The interplay of trauma and the sublime

in four fictions by Ian McEwan

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Table of contents

List of abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout the thesis for references to the corresponding works. Details on the specific editions are listed in the bibliography.

Am   *Amsterdam*, Ian McEwan

CIT   *The Child in Time*, Ian McEwan

CPJ   *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant.

EL   *Enduring Love*, Ian McEwan

HIT   *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Dominick LaCapra

IA   *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton

OFBS *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Immanuel Kant

OL   "Only love and then oblivion," Ian McEwan

Sat   *Saturday*, Ian McEwan

SV   *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton

UE   *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth

Thesis declaration

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Introduction

1   'Moments of crisis': traumatic engagement and narrative point of view

in McEwan's fiction

Ian McEwan has received popular and critical acclaim since his earliest publications

in the 1970s, and has been associated with several other key figures in contemporary

British fiction, such as Martin Amis, Kazuo Ishiguro and Graham Swift (Head 2). In

2009, McEwan was identified in *The New Yorker* as having 'edged past his peers to

become England's national author' (Zalewski). During the first decade of his career,

he was noted as 'a writer of quality with a penchant for controversial or disturbing

plots' (Roberts ix). Of this period, McEwan has stated that he was attempting to

resist what he saw as 'the prevailing grayness of English style and subject matter',

that he 'looked for extreme situations, deranged narrators, obscenity, and shock', and

sought to 'set these elements within a careful or disciplined prose' (Begley 91).

McEwan broke from the 'claustrophobic world' of his early work and into 'a more

public arena' with his 1987 novel, *The Child in Time*, which led onto further

commercially successful and critically acclaimed works (Roberts x). Despite this

shift, McEwan's fiction has continued to describe 'moments of crisis' (Begley 97)

that in various ways open onto trauma and the sublime.

        In this thesis, I will examine how McEwan represents trauma and the sublime

in a selection of four novels; these are, in order of publication, *The Child in Time*

(1987), *Enduring Love* (1997), *Amsterdam* (1998) and *Saturday* (2005). The novels I

have selected evoke traumatic experience and various versions of the sublime,

particularly the eighteenth-century ideas of the sublime described by Edmund Burke

and Immanuel Kant. These evocations of trauma and the sublime often coincide in

the novels. I argue that McEwan harnesses the vocabulary and intellectual heritage of

the sublime in order to describe traumatic experience. Various narrative techniques

serve to evince this relationship between trauma and the sublime. Key among these

is narrative point of view, through which the consciousness of the novels' characters

is represented. In my analysis, I will also consider the narrative structure of the

novels, with regard to point of view and the representation of trauma and the sublime.

A crucial question underpinning these concerns is how McEwan configures the

protagonist in relation to the external world in his fiction: for example, how close is

the individual to a traumatic event within the narrative, or how might this traumatic

event figure structurally throughout the novel? Across all of the chapters, I address

the role of the protagonist, where it helps to illuminate issues of narrative structure,

point of view, trauma and the sublime. Burkean and Kantian discourses on the

relationship between subject and object also inform my discussion, not only in the

context of the sublime but also the representation of consciousness and traumatic

experience. In addition, I will examine narrative features that are particular to each

individual novel: for example, the aberrant function of narrative temporality in *The

Child in Time*, perspectival shifts in *Enduring Love*, certain resonances with tragedy

in *Amsterdam*, and the limitations of consciousness and empathy in *Saturday*.

The connection between Ian McEwan's fiction and extreme forms of experience – even beyond those represented in his early work – is well established[1] in the critical literature on McEwan. The author himself has claimed that the 'moments of crisis', often taken as a hallmark of his work, are a means of

> exploring and testing character. How we might withstand, or fail to
> withstand, an extreme experience, what moral qualities and questions
> are brought forward, how we live with the consequences of our
> decisions, how memory torments, what time does, what resources we
> have to fall back on.   (Begley 97)

