Composing a Visual Elegy? S/cenographies of Loss and Recovery in Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time*


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In a 2007 interview with David Lynn, Ian McEwan identifies a shared “very strong visual sense” in the works of novelists such as Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov and John Updike, and defines it as an essential quality of his own craft and fiction-writing in general:

[I like writers] who recognize that forty percent of the brain’s processing is given over to the visual, and the visual region projects deep into other parts of the brain, of language and emotion. We are visual creatures and the novel, more than cinema, for me is ultimately a visual medium. […] [That’s what I] aspire to in my own writing—to make you see, to get to the heart of any emotional exchange or any transaction of any set piece. It’s crucial, in my view, to have the reader see, and that is not to say that you’ve got to lard the page with masses of description but key, vivid, specific details, like little starbursts in the darkness, I think have emotional consequences. If you can see this then you can feel it. (in Lynn)

As he elaborates on the brain’s cognitive processes, McEwan lauds the imaginative quality of the written word, to which he attributes a greater depth and affective strength than the visual immediacy of cinema. Moreover, there appears to be a selectiveness to the novelist’s own “very strong visual sense”, a desire to enhance the narrative significance and visibility of particular plot points by emphasizing their picturable dimension. Indeed, in a number of McEwan novels, memorable events stand out because of their cinematic quality. One may think of notable examples like the multi-perspectival fountain scene in *Atonement* (2001) or the spectacular balloon accident in *Enduring Love* (1997). The combination of emotional intensity and vivid description leaves those “engrossing set piece[s]” (Head 6) engraved in the reader’s mind and contributes to sketching out McEwan’s poetics of vision-cum-emotion.
Nowhere in McEwan’s work is the link between vision and emotion acknowledged as clearly as in *The Child in Time* (1987), his third novel, where the act of seeing takes a deeply organic dimension and finds an intimate resonance for its grieving protagonist Stephen, who loses sight of his daughter Kate in a supermarket, never to find her again. In a crucial episode of the novel, which marks a temporary break from realistic conventions, Stephen briefly journeys through time to witness a scene that predates his own birth. As he beholds a conversation between his (future) parents from behind the window of a pub, he is also seen by his mother (or mother-to-be). The exchange of gazes figuratively brings him into existence: “his vision pulsed with the beating of his heart” (61). In this moment of vision (which is both a perceptual act and a moment of profound or supernatural revelation), the pulsing designates at once the emotional pull of the scene and the beating of a baby’s heart, a sign of life.

Furthermore, *The Child in Time*, a complex story that intertwines multiple genres, such as political satire, dystopia and science fiction, can be described in the first place as an exploration of a psychological and emotional labyrinth of grief. As the unresolved (and scarcely mentioned) investigation that follows Kate’s disappearance fails to either confirm or disprove the possibility of her death, she remains stuck in a memorial limbo of (non-)being for her parents Stephen and Julie, thus compounding their vulnerability. A dialectic between seeing and not seeing, which sometimes blurs the limits between reality and imagination and takes on a spectral quality, informs the representation of mourning in the novel.

As a tale of lamentation and tentative recovery, it could be argued that *The Child in Time* falls into the category of the contemporary “narrative elegy” (Ganteau 2021). In his seminal study *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks defines the elegy as “a poem of mortal loss and consolation” (3). Conversely, the modern version of elegy (also known as “anti-elegy”, Spargo in Weisman 2010) “tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (Ramazani xi). The emotional impact of vision in McEwan’s writing thus brings into focus not only his narrative construction of memory but also his protagonist’s uncertain trajectory of mourning, straddling the edge between elegy and anti-elegy. Both senses of the verb “recover” appear to be at stake in McEwan’s poetics of vision: “to save from loss” and to “make up for” or “to regain a normal position/condition” (*Merriam Webster*). Consequently, this article purports to investigate the visual articulation of memory and consolation at the heart of this narrative elegy. Even though the story of mourning is predicated on an initial failure of vision, the attempt to (re)construct a portrait of the lost child (in time) is instrumental to the novel’s visual drive. Finally, McEwan’s symbolic descriptions seem to carve out an aesthetics of revelation and a scenography of potential consolation that contributes to map out the plot’s progression.

