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**IAN McEWAN'S *THE CEMENT GARDEN*
AND THE TRADITION
OF THE CHILD/ADOLESCENT AS 'I-NARRATOR'**

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**IAN McEWAN'S *THE CEMENT GARDEN*
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In the literary history of the English-speaking world, the theme of childhood was largely ignored until the Romantics. Of course, childhood had often been the subject of Elizabethan lyrics, but in the Elizabethan drama, the main body of Augustan verse, and the 18th century novel, the child was generally absent or played at most a peripheral role.

Although the rationalist school had consistently shown an interest in theories of education, it "seldom considered the nature of the child as a child"¹. Children were perceived as small adults (they were even forced to dress like miniature adults), and it was believed that, through training, their infantile ways could be transformed into the moral and rational perfection of regulated childhood. As a tabula rasa, the child had everything to gain from the beneficent influence of education; conversely, the adult – teacher, writer or parent – had precious little to learn from the child.

The growing reaction against this rationalist, perfectionist idea, and the belief in the supremacy of Feeling over Reason, led to a progressive concentration of interest upon the child in the second half of the 18th century.

Rousseau, more than any other philosopher, was to influence the intellectual climate in which Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote. Childhood, Rousseau maintained, was the phase in human life that was closest to the "state of na-

¹ COVENEY P., *The Image of Childhood* (1957), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967 edition, p. 40.

ture". Children, he argued, were important in themselves, and not merely as miniature adults. In the Preface to *Emile* (1762), Rousseau asserts that "Nature wants children to be children before they are men ... Childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling peculiar to itself; nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them"². Such ideas permeated the Romantic literature of the child, as did Rousseau's stress on the "original innocence" of the child, and his sentimental, nostalgic view of the transience of childhood: "Why take from these little innocents the pleasure of a time so short which ever escapes them ...? Why fill with bitterness and sorrow their first swift years which will never return on them any more than they can return for you?"³.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, poetry was the primary vehicle of expression for this interest in childhood. However, from the 1830s onwards, the novel supplanted poetry as the major literary form, appropriating for itself and, indeed, further exalting the figure of the "Romantic child".

But whereas the Romantic poets had underlined the innocence and frailty of the child, the early and mid-Victorian novelists were more concerned with denouncing the material and psychological plight of children in society. The image of childhood visualized by the Romantic poets was often at odds with the abject squalor and cruelty suffered by the young inhabitants of urban England as described in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) (defined as "the first novel in the language with its true centre of focus on a child"⁴), or Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850). The latter novel graphically depicts, from a child's-eye view, the horrors of the slums and factories of the Industrial Revolution. Alton remembers growing up "in the little dingy, foul, reeking, twelve foot square back-yard where huge smoky party-walls

² Cited in COVENEY, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴ COVENEY, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

shut out every breath of air, and almost all the light of heaven ... all of a sudden the horror of the place came over me: those grim prison-walls above ... the dreary, sloppy, broken pavement; the horrible stench of the cesspool; the utter want of form, colour, life, in the whole place"⁵.

Dickens, of course, represents the quintessential Victorian novelist, and at the heart of the Dickensian world we find the child - sentimentalized and heavily tinged with pathos in the case of *Oliver Twist*, *Paul Dombey*, *Little Nell*, *Pip* and *David Copperfield*. But one merely has to think of the deprivations of Dickens's own childhood (narrated semiautobiographically in *David Copperfield* (1850) or read the findings of the Commission on the Employment of Young Persons and Children of 1842 to understand the seething indignation that fuelled Dickens, *Mrs Gaskell* (in *Mary Barton* (1848)), *Disraeli* (in *Sybil* (1845)), *Charles Kingsley* and other writers of this period.

To this underlying sense of injustice in the way adults treated children, *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre* (1847) and *George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss* (1860) brought the further dimension of profound psychological analysis and an awareness of sexual discrimination (especially in Eliot's portrayal of *Maggie Tulliver*) when depicting their young heroines struggling to find a balance between youthful rebellion and submission. And yet, for all their hardships, children are generally perceived as being infinitely happier than their elders. Almost 100 years after the publication of *Emile*, *George Eliot* considers childhood in the same idyllic, nostalgic terms as *Rousseau*: "They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of childhood had forever closed behind them"⁶.

