

**Life in the Metropolis:  
A Critical Reading of Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time***

Hossein Payandeh<sup>1</sup>

***Abstract***

This paper provides a critical reading of the contemporary English author Ian McEwan's third novel, entitled *The Child in Time* (1987). Arguing that McEwan writes to dissect and criticize contemporary culture, I offer a reading of his novel as a literary intervention into a cultural debate. In my reading, I consider the text to be a dream about certain events and characters that are the metaphoric representations of a psychic structure. More than the psyche of the author as an individual, this structure pertains to contemporary society and its predominant culture. Therefore, my purpose is not to read McEwan's novel in order to identify his assumed repressed wishes or personal fantasies, but to analyse the narrative as a literary construct that gives us access to a *societal* unconscious. The nightmarish world that McEwan depicts in his fiction, in other words, is regarded as the social context out of which the individual's self is shaped.

***Keywords***

societal unconscious, femininity, the family, child rearing, metropolis, satire, thatcherism

All governments, whatever their political complexion, are tempted at one time or another to suppress or distort the truth to avoid scandal, humiliation or defeat. In fact, most individuals, at some point in their lives, face analogous temptations (McEwan 1992:19).

[C]hildren force upon you a search for value (McEwan 1992:44).

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of English Literature, Allameh Tabatabaee University, Tehran, Iran  
h-pyandeh@yahoo.com

## I)

Ian McEwan is a controversial figure in contemporary English literature. Since the publication of his first books of fiction in the 1970s, he has gained notoriety as a writer obsessed with violence and perversion. Dubbed “Ian Macabre” for the harrowing scenes of body violence in his short stories and novels, McEwan has been accused of writing deliberately to shock and disgust his readers.

If there is one feature in the opening paragraph of McEwan’s third novel, *The Child in Time* (1987a), which we may confidently assume strikes his readers as unprecedented in his fictional writing, it is the outdoor setting of the novel. Unlike almost all of McEwan’s earlier stories, this novel begins with a description of a city in the busy hours of a morning in late May. Far from fortuitous, McEwan’s choice of an outdoor opening for a novel which took him more than three years—from the summer of 1983 to the end of 1986—to write (See McEwan 1989:xxv-xxvi), is arguably indicative of his departure from the claustrophobic world of his earlier fiction and his wish to address issues of a more overtly social and political nature. Himself an activist in antinuclear campaigns as well as a member of the pressure group Charter 88, McEwan stated in an interview after the publication of this novel: “For a long time I’ve wanted to connect up two different sides of my writing: the writing in television plays..., where my concerns were primarily social and to some extent political, and the writing in prose fiction that tended to be rather dark, rather interior and rather more concerned with the pathology of the mind (Stephen 1987:36)”. “Rather interior” is, doubtless, an apposite characterization of McEwan’s fiction, particularly his early short stories. Indeed, typical McEwanesque stories are those which afford a view of the murky, *private* world of neurotic characters. Nonetheless, one can question the validity of the distinction that McEwan makes between the political and the pathological in his work. Indeed, his fiction *blurs* such a distinction by establishing a link between sexuality (intimacy, the family) and social structure (patriarchy). In *The Child in Time*, McEwan avails himself of the concept of the family to bridge the gap between the private and the public. In my reading of McEwan’s novel, I consider the text to be a dream about certain events and characters that are the metaphoric representations of a psychic structure. More than the psyche of the author as an individual, this structure pertains to contemporary society and its predominant culture. Therefore, my purpose is not to read McEwan’s novel in order to identify his assumed repressed wishes or personal fantasies, but to analyse this narrative as a literary construct that gives us access to a *societal* unconscious. The nightmarish world that McEwan

depicts in his fiction, in other words, is regarded as the social context out of which the individual's self is shaped.

Set in England at an unspecified time around the turn of the twentieth century, *The Child in Time* tells the story of how the married life of Stephen Lewis, a celebrated author of children's books and a member of the Government commission on child-care, and his wife, Julie, is ruined after their three-year-old daughter, Kate, goes missing in a London supermarket. Feeling guilty for taking Kate with him to the supermarket, Stephen tries desperately to find his missing daughter. His efforts, however, prove fruitless and gradually his hope of finding her diminishes, making him more and more despondent. Yet Stephen never gives up the "fantasy of her continued existence (McEwan 1987a:8)" and sees Kate in the face of a small girl begging him for money, or in the face of a schoolgirl playing with her classmates. Coming to terms with the reality of his daughter's loss is so difficult for Stephen that in the latter incident, for instance, he decides to leave the car which is taking him to a lunch with the Prime Minister and pursue the schoolgirl whom he has mistaken for Kate.

What makes Stephen's life even more miserable is the rift between his wife and himself. The two disagree over their different ways of coping with, or even grieving for, Kate's disappearance. Bitter exchanges and mutual accusations follow, resulting in the virtual estrangement of the couple and, eventually, one day Julie moves out to live alone in a retreat in the Chilterns. They maintain contact, however, through occasional exchange of postcards. Stephen also visits his wife once, during which their passion for each other is briefly rekindled. Nine months later, Stephen pays another visit to Julie, this time at her invitation. When he reaches Julie's retreat, Stephen realizes that his wife is only minutes away from giving birth to a child that she had conceived after their sexual union in their previous meeting. The novel ends with the birth of Stephen and Julie's second child, whom Stephen himself delivers, and the revival of love between them.