**Visualizing loss: absence and desire**

Visual images abound when it comes to defining narratology and fictional writing, as Dorrit Cohn argues in a chapter of *The Distinction of Fiction*, entitled “Options and Power in the Novel”: “optical imagery has traditionally pervaded the language of critics and theorists of fiction: window and mirror, microscope and telescope, lens and Xray, perspective and focalization, reflection and transparency” (163). For any fiction-writer,
choosing the viewpoint(s) from which the story will be told is a foundational act, which either gives an illusion of omniscience or restricts the reader’s access to information. The angle of vision is thus related to notions of cognition, which is why, in his seminal work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth describes the figure of the unreliable narrator as a “flawed reflector” (340), an expression that takes a visual as well as a mental dimension. This analogy metaphorizes the surface of the narrator’s consciousness as a faulty mirror which provides distorted reflections of events. In *The Child in Time*, the choice of an internal focalization means that most of the novel’s events are told by a heterodiegetic narrator, all the while being filtered through the point of view of the protagonist, Stephen Lewis. Consequently, even though Stephen is not the narrator of the story, one could argue that he remains a “flawed reflector” throughout, and McEwan uses this narratological specificity as a narrative instrument of elegiac and/or traumatic expression of loss and absence.

The emotional heart of *The Child in Time*’s plot is the sudden disappearance in plain sight of Stephen’s daughter Kate, during a simple supermarket trip. Although it is carefully framed by highly detailed descriptions of the surroundings, the “supermarket scene”, as it has been called by critics, revolves around one crucial instant, which seals the little girl’s fate and consigns her into non-existence: “[Stephen] asked the [cashier] girl for a carrier bag. She reached under a shelf and pulled one out. He took it and turned. Kate was gone. There was no one in the queue behind him” (12). In this quotation, the disjointedness of parataxis evinces the suddenness of the event and each detail of the scene follows the movement of the character’s gaze from the cashier to the carrier bag, back to the place where Kate should be. What Christine Reynier calls a “moment of distraction” (“un moment d’inattention”, 115) becomes a defining motif of the novel, which associates the perceptual act of looking away with a loss of mental focus. In her analysis of this scene, Eluned Summers-Bremner identifies a correlation between Stephen’s loss of visual contact and the overwhelming nature of traumatic experience: “Kate’s loss is bound up with Stephen’s momentary lapse of attention [and] this lapse is also the space of the lapse in experience constituted by an overwhelming event” (47). McEwan’s detailed description of the scene pulls the protagonist/focalizer’s focus (as well as the reader’s) away from the actual event while it is unfolding. The failure to see is thus correlated with a failure of cognition: the mind is unable to register the initial shock of the catastrophic event. This brief moment of distraction could also be correlated with what Vladimir Jankélévitch calls the “almost-nothing” of the “mortal instant”, which is the crossing of the “threshold between two worlds”: that of the living and that of the dead (286). Since Kate’s fate remains uncertain, the narrative inhabits the liminal space of the temporal and experiential fault line constituted by Stephen’s blind spot and the child’s slipping into a perceptual void.

As a result, the description of the specific threshold-moment when the child suddenly escapes her father’s view becomes a recurrent motif in the narrative, a traumatic loop that remains deeply embedded in the protagonist’s memory:

He had been back a thousand times, seen his own hand, a shelf, the goods accumulate, heard Kate chattering on, and tried to move his eyes, lift them against the weight of time, to find that shrouded figure at the periphery of vision, the one who was always to the side and slightly behind, who, filled with a strange desire, was calculating odds, or simply waiting. But time held his sight for ever on his
The hyperbolic mention of Stephen’s protracted and multiple attempts at remembering the scene in its entirety and with clarity (“a thousand times”) takes the shape of a multi-sensorial exploration of memory’s dark recesses (“seen”, “heard”). While Cathy Caruth argues in Trauma: Explorations in Memory that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (5), in this case, it is precisely the absence of a clear image that haunts the protagonist by foregrounding his inability to solve the crime/mystery. Mentions of sight saturate the text (“his eyes”, “his sight”), but memory is reduced to a painful effort more than a faculty (“tried to move his eyes”, “lift them”), with underwhelming results. Instead of focusing on Kate, the fragment of memory verges into the territory of imagination, in a desperate attempt to reconstitute a portrait of an unknowable villain, Kate’s abductor. However, this ill-defined figure remains just beyond the scope of perception (“at the periphery of vision”, “to the side”, “slightly behind”), and beyond focus (“shapes without definition”). The adjective “shrouded” adds a funeral dimension to this eerie (non-)portrait of the agent of disappearance. Stephen remains a “flawed reflector” throughout this episode, in which his lapse of attention creates a sensory vacuum that expresses his traumatic experience of loss. Elusive perception replaces clarity and the intense focus on a blind spot carves a narrative space for the expression of emotion and desire.

