic Prince of Denmark intimates ‘the pain of unnamed, unreachable remorse, a sense of having left someone or something behind in a betrayal of duty or love’” (192). Here, James associates the allusions to the absent *Hamlet* and the text’s problem of figuration of “the real”. Both
are compensated for with an artificiality that paradoxically is made very obvious: everything around the dark stage of *Hamlet* is lit, and the narrator is deliberately prevented from seeing what he is supposed, as a narrator, “to make [us] see”.

Like “characterization and voice” in *Nutshell*, sounds and images together also produce the allusiveness that James identifies. The quote from *Nutshell* chosen by James is taken from chapter eleven, from the foetus’s first dream. The foetus’s “sense of having left someone or something behind” is echoed in the last sentence of this passage, when the foetus finds himself “wait[ing] for the funeral cortège” of an unknown deceased person (most likely his father’s, who has just ingested poison) that never comes: “The procession doesn’t appear, but the bell keeps ringing” (106). Here, sound has left the visual behind, the expected picture is missing, although it is announced by the sound of the bell. Even in a dream “in full colour and rich visual depth” there are images that resist actualization (105). The artifice of language, that we can equate with the sound of the bell, has left the real behind, the expected but unseen funeral cortège. Here we are reminded of McEwan’s metaphor of the “sieve”, whose very purpose is to prevent some things to go through its holes and mix with what does.

In some of his other fantasies, too, before his birth, the foetus’s vision remains somehow partly impaired, even though he could allow himself all the impossible points of view he likes. In fact, it seems the foetus learns from his mistakes earlier in the novel. In the first portraits of his father, the foetus is careful (“Various of my conjectures have proved wrong in the past, but I’ve listened carefully and I’m assuming the following”, 10), signposts clearly what is pure invention (“I send my thoughts ahead to spy on them. Purely an exercise of the imagination. Nothing here is real”, 35) but is still generous in his portrayal, believing his father to be a decent man, though perhaps lacking a little backbone. John at first is “moonishly in love” with Trudy (10), he is “like a saint” when it comes to helping young poets (11), and the narrator’s “reasonable inferences” are that his father was “[b]orn under an obliging star, eager to please, too kind, too earnest” and “has nothing of the ambitious poet’s quiet greed” (12). The narrator also imagines that his father refuses the money his uncle offers him. All of this later proves to be wrong. The first few chapters of the novel, in fact, track the successive revelations first of Trudy and Claude’s murder plans, of Claude’s true identity as the brother of the same man he plans to kill, of Trudy’s true nature as a woman willing to kill out of jealousy and greed, and finally of John’s true nature as a manipulative, potentially cheating husband and as a father who does not give a single thought to his unborn child. As a consequence, the narrator seems to learn not to project too much onto his parents, and the following portraits picture his hesitation. For example, the foetus’s last image of his father has become partly unavailable to him: as he is listening to his father trying to start the car in front of the house after he has been poisoned, the foetus “conjure[s] a view of him through the car windscreen, his form almost obliterated by reflections of summer clouds” (103). The narrator conjures an unavailable image, obscured by clouds, which, on top of foreshadowing his father’s certain death, pictures the text’s struggle with artifice versus the real. The character of his father as the foetus imagined it had been “sieved”, to use McEwan’s own words, through the foetus’s consciousness, but without accounting for what was left in the sieve, what hadn’t gone through the holes of his consciousness—his father’s true character. This last “obliterated” portrait of his father does that, however. The part of
the picture that is “obliterated” is what remains of reality, and points to the artifice—and failure—of the foetus’s perspective.