In addition to a story of love being reborn out of its ashes, *The Child in Time* embodies a political plot as well as philosophical reflections on the nature of time and childhood. Stephen is a member of one of the fourteen sub-committees of the Official Commission on Childcare. A "pet concern of the Prime Minister (McEwan 1987a:9)", the Commission is set up by the Government to inquire into, and recommend to the nation, the best child-rearing practices. It is subsequently revealed, however, that *The Authorised Childcare Handbook*, which is supposed to be compiled on the basis of the reports prepared by the Commission's sub-committees, has already been written by Charles Darke (Stephen's first publisher who becomes a

Conservative politician and, later, a junior minister) in collusion with the Prime Minister. Charles's political career comes to an unexpected end when, following the scandal about *The Authorised Childcare Handbook*, he decides to reclaim his never fully experienced childhood. Accordingly, he leaves his house in London for a rural retreat, dresses as a small schoolboy, and builds a tree-house for himself. Charles's second childhood does not last long, though, as he dies of hypothermia in his tree-house.

The publication of *The Child in Time* gave rise to mixed reactions among reviewers. "A [sic] *Child in Time* is rather a silly novel", reviled Gabriele Annan in the *New York Review of Books* (1998:19). "[I]t is marvellously written, moving, serious, readable, and draws on that innocence which great English writers have always been able to recapture, and which is a much harder thing to come by than experience", eulogized John Carey in *The Sunday Times* (1987:64). The ending of the novel drew antithetical comments. Alan Brownjohn (1988:58), for example, wrote that he found "the affirmative ending of *The Child in Time*, with its message of rebirth, too straight-faced to believe", while Rebecca Goldstein (1987:9) observed that the novel's ending was "as artfully conceived as it is poignantly realised".

Several critics saw *The Child in Time* as manifesting a remarkable turn towards a fiction of social and political critique. Among the reviewers who hailed this new direction in McEwan's work was John Powers who, in a review in *The Nation*, argued that *The Child in Time* was different from McEwan's earlier work in that its characters were not "McEwan's usual suspects"; they were ordinary parents whose story imparted a new resonance to McEwan's fiction. The novel also portrayed Thatcherism as an anti-democratic force in politics that demolished the welfare system and attempted to redefine childhood. But this was precisely the novel's flaw: politics seemed "a bit tacked on" to it, so that McEwan's political theme lacked "a satisfying payoff" (Powers 1987:492).

John Powers's disapproving remarks concerning McEwan's treatment of the political theme in *The Child in Time* were, to some extent, echoed in the comments of another critic. In *A Vain Conceit: British Fiction in the 1980s*, D. J. Taylor referred to this novel as "McEwan's most obviously 'political' book" and, like Powers, welcomed McEwan's engagement with politics in it: "[H]ats off to McEwan for mixing it with the politicians (Taylor 1989:58-59)". However, he saw a dichotomy in McEwan's style: the novel's political scenes—e.g., the proceedings of the Committee—were conveyed through a style which was "formal and fatigued", whereas the informal scenes, such as Stephen's daydreams about his daughter in the Committee's meetings, struck

“a consistently relaxed yet forceful note” (Taylor 1989:59). Thus Taylor concluded that:

As an examination of the way in which families function, the novel is masterly. As an examination of the way in which people formally react to political contingency it strikes me as fundamentally flawed...*The Child in Time* has still not solved the question of how far “politics” can go without irritating the reader or undermining the writer’s sense of himself (Taylor 1989:59).

It is this “question” which I intend to discuss in the rest of this paper. As opposed to Taylor who draws a distinction between the novel’s examination of how families function and its political aspects, I argue that such a distinction is erroneous since the family itself is considered in an evidently political context, which has made it possible for McEwan throughout the novel to sustain his biting satire on state interference in such matters as child rearing. The question of the family and how it functions also warrants an exploration of a related topic that has been very much neglected in the criticisms and reviews of *The Child in Time*: the novel’s construction of sexual difference.

## II)

*The Child in Time* is in many ways an alarming portrayal of a future Britain ruled by an authoritarian government. Like all repressive regimes, this government has as one of its top priorities a plan to discipline people to become its ideal, submissive citizens: “It was generally agreed that the country was full of the wrong sort of people. There were strong opinions about what constituted a desirable citizenry and what should be done to children to procure one for the future (McEwan 1987a:10)”. McEwan suggests that in order to eliminate the “wrong sort of people” and produce “desirable” citizens, authoritarian regimes resort to coercive interventions in the upbringing of children, thus expropriating a fundamental function of the family. Accordingly, an analogy is drawn in the novel between the two entities of “family” and “nation”, the latter being redefined by the Government as an enlarged version of the former. The head of the state is, therefore, described as “the nation’s parent” and actual parents are “embodiments of society” (83,93). Indeed, the Government makes it clear that the importance it attaches to the family depends on its capacity to foster loyalty to one’s nation, for example in its children: “[F]rom love and respect for home we derive our deepest loyalties to nation (69)”. By showing authoritarian regimes’ attempts at subduing the family and subordinating it to the more important entity of “nation”, McEwan also suggests that there is a

subversive potential to the family that could pose a great danger to such regimes. David Willetts believes it was because of this potential that Ferdinand Mount, the head of Margaret Thatcher's Policy Unit 1982-4, called his book *The Subversive Family*. The Conservatives, he argues, see the family as a social institution for learning and practising such concepts as "altruism", "civility" and "obligation to others" (See Willetts 1989:265).