These 'moments of crisis' evidently do more within McEwan's work than simply provide a plot point. In her 2013 study of temporality in McEwan's fiction, Hannah Courtney notes that '[t]here is at least one pivotal moment of crisis (for both character and story) in each of McEwan's works', citing as examples 'the act of murder in *The Comfort of Strangers* and *Amsterdam*, the incestuous moment of sex and the burying of the mother in cement in *The Cement Garden*', and 'the chopping up of the murdered man's corpse in *The Innocent*' (186). Courtney also asserts that, through his fiction, McEwan 'manages to reconstruct, and even evoke through the reading process, the personal, temporally warped experience' of 'often traumatic and life[-]changing' moments (Courtney 184-5). These qualities have led some critics to read traumatic experience in McEwan's writing. Hal Foster suggests such a reading in his 1996 essay, 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic', when he claims that McEwan's

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[1] See for example Ganteau and Onega's volumes *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction* (2011) and *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* (2013).

fiction often renders an 'experience that is *not* experienced, at least not punctually, that comes too early or too late, that must be acted out compulsively or reconstructed after the fact, almost analytically' (123; emphasis in original). Foster's observation provides an opening for my own reading of traumatic experience in McEwan's fiction.

For my theoretical framework in analysing McEwan's representation of trauma, I predominantly refer to the work of Dominick LaCapra, a prominent historiographer and trauma theorist. I specifically refer to two key works, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) and *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (2004). In the former work, LaCapra examines the problem of representing historical trauma in written forms. These written forms are not restricted to historiography, trauma theory and testimony, but extend to fiction; for example, LaCapra considers the value of 'alternative narrative modalities' that can 'raise in probing and problematic ways the question of the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence' (*WHWT* 55, 54). In *History in Transit*, he similarly takes account of fiction as a potential mode of discourse, claiming that it

> may well explore the traumatic, including the fragmentation, emptiness, or evacuation of experience, and […] may also explore in a particularly telling and unsettling way the affective or emotional dimensions of experience and understanding.

(132)

In his discussion of the representation of trauma, LaCapra draws upon a diverse

range of discourses. Perhaps most crucially for my own critical approach in this

study, however, LaCapra regards fiction as a valid mode of discourse for addressing

trauma, more permissive than critical discourse and able to speak from a more

affective, empathic[2] dimension of understanding. LaCapra openly acknowledges the

difficulty of limiting one's consideration of trauma to any single field of discourse;

in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, he identifies the 'cross-disciplinary problem' of

trauma, in that it 'falls within the compass of no single genre or discipline' (204). He

is aware also that 'no single genre or discipline' can be ruled out as a means of

addressing trauma. LaCapra's outlook strongly informs my critical approach, yet

helps also to contextualise the representation of trauma in fiction as one of many

potential representations. Importantly, his work also helps define what trauma is, or

at least the features that its various manifestations share.

According to LaCapra, trauma is an 'affective experience' of which one is

not 'fully conscious' at the time (*HIT* 92). It is also 'a disruptive experience that

disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence', and which 'has belated effects

that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered' (*WHWT*

41). This belated quality of traumatic experience is what distinguishes it from an

experience that is simply distressing in the moment. Trauma imposes itself on the

subject repeatedly in the form of 'belated effects or symptoms'; these can include

'flashbacks, startle reactions and other forms of intrusive behaviour' (LaCapra, *HIT*

118, 45). Cathy Caruth, an influential trauma theorist and contemporary of LaCapra,

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[2] I will address empathy quite directly in my study of *Saturday*, in the context of trauma, the sublime
and the representation of consciousness.

notes the 'inherent latency within the [traumatic] experience itself', and defines

trauma in general terms as 'an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic

events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled

repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena' (*UE* 17, 11).

The repeated return, then, describes an intrinsic component of traumatic experience.

LaCapra also describes trauma as an 'out-of-context experience' that 'upsets

expectations and unsettles one's very understanding of existing contexts' (*HIT* 117).