Because of this key perceptual lapse, McEwan invariably couches his poetics of emotion in visual terms, and makes it a defining feature of his grieving protagonist to be looking for his lost daughter, since looking at her has become impossible: “Stephen remained as always, though barely consciously, on the watch for children, for a five-year-old girl. It was more than a habit, for a habit could be broken. It was a deep disposition, the outline experience had stencilled on character” (1, italics mine). In this subtly metatextual excerpt, the action of watching is inextricably bound up with Stephen’s constant yearning to be reunited with Kate. The association of desire and underlying frustration is a characteristic of elegy, which, according to Elizabeth Helsinger in her article “Grieving Images: Elegy and the Visual Arts”, “responds to the vain desires of the living to see, hear, touch, and grasp [the dead] once again” (in Weisman 660).

More than just looking for visual or sensorial contact with the absent child, though, what is represented in the novel is a multifaceted portrait of loss, which ties in with Brian Diemert’s definition of McEwan’s novel: “The Child in Time is not, after all, a crime story (we read nothing of a police investigation), so Kate’s unresolved disappearance stands as little more than the space of loss into which narrative moves” (221). The loss of visual contact with Kate is generalized throughout the novel, as Stephen continually stumbles upon “impediments to his field of vision” (13) and finds himself in situations where “it [is] hard to see clearly” (115), which pinpoint the apparent impossibility of recovering the lost child, but also of recovering from his own loss and move forward.

The predominance of this failure to see is the narrative articulation of the void at the heart of the story. By representing the grieving protagonist’s wound as an experiential and perceptual discontinuity, the novel signals its affinity with trauma fiction, whose aim is to “dramatize and perform loss” according to Jean-Michel Ganteau (2015, 22). The resulting poetics of vulnerability informs the novel’s (and the protagonist’s) elegiac attempts at creating a textual memorial for the lost child.
While it is commonly considered as a poetic lament, the goal of the traditional elegy is further defined by William Watkin as the “setting in a structure of presence—poem, monument, epitaph, name—a radical and irreversible absence: the lost beloved” (36-37). A sense of consolation (the alleviating of suffering) supposedly stems from the “figurative or aesthetic compensation” (Sacks 5) at the heart of this interplay between absence and presence. In The Child in Time, the visual outlining of loss is inextricably linked with a memorializing impulse, a contradictory and wavering attempt at retrieving Kate’s memory from the shadows. However, as often in McEwan’s fiction, memory is both profoundly perceptual and potentially defective, plagued by an “inexorable process of erasure” (Whitehead 57). Even though some blurred vignettes from the past emerge at the surface of Stephen’s consciousness, the edifice of reminiscence constantly remains under the threat of collapsing: “he brought to mind the three-year-old, the springy touch of her, how she fitted herself so comfortably round his body, the solemn purity of her voice, the wet red and white of tongue and lips and teeth, the unconditional trust. It was getting harder to recall. She was fading” (141). No matter how devotedly Stephen attempts to combine sight, touch, hearing and emotional attachment to recreate a multisensorial portrait of Kate, his painstaking work of memory is obstructed by a fragmentariness which is “commonly associated with loss, lack and vulnerability” in contemporary fiction, according to Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg in The Poetics of Fragmentation (xii). The asyndetic style of the enumeration paradoxically highlights the decomposition of Kate’s portrait as a coherent whole, as she is reduced to a blur of colours and disconnected sensations. Throughout the narrative, Karen Smythe’s definition of Virginia Woolf’s elegy Jacob’s Room finds (an empty) space of resonance: “the novel functions not as a consoling resurrection of the character’s personality […], but as a verbal cenotaph, or rather, cenograph: it is an empty marker or tomb” (70). Attempts at recollection mostly conjure up sketches of absence and elusive representations of the lost child, thus highlighting the frailty of consolation and leading to the verbal creation of a cenotaph for Kate.