In *The Child in Time* McEwan makes a parody of unwarranted state interference in child rearing through *The Authorised Childcare Handbook*. A glimpse at a few of the chapter headings of the Government's official parenting manual would suffice to indicate who its "desirable" citizens are: " 'The Disciplined Mind', 'Adolescence Overcome', 'Security in Obedience', 'Boys and Girls — vive la différence', 'A Sound Smack Saves Nine' (McEwan 1987a:161)". The *Handbook* is compiled so that "the nation [would] be regenerated by reformed childcare practice (162)". Extracts from its content, however, which head every chapter in the novel, reveal the Government's scheme to distort people's attitudes to childhood. For example, the *Handbook* endorses "the time-honoured analogy between childhood and disease", according to which childhood is "a physically and mentally incapacitating condition, destroying emotions, perceptions and reason, from which growing up is the slow and difficult recovery" (179). McEwan suggests that the Government's ulterior motive in advocating this analogy is to undermine the family by denying the very naturalness of childhood: "It should be remembered that childhood is not a natural occurrence... Childhood is an invention, a social construct, made possible by society as it increased in sophistication and resource (93)". Through the quotations from the Government's official childcare manual, then, McEwan manages to expose how the conservative claims of "love and respect" for the family are, in fact, empty rhetoric disguising an intention to dissolve the family as a social formation independent of the state.

Also satirized in the novel are the "expert" pieces of advice that the *Handbook* contains on how families should bring up their children. For instance, the promise of chocolate to children is recommended to encourage them to go to bed on time, arguing that "Incentives, after all, form the basis of our economic structure and necessarily shape our morality (McEwan 1987a:123)". Or on corporal punishment: "Those who argue dogmatically against all forms of corporal punishment find themselves urging a variety of psychological reprisals against the child... There is no evidence to suggest that these [psychological reprisals] cause less long-term damage than a swift clip across the ear or a few smart slaps to the backside (161)". McEwan stresses the absurdity of such recommendations by having his protagonist ponder on a long list of similar expert opinions, which includes every aspect of child care, from

binding the newborn baby's limbs to a board, to teaching mathematics to nine-month-old babies (80-1).

The idea that the instructions given by child-care experts are often contradictory seems to have been suggested to McEwan by Christina Hardyment's book *Dream Babies: Child Care from Locke to Spock* (1994), which is mentioned in his acknowledgements (McEwan 1987a:6). In her book Hardyment argues that mothers today generally rely on baby-care manuals to bring up their babies. These manuals, however, override mothers' instincts in favour of their authors' conflicting "new insights" which are aimed at overturning past "misconceptions". The never-ending debate between various experts of different persuasions results in anxiety in mothers, who see all the age-old advice passed on to them contested and refuted. One way of countering this barrage of expert information, Hardyment argues, is to consider it from a historical perspective; that is, we have to see why baby-care books were written and how their contents were influenced by trends in social, philosophical and psychological thought. Accordingly, in a section entitled "Pillars of the State" in the fourth chapter of her book, Hardyment discusses state interference in the child-rearing functions of the family. She traces such interventions to the "wartime habits of obedience to authority" during the First World War, arguing that depression as well as the onset of the Second World War "left parents as resigned to following bulletins of approved infant-care practice as they were to coping with ration books and national service" (Hardyment 1994:159). If children were to be brought up as "better" citizens ready to respond to the needs set by a sense of patriotism or loyalty to the state, then the government had to intervene with schemes which were aimed at giving more weight to the communal, rather than parental, aspect of child rearing. The contradictory instructions about child care on which Stephen reflects, and the ludicrous prescriptions of *The Authorised Childcare Handbook*, serve to highlight the diminishing of the parents' role in children's upbringing as well as the state's desire to have ultimate power over children.

There is evidence to suggest that the interventionist policies of Margaret Thatcher's government, its freezing of child benefits and cuts in welfare expenditure, and its introduction of a new code of child care law were some of McEwan's sources of inspiration for the policies of the Conservative Government in *The Child in Time*. Around the time when the novel was first published, a major debate was taking place in Britain about the Conservative government's declared plan for reforming the country's child-care law. The debate began in 1984 with the publication of House of Commons Social Services Committee report on children in care. In 1985, a government working party published the *Review of Child Care Law*, which was followed in 1987 by

a white paper, *The Law on Child Care and Family Services*. The bill drawn up by the government was finally passed in both Houses of the Parliament and came into force in 1989. The extent of the change brought about by this law, the Children Act 1989, was stressed by the Lord Chancellor, who, introducing the bill to the House of Lords in December 1989, remarked that it was “the most comprehensive and far reaching reform of childcare law in living memory (quoted in Hendrick 1994:276)”. In an article on this Act, Lorraine M. Fox Harding describes it as “almost certain to be the last major Act on children this century”, adding that:

The Act also replaces a huge volume of existing legislation, repealing seven complete Acts passed since the Second World War, including the Children Act 1975 and the Child Care Act 1980, as well as key provisions of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969. Altogether over a dozen preceding Acts are replaced in whole or part. The Act also changes, and arguably widens the scope of state intervention in matters affecting children, and changes the principles on which intervention is based (Harding 1991:180)

Interestingly, when the Act was being debated in the House of Lords, the Conservative Peer, Lord Mitterton, made the following remarks on corporal punishment which have a striking resemblance to McEwan’s quotation on the same subject from *The Authorised Childcare Handbook*: “I was last beaten at the age of 19 as a midshipman for misbehaving. It did not create in me a feeling of antagonism and make me want to behave badly...It seems to me that one can become obsessed with the thought that corporal punishment—beating—of a child by a parent is wicked (quoted in Parton 1991:162)”.

The Government in *The Child in Time* is characterized by corruption and deceitfulness. Even the intelligentsia could be blinded to the true nature of such regimes. For instance, Stephen genuinely believes that the *Handbook* is going to be compiled on the basis of the findings and recommendations of The Official Commission on Childcare. His father’s comments, though, suggest that Mr. Lewis knows better than his son does:

[Y]ou’re wasting your time there. This report’s already been written in secret and the whole thing’s a load of rubbish anyway. These committees are a lot of flannel as far as I can see. Professor So-and-So and Lord So-and-So! It’s to make people believe the report when they read it, and most people are such bloody fools, they will believe it. Lord So-and-So put his name to this so it must be true! And who is this Lord? Some Joe who’s said the right things all his life, offended no one and



made himself some money. . . . That's the trouble with this country, too much bowing and scraping, everyone kow-towing to Lords and Sirs, no one thinking for themselves! No, I'd jack it in if I were you, son (McEwan 1987a:88).

However, not until a disaffected civil servant shows Stephen a copy of the *Handbook* when the Commission has not yet finished its job, does he realize how worldly-wise his father is. Furthermore, by this incident McEwan scorns the gullibility of the masses. A copy of the *Handbook* is leaked through Stephen to a newspaper, but in a pre-emptive move, the Prime Minister orders, "in the interests of open government and informed discussion", that two thousand copies of the *Handbook* be printed and distributed to the press and "other involved parties" (McEwan 1987a:179-80). The reviewers in the newspapers, ironically, welcome and even praise the *Handbook*:

The reviews the following morning were at least favourable, and otherwise ecstatic. One tabloid gave a front page to: Sit down, shut up and listen! Another said: Kids, get in line! In the quality press it was 'masterful and authoritative'. It marked 'the demise of confusion and moral turpitude in childcare writing', and, in the paper which had first carried the story, 'with its honest quest for certainties it encapsulates the spirit of the age'. However it had come about, 'The book' was exemplary and should be made widely available. . . . In its wisdom or carelessness, the Government had come up with the kind of lead parents would respect (McEwan 1987a:180)

McEwan's satire of how a scandal turns out to consolidate a deceitful, authoritarian regime is a powerful indictment of contemporary society and its unquestioning acceptance of disinformation and propaganda from governments or the media. He suggests that intellectuals like Stephen—who earlier in the novel has, significantly, been described as sipping coffee in Whitehall "from the plastic cups bearing the Ministry's stamp, bought from a machine in the corridor which dispenses onion soup down the same nozzle (McEwan 1987a:133)"—need to be disillusioned before being able to distinguish lies from the truth. Unless they do so, there is not much difference between them and the audiences of chat shows in the "new all-day channel ...sponsored by the Government", i.e., ordinary people whom McEwan characterizes by their

doggish eagerness to please the host and be pleased by him, their readiness to applaud and cheer on command and wave plastic pennants bearing the show's slogan...the ease with which their moods were regulated, whipped into uproar one moment, then calmed and made

serious the next... Was it any surprise the world was led by morons with these enfeebled souls at the ballet box, these ordinary 'folk'—a word much used by the hosts—these infants who longed for nothing more than to be told when to laugh? (McEwan 1987a:124).

There are indications in the passage that, through the metaphor of "chat shows", McEwan is in fact satirising the kind of reaction that the masses show to politicians at political rallies: the "plastic pennants" waved by the audience are suggestive of flags, and the "show's slogan" could be read as party slogans. Thus the passage seems to draw an analogy between chat shows and occasions (e.g., national days, party conferences...) when political leaders deliver speeches to crowds of people: in both cases people are easily manipulated. Their applause and cheers are, therefore, manifestations of their naivety. The rhetorical question at the end of the passage is supportive of this reading. No wonder, then, that when Stephen starts to be disillusioned with the Government, the first thing that he does is to reorganise his flat, moving "the television back into an obscure corner" (McEwan 1987a:153), and to give up his addiction to the television. The next morning, he turns down the Prime Minister's second invitation to lunch at Downing Street: Stephen is no longer interested in shows of any kind.