This is an aspect to which Caruth also gestures, claiming that trauma emerges from

an event 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly', and as an 'unexpected reality'

(*UE* 4, 6). For LaCapra, in order to gain 'critical distance' on the 'out-of-context'

experience of trauma, the subject must undertake a process of 'working through'

(*HIT* 45). This process involves the distinction 'between past, present, and future'

and essentially 'coming to terms with the trauma' (*WHWT* 143, 144). Working

through, in this sense, does not involve the erasure or transcendence of the originary

traumatic experience, but an acknowledgement of its impact and the likelihood of its

continuing (if hopefully diminishing) impact in the future (*WHWT* 144, *HIT* 104).

Trauma is understood in contemporary usage as a 'wound inflicted not upon

the body but upon the mind' (Caruth, *UE* 3), and I will therefore approach it with

reference to the representation of consciousness. This involves an engagement with

narrative point of view, an aspect of representation that LaCapra addresses directly in

his work (*WHWT* 55, 196).

In my discussions of how McEwan utilises narrative point of view, I rely principally on Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1972). Three of the four McEwan novels in my study are narrated in the third-person point of view, and make prevalent use of free indirect discourse, through which the narration is 'always bound to a perceptual activity' of the protagonist (Genette 204). This technique represents a perfect merging of character and narrator (Genette 174). For the purpose of my discussion, Genette's work has been invaluable[3] in making clear the employment and effects of free indirect discourse, as well as the use of the first-person point of view and epistolary chapters in *Enduring Love*.

LaCapra describes free indirect discourse as a 'middle voice' or 'hybridized, internally dialogized form that may involve undecidability of voice' (*WHWT* 196, 196-7). This 'undecidability' problematises 'truth claims' and 'ethico-political judgments', and positions 'basic beliefs or perspectives in an agonistic, possibly fruitful, interaction with one another' (*WHWT* 197). The use of such a 'middle voice' has implications both for the theoretical discussion of trauma and its representation in fiction, particularly the 'alternative narrative modalities' that 'raise in probing and problematic ways the question of the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 55, 54). For example, how does the 'middle voice' elucidate the interactions between trauma and the sublime in the context of fiction, and are its effects replicated by any other narrative techniques? In my analysis, I consider how McEwan utilises free indirect discourse, or in the case of *Enduring Love* a shifting first-person narration, to represent the

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[3] Other authors that have provided valuable perspective on broader issues of narrative point of view include Mieke Bal, Daniel Chamberlain and Anna Snaith.

subjective experience of consciousness. My focus on the subjective modes of

narration within McEwan's novels not only permits a close examination of

traumatised consciousness, with reference to LaCapra, but also sublime discourse,

with reference to Burke and Kant.

2   The sublime: Kantian and Burkean frameworks

My study examines how McEwan's fiction inherits certain strains of eighteenth-

century[4] sublime discourse and employs them in the fictive representation of trauma,

and in this sense is situated within the framework of Kantian and Burkean models of

the sublime. Philip Shaw, in the introduction to his short guide on the sublime, writes

that '[i]n broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding,

whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of

comparison disappear, *then* we resort to the feeling of the sublime' (2; emphasis in

original). These are 'broad terms' indeed. The sublime has proven to be 'one of the

greatest and most misunderstood ambiguities in aesthetics' (Karalis 4), as its long

history of literary, philosophical and psychological commentary attests. Longinus[5], a

Greek scholar of whom little is known, composed what was to be 'the most

important ancient text with respect to the sublime', the treatise *On Height*, or *On the*

Sublime (a translation of the Ancient Greek *Peri hypsous*), sometime around the first

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[4] I will refer to modernist and postmodernist commentary on the sublime, such as that of Theodor
Adorno and Jean-François Lyotard, only where it can shed light on the inheritance of those
eighteenth-century models.
[5] A concise account of Longinus' conception of the sublime and its influence on eighteenth-century
thought can be found in Boulton's introduction to Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of
Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (xliv-lx)

century C.E. (O'Gorman 71). Shaw's definition of the sublime, in attempting

(impossibly, but valiantly) to encompass a broad spectrum of thought, necessarily

passes over the subtleties, or in some cases the substantial rifts, between individual

concepts of the sublime.