The “mysterious evanescence of Kate” (Slay 207) becomes a defining quality of the novel’s memorial (re)construction. In that respect, a telling analogy surfaces in Chapter 4, when Stephen retraces his own childhood and recollects a scene with his parents: “they were like the elegant dancing couple who revolved on his mother’s jewellery box to the tinkle of Für Elise, dream figures whose features dissolved into pink blobs when you put your face up close” (75). The transformation of characters into miniatures as well as the kinetic quality of recollection lead to an inevitable blurring of their narrative representation. A crucial keyword appears as Stephen’s parents are compared to “dream figures” whose features seem to dissolve into a haze. Indeed, throughout the novel, visions of the past are sometimes indeterminately termed “a memory, a dream, a film” (59), three inextricable components of McEwan’s elegiac poetics of vision. Articulating presence and absence, a dream-like form of reminiscence pervades the narrative’s most pictorial moments. Images of Kate thus become projections of her father’s desire to be reunited with her, following the definitions of “dream” that feature in the Merriam Webster dictionary: “a series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring during sleep”, “a creation of the imagination” or “a strongly
desired goal or purpose”. Just like the “dreamy figures [that] dissolve into pink blobs”, portraits of Kate sometimes take an imaginative form that results in a potential abstraction from reality.

The movement from painful reminiscence to fantasies of Kate’s continued existence therefore establishes a dream-like temporality, a liminal space that fails to acknowledge any clear-cut distinction between being and non-being:

The clock, sinewy like a heart, kept faith with an unceasing conditional; she would be drawing, she would be starting to read, she would be losing a milktooth. She would be familiar, taken for granted. It seemed as though the proliferating instances might wear down this conditional, the frail, semi-opaque screen, whose fine tissues of time and chance separated her from him; she is home from school and tired, her tooth is under the pillow, she is looking for her daddy. Any five-year-old girl—though boys would do—gave substance to her continued existence. [...] Kate’s growing up had become the essence of time itself. Her phantom growth, the product of an obsessive sorrow, was not only inevitable—nothing could stop the sinewy clock—but necessary. Without the fantasy of her continued existence he was lost, lost time would stop. He was the father of an invisible child. (2)

In the first pages of the novel, vignettes of the absent-present “child in time” take centre stage. The most crucial stylistic feature of dream-like vision is the reiterated use of the conditional, which Eric Benoit defines as a “grammatical sign of unaccomplished virtualities, and unrealized fiction” (in Glaudes & Rabaté 179, my translation). The steps of childhood milestones are clearly pictured and juxtaposed in those lines, where the conditional gradually gives way to the present indicative, thus turning a simple daydream into a more sustained fantasy. As Cécile Leupolt argues, the blurring of the line between reality and imagination can introduce a shift in the meaning of vision, from a perceptual act to a supernatural revelation or a hallucination: “‘Imagination’ basically indicates the human capacity to ‘imagine’ objects, events or situations, in other words to ‘see’ things in one’s mind, while ‘fantasy’ is habitually associated with falsehood, illusion or even madness [but] fantasy is derived from the Greek word phantasia, formed on the verb phainesthai, to bring to light or appear” (34). In the novel, “the fantasy of [Kate’s] continued existence” underscores the protagonist’s refusal to accept his loss and confront the reality of her absence. In his attempt to compensate for his loss, Stephen constantly looks for visual substitutes of Kate. When he meets a schoolgirl (who is approximately the same age as Kate would be), an odd, regressive scene of confusion and (mis)identification ensues as he follows her into her school and notes: “she had a dreamy appearance. He was looking at his daughter” (154). The little girl’s features are erased as Kate’s “spirit” (167) and image are projected onto her by Stephen’s dangerous daydreaming. C.S. Lewis draws a connection between the grave and the image in his grief memoir A Grief Observed: “the grave and the image are equally linked with the irrecoverable and symbols for the unimaginable. But the image has the added disadvantage that it will do whatever you want. It is a puppet of which you hold the strings” (5). In this textual cenotaph, visual representation strives to create a sense of consolation, but it is also a projection of the protagonist’s own delusion.