As if to drive its readers to settle both the question of sexual difference and the question of time, the narrative leaves unspecified the Prime Minister's sexual identity. Marc Delrez (1995:12) believes the head of the state in *The Child in Time* is a "female prime minister"; Gabriele Annan (1998:18) goes so far as to identify the Prime Minister in McEwan's novel as Margaret Thatcher: "[I]t's Mrs. Thatcher all right: 'The familiar voice, pitched somewhere between a tenor's and an alto's' produces a fine flow of Thatcherspeak. McEwan is good at mimicry". However, as noted by several critics, throughout the novel no personal pronouns or names have been used in reference to the Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup> The narrator tells us that "there was a convention in the higher reaches of the Civil Service never to reveal...any opinion as to the gender of the Prime Minister (McEwan 1987a:82)". It would, therefore, be wrong to assume a feminine gender for the Prime Minister. Identifying the Prime Minister with Margaret Thatcher would be doubly wrong, because it would be tantamount to reducing McEwan's novel to a history book (which would, of course, make McEwan liable to the accusation of falsifying history). The fact

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Paul Edwards (1995:43) notes that "the novel coyly obscures the Prime Minister's sex". and Alan Brownjohn (1988:58) writes that the "sex and name [of the Prime Minister] are not given, but that scarcely matters".

that McEwan consistently leaves the Prime Minister's gender unspecified could have different explanations. Jack Slay, for example, suggests that "[t]his sexual ambiguity and the deceptiveness involved in the courting of Charles Darke [by the Prime Minister] serve to emphasize the ambiguity and duplicity of the government itself (Slay 1996:127)". As in the discussion concerning the novel's temporal setting, I argue that the unspecifiedness of the Prime Minister's gender is yet another indication of the fact that, more than a particular period in British politics, it is the ruinous consequences of certain social and political policies with which *The Child in Time* is concerned. McEwan suggests that, whether a man or a woman, the head of such a state is bound to be a corrupt, authoritative figure.

Reinforcing McEwan's alarming portrayal of this authoritarian Government are the equally alarming images of the metropolis interspersed through the novel. London, as described in *The Child in Time*, is first and foremost characterized by abject poverty. There are so many beggars on the streets that legislation has to be brought in to regulate begging. Beggars are, therefore, "licensed" but have to wear "bright badges" and use the "regulation black bowl" (McEwan 1987a:8). The law forbids them from "working" in pairs; nor are they permitted to beg near Parliament or Whitehall: "They were supposed to be on the move all the time, down certain authorised thoroughfares (101)". However, poverty is such a widespread phenomenon that Stephen is often beset by groups of beggars. Among the beggars he is used to seeing just before Parliament Square is a little girl whose face reminds Stephen of his missing daughter. She is described early in the novel as picking up from the pavement and chewing "a lump of still glistening chewing gum (9)". She has a second, brief appearance just before the end of the novel: this time Stephen happens to see her lying, apparently fast asleep, in a train station. He decides to spread his coat over the girl, but only when he touches her face does he realize that she has already died of the cold: "[T]he eyes continued to stare, their indifference confirmed in absolute terms (193)". It is through moving images such as these that McEwan shows the harsh reality of poverty. The little girl's short, pitiful life serves also to expose the emptiness of the Government's rhetoric about caring for children.

McEwan further compounds the misery of life in the metropolis by imparting to it a series of bizarre and inexplicable climatic changes and conditions. For example, the pattern of seasons is no longer cyclic, so that the year draws to its close earlier than usual by skipping a season: "[T]here was no autumn...it had been summer last week, winter this (McEwan 1987a:123)". The summer is judged by Stephen's father to be the hottest in seventy-four years (86). Continuous dry weather imposes restrictions on water use, which, in

turn, reduces “the front gardens of suburban West London to dust (85)”. The dismal picture that emerges is that of an arid and gaunt city, destined soon to be a wasteland:

The interminable privets were crackling brown. The only flowers Stephen saw on the long walk from the tube station—the end of the line—were surreptitious geraniums on window ledges. The little squares of lawn were baked earth from which even the dried grass had flaked away. One wag had planted out a row of cacti. Stronger representations of pastoral were to be found in those gardens which had been cemented over and painted green (McEwan 1987a:85).

A metropolis characterized by widespread poverty and extreme weather, coupled with recurrent images of over-crowded pavements and sluggish traffic on the streets moving just “a little faster than walking pace (McEwan 1987a:139)”, provides a most appropriate setting for McEwan’s novel. Indeed, the inferno of city life in *The Child in Time* has suggestions of insecurity and menace. This is, after all, a city of armed policemen, and one in which even the Prime Minister does not feel free to have a personal conversation on the telephone: “The telephone is so complicatedly controlled where I am”, she or he tells Stephen, “screened, filtered, monitored, that a personal conversation is unthinkable (187)”. Ruled by a repressive government made up of demagogues, conditions of life, McEwan suggests, can be unimaginably excruciating.

Set against the novel’s bleak and alarming portrayal of the future, is the prospect of redemption through restoration of the innocent child-self and rejuvenation of love. The first solution is earnestly sought by Charles Darke, who, according to his wife, never had a true childhood: “[Charles] had a photograph, a horrid little picture taken when he was eight. It shows him standing next to his father...In the photograph Charles looks like a scaled-down version of his father—the same suit and tie, the same self-important posture and grown-up expression. So perhaps he was denied a childhood (McEwan 1987a:202)”. It is in order to experience the unsullied joys of childhood that Charles decides to abandon his career and live in a tree-house. His action of forsaking the metropolis, his return to ‘nature’, is a pseudo-mystical return to a lost innocence, which he himself describes as “the forgotten child within the adult (31)”. What Charles achieves by reverting to a childlike pattern of behaviour is the freedom from obligations of politics and metropolitan life; in Thelma’s words: “He wanted . . . freedom from money, decisions, plans, demands. He used to say he wanted to escape from time, from

appointments, schedules, deadlines (200-1)". Through Charles's regression, then, McEwan manages to juxtapose city with country, and political commitment with childlike innocence.