34 McEwan’s very purpose, then, “to make [us] see”, is to be questioned, and James encourages McEwan’s readers to “reflect [...] on McEwan’s formal aims” (195). Whether it is the author’s ambition or not, the effect Nutshell produces on its readers is to make us see, not what we cannot see, but that we cannot see—that there are things that remain out of sight, and that when we look at them we are only seeing what we wish to see or looking at darkness. The blind narrator of Nutshell points out for both writer and reader the blind spots of fiction, without showing what is hidden behind them. Paradoxically, the real’s refusal to be inscribed is what the real consists in, Nutshell shows. The last striking example of this occurs at the end of the novel, after Trudy has given birth to the foetus and when the police arrive to arrest the murderers. In an interview from 2018, McEwan explains how he circumvented one blind spot created in this scene by his choice of narrator:

So my narrator has to go by what he’s heard or use his imagination and see it all in the dark. I tried to play by the rules but I broke them whenever I had to. My copy editor pointed out that at the end of the novel the baby observes he’s being born onto a blue towel. How does he know it’s blue? Here I took a structural view. Blue is close to green; he doesn’t know what that looks either, but he does know that the spectrum is divided up into words, and he can live by these words. But really, it was all smoke and mirrors to persuade the reader that, of course, he sees in his own way. (Guignery)

35 What this means is that the foetus associates a colour to the towel he is born onto, without knowing, it seems, what colour it really is. As soon as he is born, he lives “by these words” instead of living fully in the material world. As soon as he is born, the discrepancy is made obvious, here not “between the vicissitudes of thought and the language in which thinking is evoked”, but between the materiality of the world, its visual quality, and “the language” in which this reality “is evoked” (James). The newborn masters the language to paint the world but is unable to match words to what they designate. Actually, this trick seems a little in bad faith on the part of McEwan considering how chapter fifteen addresses identity politics and Trudy’s claim of innocence with heavy irony. “Lies will be her truth”, the foetus says of his denying mother (147). The same could be said of the foetus: blue will be his green, red, white—whatever the real colour of the towel is, it does not matter, it is “his own way” of seeing the world. This forces us to rethink, once again, the reliability of the narrator, as well the relevance of McEwan’s choice of narrator or medium, and the good faith of the author’s own positions.

36 Mars-Jones remarks that chapter fifteen, which he calls a “piece of slightly tetchy commonsense liberalism”, “makes perfect sense coming from a writer whose recent remarks on the subject of transgender people (‘Call me old-fashioned, but I tend to think of people with penises as men’) caused a certain amount of offence”. Strangely enough, in Nutshell, McEwan’s point—his defence of “the real”—is made in spite of him. While McEwan is quick to remind us of the materiality of existence and takes more or less careful steps to both circumscribe and sustain his impossible narrator with physical limits, his narration fails to take into account the fact that the vision of a newborn is not that of an adult when they are born. While “it’s a myth that babies see in black and white”, says University of Sussex Anna Franklin, new-borns cannot see all colours either. It is only “[b]y two months [that] babies can tell red and green colours
apart; a few weeks later, they can also tell apart blues and yellows. But the colours need to be strong” (Davis).

The foetus’s first moments of vision in the novel are therefore highly unrealistic. If this new-born is, apart from its highly precocious consciousness, anything like a real new-born, there is no way he would be able to see the blue bath towel onto which he is born, nor would he be able to compare Trudy’s face, including the colour of her hair and eyes, to the poetic portrait his father had made of her. The narrator’s inability to recognize blue is therefore the least of the problems caused by this scene, since he cannot even see blue. It is of course not surprising that neither McEwan nor his editor knew when a baby starts seeing colours—it is not common knowledge, except perhaps to parents of newly born babies and most certainly to paediatric optometrists. It should perhaps also be known by writers who choose foetuses and new-borns as narrators when they pretend to rely on logic and realistic physical processes to explain the foetus’s consciousness. Still, as Mars-Jones writes again, “the donnée of the book is already extreme” and perhaps on top of premature intellectual abilities the foetus also has overly developed retinas for his age, and McEwan just does not feel the need to mention it. Mars-Jones does write that “[t]he paradox of Nutshell is that the restrictions on the point of view have no substance. They melt away. The narrator may be constrained but the writer is not, and in practice there is nothing that is excluded a priori from making its way into the book” (Mars-Jones). It is a game of “smoke and mirrors” to McEwan (Guignery).