The combination of Kate’s “phantom growth” and “the fantasy of her continued existence” (2) introduces a fantas(ma)tic regime of spectrality into portraits of Kate, which problematizes Stephen’s mourning process. The limit between desire and reality takes the form of a “semi-opaque screen” (2), which both obscures reality and projects desire, exemplifying Derrida’s argument in Specters of Marx: “a spectre is [...] what one imagines, what one thinks one can see and projects: on an imaginary screen, a
[structure of disappearing appearance], where there is nothing to see” (165, my translation). The treatment of Kate’s “phantom” or fantasized memory therefore testifies to “the various ways in which the discourse of the novel can intersect with the discourses of science” in McEwan’s writing (Head 1). The novel offers a textual take on the quantum physics principle of Schrödinger’s cat, a thought experiment in which it is posited that a cat can be simultaneously dead and alive. Since Kate is missing but her death is never confirmed, she can be said to be both dead and alive in her grieving parents’ minds. This specificity has repercussions on the regime of representation and imbues memories and daydreams (the categories of which are blurred) with a photographic quality, following Susan Sontag’s liminal definition: “a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (16). Instead of being simply absent, Kate becomes an “invisible child” (2), whose presence is both undeniable and imperceptible. As Esther Peeren argues in her study of The Spectral Metaphor, “[the ghostliness of the missing] is primarily predicated on their absent presence: they cannot be located and, as such, partake of Derrida’s visible in-visible. While they cannot be seen, they remain present; those looking for them know that they, or their remains, must be somewhere” (144). As long as the narrative keeps spinning substitutes for Kate, the grieving process remains suspended between mourning and melancholy, and the narrative hovers in an interstitial space between elegy and anti-elegy, where consolation is sought after and remains as elusive as the representations of the lost child.

However, the dream-like regime of representation is progressively shattered by Stephen’s repeated disappointments, leading to a form of revelation: “he was beginning to face the difficult truth that Kate was no longer a living presence, she was not an invisible girl at his side” (168). Paradoxically, the acceptance of loss and the destruction of the phantom/fantasy of Kate become signs of the protagonist’s recovery, which is also outlined in McEwan’s narrative and descriptive choices.

A scenography of recovery?

Even though pictures of loss and spectral manifestations of the lost child are based on blind spots, blurry dreams and spectral incursions, the novel regains its pictorial and cinematic focus with detailed descriptions of multiple objects or sceneries, whose visibility takes on a symbolic dimension. Far from simply having a referential or indicative value, those descriptions serve as “tonal operator[s]” (an expression used by Philippe Hamon in Du Descriptif, 23), thus bringing out the emotional dimension of the visual. Many critics of the novel indeed perceive a form of “psychological geography” (Reynier 121) at the heart of The Child in Time. For Claudia Schemberg, McEwan’s realism creates a contrast between the characters’ disarray and their clearly-described surroundings: “disorientation and doubt in Ian McEwan’s novels largely remain at the level of the characters’ inner—i.e. psychological, emotional, and mental—world and are set off against a clearly mapped out temporal and geographical background” (26). However, one could argue that in this novel, instead of remaining a simple background, objects and places mirror the protagonist’s experience of mourning. Throughout the novel, the depiction of Stephen’s family flat after Kate’s disappearance and Julie’s departure is composed of striking still-lifes and snapshots of absence: “deadly alignments of familiar possessions”, “empty armchairs”(6), an
“unvisited kitchen” (21) and Kate’s “bare room” (179). The multiplication of negative and sometimes hypallagic adjectives (“deadly”) carves out a visual space of loneliness and despondency, which is a projection of Stephen’s own desolation. On the other hand, Julie’s cottage, which appears in chapters 3 and 9, is a crucial setting that sketches out Stephen’s itinerary of recovery and starkly contrasts with the deserted family apartment. McEwan insists on its drawing-like quality in his description, in an attempt to pinpoint its connection with childhood: “it was a house such as a child might draw. It was box-shaped with its front door dead centre, four small windows near each corner, and constructed of the same red bricks as The Bell” (70). The visual correlation (“the same red bricks”) between the cottage in which the couple’s second child is conceived (and then born) and the pub where Stephen experiences a regenerative journey through time turns these places into narrative “consolationscapes” (literally: views of consolation), a portmanteau word coined by cultural geographers Christoph Jedan, Avril Maddrell and Eric Venbrux in their collective work Consolationscapes in the Face of Loss.