Also seeking redemption by restoring the child-self that every individual possesses within himself, is the novel's protagonist. Being both an author of children's books and the father of a lost child, Stephen fully buys into children's innocence. Indeed, he wishes that he could assume some of the childish qualities of his own three-year-old daughter: "He needed [Kate's] 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...Wasn't that Nietzsche's idea of true maturity, to attain the seriousness of a child at play? (McEwan 1987a:105-6)". This seriousness is exemplified during a short holiday that Stephen, Julie and their daughter spend in Cornwall. On the beach they build a sandcastle and wait for the tide. When the time comes to go, Kate—in what we may read as an anticipation of Charles's pseudo-mystical return to nature—"wanted them to make [the sandcastle] their home. They would abandon their London lives, they would live on the beach for ever (106)". Kate's intense urges in this episode serve to emphasize how important it is for the adult to maintain the child's ability to cherish the joys of life. Adults give priority to obligations set by time, precisely because they no longer can have the seriousness of a child at play: growing up in time has killed off their innocence.

Following two other incidents in the novel, time and man's relation to it become more enigmatic for Stephen. The first incident happens while he is on his way for his first visit with Julie in her cottage. Emerging from a plantation, he feels overwhelmed by a feeling of *déjà vu*: "He knew this spot, knew it intimately, as if over a long period of time (McEwan 1987a:56)". Stephen then comes across a pub called The Bell, by now almost certain that he is in the process of the "delicate reconstruction of another time (57)". Through the window of the pub he sees a young woman engaged in an earnest dialogue with a man. It is at this point that he realizes "the young woman . . . , beyond question, was his mother (59)". Later in the novel, Stephen's mother confirms that she and her husband did go to The Bell forty-four years before. The memory of that day is indelibly imprinted on her mind because it was in that pub that she and her husband had discussed the fate of her foetus: had she agreed with Mr. Lewis's suggestion for abortion, Stephen would have never been born. Strangely enough, Stephen's mother, too, recalls seeing a boy through the window and thinking that she must be looking at her own child. This paranormal episode, then, serves to show the essential non-sequentiality of time. Stephen takes a journey in time, back to when he was not yet born. This

journey is also important for Stephen because later on the same day he meets Julie after a long time of virtual separation and they make love. While doing so, "he did not doubt that what was happening now, and what would happen as a consequence of now, was not separate from what he had experienced earlier that day. Obscurely, he sensed a line of argument was being continued (63)". The result of their sexual reunion is, of course, Stephen and Julie's second child whose birth helps to restore their love.

The second incident which again draws Stephen's attention to the enigmatic nature of time, occurs while he is driving to visit Charles and Thelma at their rural retreat. On his way, Stephen narrowly escapes collision with a lorry, during which "the rapidity of events was accommodated by the slowing of time (McEwan 1987a:93)". In the accident, the lorry overturns and its driver is trapped upside-down in the wreckage. The description of the driver in this scene evokes the image of a baby in delivery:

There was a head at Stephen's feet. It protruded from a vertical gash in the steel. There was a bare arm too, wedged under the head, pressing tight into the face and obscuring the mouth...The man was face down into the road, but Stephen could see that one eye at least was shut (McEwan 1987a:96-7).

Stephen manages to rescue the driver by pulling him out of the wreckage (an action which anticipates his delivery of his second child at the end of the novel). What astonishes Stephen throughout the incident, however, is the difference between his own and the lorry driver's perceptions of time during the accident. Stephen thinks that the accident itself "lasted no longer than five seconds", which, to him, signifies that "duration shaped itself round the intensity of the event (McEwan 1987a:95)". Yet, "intensity", McEwan shows, is ultimately relative to the observer, so that different observers could have different estimations of one and the same event. When, for example, the lorry driver asks how long he was trapped in the wreckage, "Two hours? Three?", Stephen answers, "Ten minutes. Or less" (100). Stephen continues to be baffled by the two different perceptions of time, and so at the end of the scene he once again asks the driver, "What do you make of it, that thing about time?". The answer he receives is another confirmation of the relativity of time and the dependence of its duration on the observer in time:

I dunno. I was inside once for almost two years. Nothing to do, nothing happening. . . . And you know what? It went in a flash, my time. It was all over before I knew I was there. So it stands to reason. If a lot happens quickly it's going to seem a long time (McEwan 1987a:100).