The latter half of *Victoria's* reign, with its social reforms and relative improvements in living standards, led to a shift

⁵ Cited in COVENEY, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁶ ELIOT G., *The Mill On the Floss* (1860), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985 edition, p. 270.

away from the grim realism of Gradgrindery towards a more escapist literature. With the spread of education, children now constituted an ever-growing reading public, and this period is characterized more for producing those classics of children's literature such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and, a little later, J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904). The hero of the latter novel who never wanted to grow up was also symbolic of the mood of the era, where adult regret for the passing of childhood tended towards a morbid, regressive escapism. "I'd give all wealth that years have piled,/The slow result of life's decay,/To be once more a little child/For one bright summer's day"⁷, wrote Lewis Carroll at the ripe old age of 21!

By stressing the importance of infantile sexuality and Oedipal impulses, and thereby undermining the concept of the "pristine innocence of childhood", Freud was to provide 20th century writers with new ways of depicting childhood and adolescence. With the removal of Victorian taboos, the child/adolescent in fiction becomes more complex and less lovable.

In the first three stories of *Dubliners* (1914), all narrated in the first person, and especially in *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916), James Joyce's descriptions of childhood display little sentiment or self-pity. Through Stephen Dedalus, Joyce conveys all of the self-centredness of adolescence, as well as the awakening of sexual desire, while the passing of childhood is recorded without nostalgic regret.

D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is one of the best-known fictional studies of the Oedipal complex and the way a mother's possessiveness can affect the psycho-sexual development of her son, while James Hanley's *Boy* (1934)

⁷ Cited in COVENEY, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

is a forceful reminder, almost a century after the publication of *Oliver Twist*, that for a child brought up in working class poverty, life can be sheer hell ("Wish to God I was not a boy. Had never been a boy. Wish I had been born a man right away", reflects the 13-year-old Arthur Fearon⁸). Memories of an idyllic childhood are almost exclusively a middle-class privilege.

Post-war fiction has produced a heterogeneous array of young protagonists, ranging from the relatively traditional stance of the child as victim of adult designs in L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), to the astute portrayal of affluent adolescence in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951); the collapse into savage primitivism of Golding's English schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies* (1954) or his ironic study of a teenager's developing awareness of the intricacies of the British class system in a village in rural England in *The Pyramid* (1967); the unpleasantness of Timothy Gedge in William Trevor's *The Children of Dynmouth* (1976) where the gawky adolescent is first shown as victimizer but ultimately as victim of an uncaring society; the lethargy and moodiness of Ian McEwan's adolescent narrator in *The Cement Garden* (1978); or the strange, lonely world of the young female narrator in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1987), stifled by a mother suffering from religious mania in provincial Lancashire.

The question of the narrator in fiction featuring the child or adolescent poses an intriguing problem. Writing in the third person gives the omniscient (and therefore adult) narrator free access to all the possible nuances of the English language; but there is the danger that the special flavour of infantile or adolescent experience may be lost in the telling with respect to the immediacy of a first-person narrative. Joyce found an original solution to this problem in *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* by adapting the style and vo-

⁸ HANLEY *J. Boy* (1934), Penguin. Harmondsworth, 1990 edition, p. 98.

cabulary to Stephen's developing awareness, thus conveying the consciousness of a very young child in the opening paragraph: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road ..." etc.⁹. This, of course, is an exception, the general trend being that of adopting the stance of an adult omniscient narrator throughout (as in *Oliver Twist*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Sons and Lovers*, *Boy*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Children of Dynmouth*).

Conversely, a first-person narrative told by the child or adolescent raises the problem of how to convey with maximum authenticity the thoughts and sensations of a mind that has not yet achieved full maturity. Even if we agree with Golding's assertion in *The Pyramid* that "a child's retina is such a perfect recording machine that given the impulse of interest or excitement it takes an indelible snapshot"¹⁰, we should also remember Charlotte Brontë's caveat that "Children can feel, but they cannot analyse their feelings"¹¹. The easiest, and by far the most common, solution is to adopt a retrospective stance. By looking back on one's youth from the pinnacle of adulthood, the writer is legitimately entitled to use the full range of his or her descriptive powers. *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *The Go-Between* and *The Pyramid* fall into this category. In view of the dilemma outlined above, it is not surprising to find that most fictional works which end before the young protagonists reach maturity are narrated in the third person.