Since each place is associated with a particular emotional state, the novel visually signals each step of the “journey that leads [Stephen] towards a potential rebirth” (Reynier 116). When Stephen returns to his deserted flat at the end of chapter 1, McEwan’s proleptic description of the place announces the developments that are yet to come: “he wandered about the flat, turning on lights, staring in at neglected rooms, little stage sets about to be struck” (22). The exploration of Stephen’s (lost) home coincides with a moment of reflection and becomes a microcosm of his mourning process: “it was from this moment in the semi-darkness that he was to date his time of mourning” (22). The theatricality of McEwan’s description and the symbolic interplay between light (the realization of Stephen’s loss) and darkness (his acknowledgement of loneliness and despair) pave the way for a scenography of mourning to emerge. Indeed, throughout the novel, crucial events take on a distinctly cinematic or spectacular dimension. For example, in chapter 5, Stephen narrowly escapes death during an accident with a lorry. McEwan frames this crucial scene as an adrenaline-filled “spectacle” (101) or an action movie. The potential for disaster is reconfigured as a moment of rebirth, as Stephen emerges unscathed and helps to save the lorry driver’s life in a scene that prefigures the birth of Stephen and Julie’s second child in the last pages of the novel. From the beginning of the chapter, this pivotal moment of illumination and recovery is announced by McEwan’s depiction of the surroundings: “the sun was high behind him, giving a visibility of luminous clarity” (99). Be it in the closing scene of chapter 1 (Julie’s departure, symbolized by her empty armchair, 22) or in the episode of the lorry accident, descriptions of the surroundings have a similar epiphanic quality. In The Poetics of Epiphany, Ashton Nichols underlines the visual etymology of the term “epiphany”, which “derives from the Greek phainein ‘to show’ and the prepositional prefix epi, which means variably ‘on’, ‘over’, ‘at’ and ‘after’. Phanein can also be translated ‘to bring to light’, or ‘cause to appear’” (5). Even though the trajectory of rebirth does not appear in a straightforward manner, those cinematic or theatrical scenes go beyond the fixity of photographic description and bring a sense of movement and evolution to the narrative.

The moments of clarity associated with symbolic lighting effects hinge on McEwan’s selection of “key, vivid, specific details, like little starbursts in the darkness” (in Lynn), but they also form a wider geography of loss and recovery. The domestic scenes
alternate with wider views of cityscapes and landscapes, whose symbolic dimension is constantly emphasized by the author. The profoundly visual nature of landscape is noted by Catherine Bernard: “the very etymology of the word ‘landscape’, derived from the Dutch ‘skip’—view—from the start underlines the constructedness of our relation to space and the way our understanding of space is necessarily mediated: by vision and our cognitive processing of the world in which we are caught” (2018). In *The Child in Time*, this cognitive and emotional processing is based on an essential dichotomy: while cityscapes are mostly associated with loss and despair (“baked earth from which even the dried grass had flaked away”, 91), landscapes in the countryside sometimes gain a truly elegiac function. The quest for consolation which is at the heart of the traditional pastoral elegy is also conventionally associated with the ability to place and visualize one’s loss. In her study *Placing Sorrow: A Study of the Pastoral Elegy Convention from Theocritus to Milton*, Ellen Zetzel Lambert remarks that “[the pastoral elegy] proposes no one solution to the questions raised by death but rather a setting in which those questions may be posed, or better, ‘placed’. It offers us a landscape. [...] [This landscape] remains a concrete, palpable world, a world in which the elegist can place diffuse, intangible feelings of grief and thereby win his release from suffering” (xiii). In McEwan’s work, there appears to be a movement from the “lost landscape” (7) of a dystopian London to the opening up of perspectives that minute descriptions entail. At the end of the novel, even as Stephen and his friend Thelma are about to stumble upon Charles Darke’s corpse, the natural space contains the seeds of consolation and rebirth that will come to fruition in the next and last chapter: “by a frozen brook they passed the slab of rock under whose covering of snow, deep in the fissures, were the ingredients of a miniature tropical forest. Even by moonlight it was possible to see fat and sticky buds, and unassuming ground plants raising tiny spears through the snow. One season was piercing another” (216). The coexistence of wintry “frozen” nature and suggestions of springtime in the greenery of tiny plants brings out a sense of purity and hope. Even though consolation remains tentative (Charles dies and Kate is never found), the final descriptions of landscapes inscribe the story into the realm of the pastoral elegy and suggest the possibility of seasonal change and renewal.