As such it is not surprising that the reality that the foetus is faced with once he is born isn’t exactly one either: his birth corresponds to his entrance onto the stage of Hamlet, so far plunged in darkness. He joins the actors Trudy and Claude onstage, still a step removed from reality. Now the narrator still reports things that do not exist, only without the cover of self-avowed fictionalisation. He cannot see the play anymore than he could before, only now he is in the play and, made to see blue, he no longer is aware of his blindness. It turns out the birth offers no release from the blind narrative perspective, and the real remains unseen.

**Conclusion: “The rest is silence”**

One question that remains and must be asked is this: why is it that in Nutshell only the visual comes to equal “the real”? On top of the novel’s reliance on artifice, which paradoxically inscribes its own failure into the text through obliterated images, echography remains a medium that transforms sounds into images, and the narrative staging of the novel circles and points to the narrator’s own blindness. What is made obvious is that Nutshell pushes against the boundaries of the visual, but offers no alternative to it, despite its relying on an unusual consciousness that has no choice but to rely on something other than sight to comprehend the world.

In “Landscape Shaped by Blindness. Touching the Rock (1990) and Notes on Blindness (2016): Towards an Ec(h)ology of Vision”, Diane Leblond writes about another “paradoxical venture”: the documentary feature entitled Notes on Blindness which “brought to the screen Touching the Rock (1990), theologian John Hull’s testimony of sight loss” (1). The written memoir itself was already adapted from a journal recorded on cassettes by the author, so that “the audio-visual media of film […] might appear as one step too far, […] if not an aggressive takeover” (1). Similarly in Nutshell, the sounds
that reach the foetus are transcribed into writing on a page, which itself conjures up images in the reader’s mind, to “make [us] see”. Although McEwan’s novel is not based on any possible real-life experience, the questions Leblond raises about the documentary can also be asked about *Nutshell*.

Leblond answers them by arguing that despite its seemingly inadequate format, *Notes on Blindness* manages to “leave behind a preconceived idea of sensory impairment”, to move “[f]rom impairment to impropriety”, and “encourages us to deconstruct the very framework in which we ran the risk of overlooking the landscape, of missing it entirely” (14). Similarly, McEwan’s *Nutshell* makes obvious “the risk of overlooking”: the holes in the images produced by the foetus as the novel advances are proof of that. However, *Nutshell*’s movement “from impairment to impropriety” does not take place, and the narrator’s impairment remains just that. That is because *Nutshell* and *Notes on Blindness*’s “frameworks” are “deconstruct[ed]” in very different ways.

“‘Apprehending’ the other need not mean appropriating, quite the opposite”, Leblond writes as the final lesson of *Notes on Blindness*, and demonstrates this by highlighting the ways in which the documentary makes Hull’s experience available to the viewer:

It points out what a sighted person might be overlooking: [...] we stop focusing only on the view, and pay attention to other aspects of the landscape: the dryness of the soil underfoot, the rolling of cracked earth and rocks, and the wind. It also makes us more aware of the small blindscape produced by John’s glasses in the second shot—one that challenges our sighted sense of normalcy, as the thickness of the lenses make it appear upside-down. (12)

In *Nutshell*, on the contrary, we never stop focusing on the view since the narrator is so intent on making us see. In fact, what we do forget at times is that the foetus cannot see, so gifted he is at transforming sounds and other sensations into pictures, and at conjuring fantasies to pass the time. Despite the foetus’s position in the womb, and contrary to what the documentary achieves, the world he is telling us about is not upside down, it is constantly being turned back on its head for us. As a consequence, the lesson to be drawn from the novel is more forceful than the documentary’s: in *Nutshell* the foetus is made to realise that “apprehending” must “not mean appropriating”, and that doing so is at the risk of seeing the picture “obliterated”.