Obviously, there are exceptions, as in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but here the narrator is already on the brink of entering the adult world. One recent novel, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993) by Roddy Doyle, has courageously attempted to relate Dublin life in the 1960s as seen through the eyes of a 10-

⁹ JOYCE J., *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916), Penguin. Harmondsworth, 1975 edition, p. 7.

¹⁰ GOLDING W., *The Pyramid* (1967), Faber and Faber, London, 1989 edition, p. 165.

¹¹ BRONTË C. *Jane Eyre* (1847). Penguin. Harmondsworth, 1985 edition, p. 56.

year-old boy. Syntax and vocabulary are accordingly limited, the sentences generally short, and the boyish logic of bravado is often rendered with great precision: "We saw mice. I never saw any, but I heard them. I said I saw them. Kevin saw loads of them. I saw a squashed cat. The marks of the tyres were on it. We tried to light it but it wouldn't go"¹². But 282 pages inside the mind of a 10-year-old, however well written, are perhaps more than many a reader can take!

Ian McEwan has experimented with various narrative techniques in his chronicles of childhood and adolescence¹³. Born in 1948, and with an M.A. in Creative Writing obtained at East Anglia University under Malcolm Bradbury, McEwan's first collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), was rightly hailed as marking a new direction in British fiction, his hallmark being the deadpan narration of extraordinary events. Several of his stories concerned children or adolescents, such as "Homemade" where the narrator retrospectively recounts his entry into the adult world, consisting in committing incest with his 10-year-old sister as the culmination of their game of playing mummies and daddies; or the pathologically regressive narrator of "Conversations with a cupboard man", irreparably damaged during childhood by his overpowering mother; or "Last day of summer", related by a 12-year-old boy in the present tense.

McEwan's second collection of short stories, *In Between the Sheets* (1978), though less original than the first, confirmed his reputation as a master of the "short, sharp shock", while his first piece of full-length fiction, *The Cement Garden*, appeared later the same year.

The book immediately caused a scandal, and McEwan was forced to counter accusations of plagiarism, as several

¹² DOYLE R., *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*. Secker & Warburg, London, 1993, p. 13.

¹³ For a critical appraisal of McEwan's works up to 1986, see D'ELIA G. & WILLIAMS C., *La Nuova Letteratura Inglese: Ian McEwan*, Schena Editore, Fasano. 1986.

parallels had been noted with the plot of Julian Gloag's *Our Mother's House* (1963). McEwan's novel centres around four children whose parents die (the father of a heart attack while cementing the back garden, the mother of cancer months later); the children decide to bury their mother in the cellar and hide the fact from the outside world to avoid being put into care. The elder sister Julie takes charge of the household, much to the resentment of the narrator who becomes almost catatonic with his newly-found freedom, and wanders listlessly around the house. Free of any kind of control, the children are incapable of giving any proper structure to their existence, and the only "outsider" in the story, Julie's boyfriend Derek, literally shatters the children's secret by cracking with a sledgehammer the cement in which their mother's body is encased.

Accusations of plagiarism notwithstanding, McEwan's work has an extremely distinctive quality, partly as a result of the author's precision in describing the susceptibilities and sheer awkwardness of an apathetic adolescent. However, even if the events are related by a 15-year-old boy, McEwan himself is candid enough to admit that the narrative hovers ambiguously between an adolescent consciousness and that of an adult: "The problem is, as an author you want it both ways. You want your narrator to carry lines which are *your* best lines. If you have a first person narrator, who else can you give your best lines to?"¹⁴.

There is no one element in itself that embodies what has been defined as the "insolite modernité"¹⁵ of *The Cement Garden* but rather a combination of factors which set the novel apart from other works of fiction featuring a child or adolescent as 'I-narrator'. As with McEwan's second novel,

¹⁴ HAMILTON I, "Points of Departure", *The New Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, Autumn 1978, p. 18.