One specific “descriptive topos” (Hamon 205) contributes to the articulation of the visual with the sense of recovery that pervades the last chapters of the novel: the window’s metaphorical value as “an optical device that registers a subjective point of view and frame of representation” (Del Lungo 9, my translation). At the beginning of the novel, the description of the window creates a claustrophobic and stifling environment in which the grieving protagonist is deprived of a view and remains seated in the committee room “[opposite] a tall window through which, even in mid-summer, no sunlight ever passed” (5). Stephen’s blocked horizon turns his reflection inward, leading him to focus on his own grief and loss. However, later on, as he is staying at Charles and Thelma’s, he opens his window: “he crossed the room to open the window wider” (47). Finally, at the end of the novel, the window becomes a framing device that enables Stephen and Julie to gaze at the landscape and envision a figurative and literal new dawn: “beyond the bed was the window through which they could see the moon sinking into a gap in the pines. Directly above the moon was a planet. It was Mars, Julie said. It was a reminder of a harsh world. For now, however, they were immune, it was before the beginning of time, and they lay watching planet and moon descend through a sky that was turning blue” (245). The pastoral setting (“pines”) is extended into a wider and harmonious apprehension of a cosmic view. The sense of
elevation that comes from focusing on the sky and its dawning light does not hide the symbolic presence of the planet Mars, named after the god of war, which suggests that consolation might remain temporary. The window’s narrative function as a device that directs the characters’ gaze thus highlights the uncertain elegiac trajectory that is sketched out in McEwan’s descriptions of landscapes.

The Child in Time can be described as an elegy for the lost child, be it Kate or a metonymy of childhood in general, but it is also the elegy of the grieving protagonist, Stephen, which monitors his progression. The attempts at erecting a textual cenotaph (or cenograph) to preserve Kate’s memory and keep her present thus progressively give way to a scenography of acceptance and consolation. McEwan’s poetics of vision thus remain inseparable from representations of emotion and vulnerability throughout the narrative. The juxtaposition of multiple visual spaces emphasizes the cine(ma)tic nature of recovery and contributes to the dramatization of mourning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES

1. When describing the opening scene of *Enduring Love* in the same interview with David Lynn, McEwan emphasizes its emotional impact: “What I wanted was to sort of hit the ground running, to have a sense of urgency and visual clarity with something knocking the heart, or making the heart knock and get a sort of drumbeat of prose”.

2. David Malcolm notes in *Understanding Ian McEwan* that the novel “[mixes] genres in a fairly striking manner. Psychological fiction, political-social criticism, dystopia, tutorial on the mysteries of modern physics, and novel with supernatural elements (fitting, in fact, a persuasive definition of the fantastic text)” (100).

3. Anti-elegy coincides with melancholic visions of grief, in which the loss is incorporated and cannot be overcome over time, as opposed to the principle of time-limited mourning. This dichotomy is at the heart of Freud’s seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, which was published in 1917.

4. As David Lodge phrases it in *The Art of Fiction*, “the choice of the point(s) of view from which the story is told is arguably the most important single decision that the novelist has to make, for it fundamentally affects the way readers will respond, emotionally and morally, to the fictional characters and their actions” (26). While Lodge insists on the affective dimension of perspective, Genette focuses on its filtering function in *Figures III*: “regulation of information [...] stems from the choice of a restrictive point of view” (203, my translation).

5. Ali Smith remarks in her essay-novel *Artful* that “at one level, reflection means we see ourselves. At another, it’s another word for the thought process” (186).

6. The expression is used by Christine Reynier in her analysis of rites of passage in the novel (115).

7. As Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega remark in the introduction to their collective work *Trauma and Romance*: “The central characteristic of trauma is the unknowability and inassimilability by the conscious mind of the event that has triggered the traumatic condition, so that trauma always has an element that remains in excess of representation and understanding” (7).

8. A similar expression is used in a metaphorical way near the end of the novel, to monitor Stephen’s progress: “he was on the look-out for the first signs, the first small indication that his life was about to be transformed” (173).