Stephen's personal experiences of the non-sequentiality and relativity of time are subsequently corroborated by Thelma. A lecturer in theoretical physics, she explains that "[t]here's a whole supermarket of theories [of time] these days (McEwan 1987a:117)". The common denominator of all these theories, however, is that "the common-sense, everyday version of it as linear, absolute, marching from left to right, from the past through the present to the future, is either nonsense or a tiny fraction of the truth. . . . Time is variable. . . . There's no absolute, generally recognised 'now' (117-18)". Ruptures in the temporal continuum in the novel, such as Charles's regression to childhood or Stephen's paranormal experience of seeing his own parents in the pub, serve to validate this view of time as a subjective entity. By engaging his protagonist in a quest for unravelling the enigma of time, then, McEwan shows the possibility and necessity of reversing time's ravages and restoring our lost innocence. It is only when Stephen becomes a child (a child *in* time, i.e., a *child* observer of his parents' conversation about himself) that he realizes the redemptive potential of a child for rejuvenating love, both in his parents' relationship as well as in his own damaged married life.

The revival of love between Stephen and Julie is shown in the novel to be largely the result of Julie's judicious behaviour. For a long time after Kate's disappearance, Stephen continues to nurture the hope that she will be found. Accordingly, he exhausts all possibilities of searching for her: he places advertisements in local newspapers, offers rewards for information about her, pastes her enlarged photographs on bus shelters and walls, and, assuming that Kate has been stolen by a family who had lost their own child,

He carried with him a folder of photographs and lists of names and addresses, neatly typed and alphabetically ordered. The photographs...he showed to everyone he could interest. The lists, compiled in the library from back numbers of local newspapers, were of parents whose children had died in the preceding six months...He knocked on doors and spoke to mothers who were first puzzled, then hostile. He visited child minders. .He went further afield until his search area was three miles across. *He anaesthetised himself with activity* (McEwan 1987a:23, emphasis added).

Passages such as the above are contrasted in the novel with images of Julie in solitary grief. For example, in one such image, Julie is described as *sitting* "in her armchair, lost to deep, private grief (McEwan 1987a:24)"; or in another image she is again "*sitting* in dark, . . . barely stir[ring] to acknowledge [Stephen's] return" home (24, emphasis added). McEwan, thus, characterizes

masculinity as active by showing Stephen up on his feet and pursuing a vigorous search out on the streets; in contrast, femininity or feminine grief is characterized by passivity suggested through portraying Julie as sitting alone indoors. Stephen complains bitterly of his wife's "inertia, the collapse of will, the near ecstatic suffering", and Julie, in turn, takes his efforts to be "a typically masculine evasion, an attempt to mask feelings behind displays of competence and organisation and physical effort". Julie's only action before she starts her reclusive life in the Chilterns—clearing out Kate's clothes and toys and stripping her bed—is interpreted by Stephen as "feminine self-destructiveness, a wilful-defeatism" (24). McEwan suggests, however, that self-destruction and defeatism are in fact the other side of Stephen's endeavours. Frustrated at not being able to find Kate, he takes to excessive drinking and spending hours watching television shows. Stephen is, for example, described in a scene as "sprawled out with his Scotch on the couch in pyjamas and thick cardigan, watch[ing] the game shows with an addict's glazed patience (124)". Also, throughout the novel, he is several times depicted as either running memories (10), giving himself over to "structured daydreaming (134)", or simply "staring at his hands" for more than an hour (69). The passage in which Stephen is described by his tennis coach can be read as McEwan's attempt to show that aspect of masculinity which is often concealed behind ostensible activity:

You're passive. You're mentally enfeebled. You wait for things to happen, you stand there hoping they're going to go your way. You take no responsibility for the ball, you're making no active calculations about the next move. You're inert, spineless, you're half asleep... (McEwan 1987a:157).

It is suggested that, through his vigorous search for Kate, Stephen tried to avoid facing the reality of her loss and, therefore, he never felt the agony that Julie suffered. Activity for Stephen, in other words, was a sedative.

In contrast, McEwan shows Julie's reactions to the crisis in the family to be much more constructive than Stephen's desperate but futile search for their daughter. She indicates the need to accept Kate's loss as a reality by taking away the lost child's belongings, which had been left laying about their flat, in this way removing from sight things which were constant reminders of Kate's disappearance and which intensified the couple's grief. (This is, again, contrasted with Stephen's emotional but pointless act of buying birthday presents for his missing child and singing "Happy Birthday" to her through a walkie-talkie set.) Next, she leaves home to live alone in a cottage, where she refuses to have a telephone, thereby putting an end to the bitter exchanges and



mutual accusations between herself and her husband which could deepen the rift between them and threaten their marriage. And finally, like Stephen's mother, Julie takes the crucial decision to go through with the pregnancy which results in the birth of their second child and which helps the couple to reunite and rejuvenate their love. She explains to Stephen after summoning him to her cottage just before the birth of the new child: "I've made some progress...I began to take comfort from the idea of the new baby...to think about you and remember, and really feel how much we loved each other. I felt it all come back (McEwan 1987a:214)". McEwan, then, stresses the importance of maternity to evade the danger of the family's dissolution. By deciding to give birth to their second child, it is to the family itself that Julie gives a chance to be reborn.