¹⁵ Cfr. DUPERRAY M., "Insolite modernité: The Cement Garden (1978) d'Ian McEwan Chef-d'Oeuvre d'une Nouvelle Littérature de l'Angoisse", *Etudes Anglaises*, t. XXXV, no. 4, 1982.

The Comfort of Strangers (1981), which is clearly set in Venice although the author wilfully avoids mentioning the place-name even once, it is often what is omitted that gives *The Cement Garden* its unique atmosphere.

Following the modernist tradition of Kafka and Beckett, also the narrative in *The Cement Garden* is devoid of references to place-names, fictional or real (we are merely informed on one occasion that the mother had a distant relative in Ireland¹⁶), books (apart from a trashy science fiction novel), songs (except 'Greensleeves'), films, TV programmes, brand-names, or any of the other familiar features of contemporary consumer society, thus enhancing the novel's qualities of timelessness and of mystery: as readers we perceive that the narrator is withholding information (where do the children live?), but we do not know why. Indeed, Jack never explicitly acknowledges our presence as readers, unlike, for example, *Jane Eyre*, where the final chapter begins with an impassioned vocative, indicating the narrator's desire to share the joyous news with us: "Reader, I married him"¹⁷. When we read in *The Cement Garden* about the narrator's father - "I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal"¹⁸ - it is not clear whether this is said for our benefit, or whether it is merely a kind of mental reminder to the narrator himself as he sets about structuring his tale. And while it is true that the flat, unemotional narrative generally avoids expressing any opinion about the extraordinary events that occur, value judgements occasionally seep through. How are we to interpret Jack's definition of the episode of his father's death as a "little story"? Teenage bravado? An attempt to minimize an event too appalling to be faced? A case of understatement? Or is it

¹⁶ See McEWAN I, *The Cement Garden* (1978), Picador, London, 1982 edition, p. 21.

¹⁷ BRONTË, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

¹⁸ *The Cement Garden*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

the plain truth, the father's death representing at that moment no more than a minor incident in the life of this self-absorbed adolescent whose relationship with his father had never been close? Had the sentence been narrated retrospectively through an adult consciousness, the choice of the adjective "little" would necessarily have been perceived by us as a clear case of irony; seen through the eyes of our teenage narrator, we are aware that the choice may imply no irony whatsoever.

Nevertheless, the overall tone is one of grim neutrality. The narrator's opening line - "I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way"¹⁹ - brings us straight into Oedipal territory, but without any of the fury of Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* or of the six-year-old James Ramsay in the opening pages of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927).

We seem to be light years away from that other innovative study of 20th century adolescence, *The Catcher in the Rye*, where Holden Caulfield begins his story by promising not to relate "any of that David Copperfield kind of crap"²⁰. McEwan's narrative is devoid of the humour, the exuberance, the explicit intention of taking an irreverential swipe at the literary tradition of the Romantic child. *The Cement Garden* also subverts this tradition, but in a quieter, more unobtrusive sort of way. The greyness of the prose, its almost total lack of imagery, and the absence of cultural and historical reference points all serve to heighten our perception of the drabness and emptiness of an existence seemingly outside time and society (McEwan defines the period of his own adolescence, spent at a boarding school in Suffolk, as "empty time" after an idyllic childhood²¹). Unlike so

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁰ SALINGER J.D., *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Little, Brown & Company, Boston, 1991 edition, p. 1.

²¹ Cfr. HAMILTON. *op. cit.*, p. 12, and the heavily autobiographical section of McEwan I., *The Child in Time*. Jonathan Cape, London. 1987, pp. 69-75.

many other young protagonists in fiction, Jack has no particular axe to grind against the world; he does not appear to consider himself a victim of any kind of injustice or deprivation, either socially or emotionally. And yet he is almost perpetually morose and awkward in company, and irascible when criticized.