9. In the third volume of his study *Attachment and Loss*, entitled *Loss: Sadness and Depression*, psychoanalyst John Bowlby identifies in the mourning process a phase of “yearning”, which he describes as a time of “restless searching, intermittent hope, repeated disappointment, weeping, anger, accusation, [...] to be understood as expressions of the strong urge to find and recover the lost person” (92).

10. The sociologist Nicolas Lévesque also remarks that “mourning opens up a breach, which is liable to widen and lead to dislocation or fragmentation” (58). In McEwan’s novel, the experiential void is a representation of this breach.

11. In *Atonement*, the older Briony suffers from “vascular dementia” (354) and is “fading into unknowing” (355).
12. Over-description is associated with impossible representation and loss: “he could forget Kate in the meticulous detailing of her clothing, the accurate portrayal of her features” (16).
13. Esther Peeren also notes that the term “spectre” has an etymological link with spectacle: “[‘Specter’] strongly invokes something visible, even spectacular, through its etymology (from Latin specere, ‘to look, see’)” (4).
14. In the novel, the character of Thelma, Stephen’s physicist friend, refers to this principle: “Thelma spent evenings with him and told tales of Schroedinger’s cat” (42). The reference to “tales” outlines the fictional potential of scientific theories.
15. In the traditional elegy, the picturing of landscape is an objective correlative of the poet’s emotional state, thus echoing Michel Collot’s words in La Pensée-paysage: “the correspondence between landscape and mood is bidirectional: not only does it suppose that affect is projected onto the world, but it also suggests that the latter finds a resonance in the subject’s consciousness” (31, my translation).
16. On the other hand, seasons appear to have disappeared in the city hellscape of London, which is the butt of McEwan’s satirical and scathing political criticism.

ABSTRACTS

The plot of Ian McEwan’s 1987 novel The Child in Time revolves around the sudden disappearance of a child, Kate, in a supermarket, in plain sight and in the presence of her father Stephen. The novel attempts to compensate for the grieving protagonist’s initial lapse of vision by re-composing Kate’s portrait through vivid, almost photographic or filmic (at times traumatic) memories. In McEwan’s tale of mourning, the limits between the vanished character’s absence and her memorial presence are blurred, leading to a spectralization of her memory, in the etymological sense of the word (from the Latin spectare, “to look at”). This spectral reminiscence allows for narrative incursions into the realm of the fantastic. By giving a continued existence to an invisible character, the novel both disturbs the regime of realism and rewrites elegiac conventions. The novel’s visual imagery is at the heart of an (anti-)elegiac poetics of mourning, which attempts to recover (also risking to re-cover) the missing girl’s memory all the while signalling the evolution of the grieving protagonist’s own recovery from debilitating grief. Building on theories of trauma, mourning and spectrality, the aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which the (anti-)elegiac process of consolation is both built into and set against the imagery of the novel. To what extent does the photographic or filmic nature of memory contribute to the recovery of the lost child (who literally disappears from her father’s view)? Does this in absentia portrait reverse or intensify her loss?

L’intrigue de L’Enfant Volé, roman publié par Ian McEwan en 1987, repose sur la disparition brutale d’une enfant prénommée Kate dans un supermarché, à la vue de tous et en présence de son père Stephen. Au fil du roman, la nécessité de compenser cet échec fondateur de vision s’accompagne d’une tentative de re-composer un portrait mémoriel de Kate, qui reste cependant menacé par la fragmentation et la perte. McEwan opère un brouillage des limites entre l’absence de la disparue et sa mise en mémoire, qui mène à une spectralisation du souvenir, au sens étymologique du terme « spectre » (du latin spectare, « regarder »). Cette réminiscence spectrale entraîne alors des incursions narratives dans le registre fantastique, qui viennent à la fois perturber le régime réaliste de représentation du deuil et ré définir la tonalité élégiaque du récit.
L’insistance sur la dimension visuelle du roman est au cœur d’une composition (anti-)élégiaque qui interroge à la fois la possibilité de préserver le souvenir de l’enfant perdue et la quête de consolation du père endeuillé. Entre représentation de la perte et potentiel révélateur, la prévalence du voir au sein du roman est au cœur de l’entreprise narrative de consolation.

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