### III)

McEwan's disturbance of the boundary between the private and the public/political is a salient feature of *The Child in Time*. As suggested earlier, McEwan does engage with politics in a couple of his short stories; however, in none of his earlier works is politics such a major concern, shaping the central ideas and providing a context for his treatment of the related subjects of the family and state interference in the upbringing of children. McEwan (1992) states in an interview: "I've always been interested in politics to some extent. I never found before an adequate means to accommodate this interest in my work". It seems fair to suggest that a combination of several of McEwan's favourite themes, including childhood and the loss of its innocence, as well as the relationship between couples,<sup>3</sup> have made this accommodation possible for him in *The Child in Time*. McEwan is also conscious of the hazard involved in addressing political issues in fiction: "[I]t's a mine field, politics and the novel. If you set about writing fiction with a clear intention of persuading people of a certain point of view, you cramp your field, you deny yourself the possibility of opening up an investigation on free inquiry" (McEwan 1992). McEwan manages to pass this minefield safely because he does not write to criticize an actual government but rather he imparts a universality to his novel which makes it stand above political history. The ambiguities in the novel surrounding the specific temporal setting of the events or the Prime Minister's gender and name serve to enhance this universal quality. What acquits McEwan of the charge of "irritating the reader" by too much overt politics (Taylor 1989:59) is

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<sup>3</sup> In another interview, McEwan speaks of his "habit of watchfulness" and adds: "There are two areas where I look. One is how people are with their children, because that fascinates me a great deal. And the other thing is couples, married or otherwise" ("In Search of Two Characters" 13).

that, instead of propagating certain political viewpoints, he explores the social and familial aspects of life in a country ruled by a corrupt, repressive government. Related themes of innocence, femininity and love have been amalgamated with this exploration to give an even wider scope and complexity to the novel.

*The Child in Time* is also remarkable because of the different picture that it presents of its author. Too often, and certainly unjustly, had McEwan been identified with his rapist, paedophile and neurotic narrators. John Powers, for instance, referred in a review to what he called the “penchant [of McEwan’s early work] for morbid tour de force” and added: “Must every narrator be an ape, pornographer or screwdriver of mannequins? One wondered if McEwan dwelt imaginatively within these self-contained worlds because he, too, felt it impossible to know or feel anything for certain. . . . Would his limitations grow obvious with time?” (Powers 1987:491). Accusations of gratuitous sex and violence had been persistently laid against him by various reviewers and critics. *The Child in Time* helped to modify McEwan’s reputation—or, rather, notoriety—by introducing an author capable of capturing the feelings of a father (and a mother). This seems to be partly due to McEwan’s experience of becoming a father himself. “There are things you can do when you are young which you can’t do later on”, McEwan remarks in an interview; “I once wrote a story which I would find impossible to write now. It was called ‘Butterfly’ [sic], and it was narrated by a man who sexually assaulted a girl and pushed her into a canal. As a parent now, I find that my responses are so much more complex that it would take a lot more to take me into that situation (McEwan 1987b:13). McEwan implies that parenting imposes limits on what it is safe to imagine. Reversing the assumption that parents affect their children, he suggests that it is children who shape or modify their parents’ attitudes: Child is Father of Man. McEwan’s wife, Penny Allan, to whom the novel is dedicated,<sup>4</sup> also believes that fatherhood had a profound effect on his writing: “Having children has opened him up a great deal. And possibly that shows itself in the new novel [*The Child in Time*]. There is a touch of optimism at the end” (Stephen 1987:38).

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<sup>4</sup> When writing the draft of this paper, I assumed that Penny Allen and McEwan were still married to each other. It has since been revealed, however, that they divorced in 1994 and that McEwan’s current wife is Annalena McAfee. After separating from his first wife, McEwan had the dedication of *The Child in Time* removed from the novel’s subsequent editions. The omission did not go unheeded by McEwan’s readers. In a letter to the editor of *The Sunday Times*, one such reader wrote: “We noticed in our reading group last week that my original paperback copy (1988) of Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time* was dedicated to Penny [Allen], but in the recently reissued edition, the dedication had been expunged” (Marion Jones 20).

Despite McEwan's disclaimer about not being an autobiographical writer (McEwan 1987b:13), there are reasons to believe that *The Child in Time* is perhaps the most "personal" of McEwan's novels. Like his protagonist, McEwan is a writer of children's fiction, too (he has so far published two books of fiction for children: *Rose Blanche* (1985) and *The Daydreamer* (1994)). Like Stephen's father, McEwan's father was an Air Force officer posted to North Africa when McEwan was a small boy (McEwan 1978:10). Like Stephen, too, McEwan studied in a boarding school (10). Both are only children who spent part of their childhood outside their homeland. Like Stephen who had a "hashish-befuddled tour of Turkey, Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier Province" (28), McEwan "travelled the hippy trail to Afghanistan and into the North West Frontier Province" (McEwan, 1981:12) during which he "smok[ed] hash in huge quantities" (McEwan 1978:17). Both Stephen and McEwan have the same writing habits: Stephen writes in black ink and sets a "daily quota of typewritten words" (McEwan 1987a:131); McEwan says in an interview that his "ideal rate of work is around 500 words a day" and that he uses "[b]lack ink always" (McEwan 1987b:13). Last but not least, like his protagonist, McEwan delivered his second child, Gregory, himself (Stephen 1987b:36). It should also be added that McEwan has said that the plot of the novel is based on a real incident of child snatching that his parents happened to witness in a military grocery store in Germany (McEwan 1987b:36). Thus it seems fair to conclude that McEwan's most "public" novel is, paradoxically, his most "personal" work as well, reflecting an author's ability to fictionalize material derived from his country's political scene as well as his own life.

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