Not even his mother's death manages to break down his wall of egocentricity: "For a moment I perceived clearly the fact of her death, and my crying became dry and hard. But then I pictured myself as someone whose mother had just died and my crying was wet and easy again"²². For Jack the establishing of a personal identity as a mourner is more important than the mourning itself. The scene is reminiscent of when David Copperfield is informed at school of his mother's death; after shedding sincere tears of grief, David narrates: "I stood upon a chair when I was left alone, and looked into the glass to see how red my eyes were, and how sorrowful my face ... I am sensible of having felt that a dignity attached to me among the rest of the boys, and that I felt important in my affliction"²³.

Just as the above episode from Dickens should serve to remind us that astute insights into a child's psychology did not begin with Freud, neither should we imagine that McEwan's antithesis of the Romantic child is some kind of pathological monster. There is none of the unrelenting evil in Jack that we find, for example, in his namesake in *Lord of the Flies*. McEwan's narrator is simply an unexceptional teenager in a highly stressful situation for which he is in no way equipped to cope and whose reaction is to sink into a state of inertia.

One other distinctive quality of the narrative in *The Cement Garden* is the total absence of any reference to religion, a vivid contrast with *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*

²² *The Cement Garden*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²³ DICKENS C., *David Copperfield* (1850), Wordsworth Classics. Hertfordshire, 1992 edition, pp. 117-118.

where practically every line is imbued with religion (even the chapters are named after books in the Old Testament). *The Cement Garden* is an atheistic work in a very silent way – religion simply never enters Jack’s world. There is no God, no afterlife, no mention of church, and none of the superstition and fear of imaginary spirits that gradually takes hold of the schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies*.

If *The Cement Garden* represents the last time (until the recent publication of *The Daydreamer* in 1994) that McEwan has concerned himself with adolescence, the theme of his third novel, *The Child in Time* (1987), is that of the lost child seen from an adult stance. The three-year-old daughter of Stephen Lewis, a writer of children’s books, disappears without trace in a South London supermarket (a rather more prosaic setting than that of Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), where the same fate befalls a group of schoolgirls and their teacher). Stephen’s fruitless search gradually becomes a desperate longing not merely for his daughter but for the child within himself that he has irretrievably lost. At one point, Stephen is alone in a wood, and he tries to imagine, in a passage reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s “Kew Gardens” (1919), how his daughter would have seen it: “The wood, this spider rotating on its thread, this beetle lumbering over blades of grass; would be all, the moment would be everything. He needed her good influence, her lessons in celebrating the specific; how to fill the present and be filled by it to the point where identity faded to nothing. He was always partly somewhere else, never quite paying attention, never wholly serious”²⁴. In his essay “The lost childhood” (1969), Graham Greene likewise laments the loss in adulthood of the intensity of the child’s experience of reading fiction. Like Jack, Stephen reacts to his crisis by reverting into a state of torpor, spending countless hours watching television, with a whisky bottle held to

²⁴ *The Child in Time*, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

his lips like a baby’s bottle, while his wife Julie attempts to create a new life for herself after the disintegration of their marriage. Stephen also witnesses the breakdown and suicide of a close friend, Charles Darke, a highly successful businessman turned politician who collapses under the strain and regresses to the state of a 10-year-old, complete with short trousers, snake belt and catapult. The novel sheds further interpretative light on Jack’s behaviour in *The Cement Garden*. For McEwan, the male psychology cannot cope with radical change and either sticks stubbornly, and childishly, to known ways or else it implodes under pressure (just as, in *The Go-Between*, the young Leo turns into an old man “all dried up inside”²⁵, irrevocably paralysed by the trauma he suffered as a youth). On the contrary, the female retains the childlike (as opposed to the childish) sense of wonder, inventiveness and recreation (re-creation) that allows her to assimilate changes more easily.

McEwan once again highlights that age-old dilemma of how to come to terms with the transition from a child’s perception of never-ending time to the adult’s ever-growing awareness that one’s own time is finite. If the transition is painful, we may glean some comfort from the knowledge that the theme of childhood and adolescence and the attempts to capture the sense of loss that accompanies entry into adulthood have also produced some of the finest literature over the last 200 years.

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²⁵ HARTLEY L.P., *The Go-Between* (1953), Penguin, Harmondworth, 1973 edition, p. 280.