As such, the novel’s last line, which rewrites a line from *Hamlet*, sounds wrong when one remembers the original. “The rest is silence” (Shakespeare 986) would be a lot more appropriate, since the foetus can now stop listening and start watching. In fact, the novel’s final refusal to acknowledge “silence” is inappropriate but also feels like an appropriation of that silence. Leblond writes that in blindness and as shown in *Notes*, “[t]he transience of things is met by our inability to control the view, in an equation that points to a metaphysical sense of necessary loss”, which she illustrates with a quote from Hull: “Where nothing was happening, there was silence. That little part of the world then died [...] To rest is not to be” (9). It is this silence, this “not to be” that lacks in *Nutshell*, yet that is considered as much as “to be” in *Hamlet*’s famous soliloquy (Shakespeare 806).

Perhaps this stems from the author’s initial choice of narrator: the problem with a foetal consciousness is not so much that it appeals to “magical realism” and artifice, but that it conjures up an inevitably political debate about a foetus’s being or not being. That the question that started it all—“What if she can overhear us?”—immediately results in imagining a fully developed consciousness which immediately understands
what reaches it participates, whether intentionally or not, in this debate. And McEwan’s foetus sure is intent on demonstrating his own being.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Tayler, Christopher. “Nutshell by Ian McEwan review—Womb with a View”, The Financial Times, 2 September 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/2bddd4c6-6f96-11e6-a0c9-1365ce54b926 [accessed 13 August 2022].

ABSTRACTS

Ian McEwan’s claim that, like Conrad, he writes novels “to make [us] see” can seem problematic when applied to his 2016 novel Nutshell. The novel both illustrates and complicates the author’s self-assigned task, as its foetal narrator is essentially blind but still insists on conveying a view of the world outside the womb. It is further complicated by the fact that Nutshell is meant as a retelling of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a play, and therefore implies a transition from stage
representation to novelization, “from the showing mode to the telling mode” (Bandín and González). Ian McEwan did not renounce his visual ambitions when writing *Nutshell* (Guignery) but instead “the book [...] is clearly generated by the technical challenges implicit in the opening sentence, rather than a story that McEwan urgently needs to tell” (Tayler). Therefore, the following questions must be asked about *Nutshell*: how is such visuality, or visibility, made possible in a novel whose narrator is blind? Exactly what tricks do the narrator and writer rely on to transform blindness into images? And what is the reader really given to look at? This article argues that *Nutshell* fails to transition “from the showing mode to the telling mode”. It attempts instead to picture blindness by relying on what can be called echographic writing—the translation of sounds into images—as well as incomplete staging of the foetus’s condition. These inappropriate mechanisms threaten the integrity of the novel, eventually leaving narrator, reader and writer in the dark.


**INDEX**

**Keywords:** blindness, pregnancy, perception, visibility, staging, sound

**Mots-clés:** cécité, grossesse, perception, visibilité, mise en scène, son

**oeuvrecitee** *Nutshell*

**AUTHORS**

MAXENCE GOULEAU

Maxence Gouleau is a PhD candidate in British literature at Sorbonne Université. Her thesis subject focuses on pregnancy and childbirth in the contemporary and ultra-contemporary British novel, including several novels by Ian McEwan. She is supervised by Prof. Frédéric Regard. Maxence got her master’s degree from Sorbonne Université and is agrégée d’anglais. She is a member of the VALÉ research centre at Sorbonne Université (EA 4085). She will be a teaching assistant in the English department at Sorbonne Université starting September 2022. She is
currently working on an article for *Sillages Critiques* adapted from her talk on pregnancy and curiosity in Jesse Greengrass’s 2018 novel *Sight* at the June 2022 conference on “Body Building” by the junior lab OVALE at Sorbonne Université.