One of the central problems of sublime discourse is defining the exact nature

of the phenomenon, or the 'relationship between the object and its sublime effect'

(Vanessa Ryan 266). The mid-to-late eighteenth century saw a watershed in

discourse on this relationship, with the emergence of two theorists now considered

foundational – Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. This followed from the then-

recent French translation of *Peri hypsous* in 1674 (Boulton xliv). Burke and Kant

posit two divergent conceptions of the object-subject relationship at work in the

sublime encounter. Eighteenth-century sublime discourse also saw various

transitions 'from rhetoric to nature' and 'tradition to individual psychology' (Furniss

21) that were decisively affected by the seminal works of these two figures.

Edmund Burke's seminal work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of

Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, describes the 'source of the sublime' as

anything that excites 'ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort

terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to

terror' (39). He further posits that '[w]hen danger or pain press too nearly, they are

incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and

with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day

experience' (Burke 40). In his introduction to the *Enquiry*, J. T. Boulton claims that

Burke's conception of the sublime represents a profound innovation, through

offering 'a physiological explanation' for its effects (lvi). The physiology of the

Burkean sublime intimately binds the sensations of terror and delight. Crucial to this

relationship are the 'certain distances' and 'certain modifications' which represent a

degree of remove from the source of 'danger or pain', for the individual who feels or

encounters the sublime (Burke 40). This essentially describes a 'position of safety'

(Crowther 8), a necessary condition for Burkean sublimity. I shall address the

'position of safety' directly with regard to the evocation of the Burkean sublime and

trauma in McEwan's novels. Certain scenes in these novels present the protagonist

with 'dangerous objects' that appear to cause 'a weak or moderated state of terror'

(Crowther 8) verging on sublime pleasure in the understanding that such 'objects'

are at a safe distance. The protagonist in this sense stands in a 'position of safety'

and yet confronts a traumatic extreme, be it the air ballooning accident in *Enduring*

Love or the burning plane in *Saturday*. I will situate my readings of these scenes

within a Burkean framework, while also addressing the relationships between trauma,

the sublime and narrative point of view.

In Kantian theory, the sublime manifests within the perceiving subject. The

centrality of the subject forms the basis of Kant's understanding of sublimity. He

begins his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* with the

assertion that '[t]he various feelings of enjoyment or of displeasure rest not so much

upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person's own

disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain' (45). In *The Kantian Sublime:*

From Morality to Art, Paul Crowther asserts that the crucial role of subjective

experience in Kant's theory allows for 'a greater diversity both in the employment of

our feeling of the sublime, and in the objects and situations which can occasion it'
(11). These 'objects and situations' include mountains, night-time, immense heights,
great depths, long durations of time, and even certain passages of Milton's *Paradise
Lost* (Kant, *OFBS* 47-50).

Kant describes two principal categories of the sublime: the 'mathematical'
and the 'dynamical' (Guyer, *Introduction* xxx). The mathematical sublime pertains
to the divorce between what reason can apprehend and the imagination cannot, or in
Kant's terms, 'a feeling of displeasure from the inadequacy of the imagination in the
aesthetic estimation of magnitude for the estimation by means of reason' (Kant *CPJ*
250). The 'correspondence [with reason] of this very judgment of the inadequacy' of
the imagination – 'the greatest sensible faculty' – paradoxically arouses 'pleasure' in
the subject (Kant *CPJ* 250). The dynamical sublime involves the consideration of our
'physical powerlessness' before the vast and threatening phenomena of nature, yet
also a deep recognition of our (admittedly dwarfed) condition, as sentient beings,
sensitive to this 'powerlessness' and to our 'capacity for judging ourselves' (Kant
CPJ 261). The dynamical sublime leads onto Kantian morality, but for the sake of
the limited scope of this study, I will be leaving these considerations out of my
analysis. In regards to the Kantian sublime, I will predominantly discuss it in the
dynamical sense, and with particular stress on the perceiving consciousness of the
human subject as the locus of the sublime itself. This formulation informs my
discussion of narrative point of view and the representation of consciousness,
particularly in relation to *The Child in Time* and *Saturday*. In these two novels, the
third-person narration is focalised through the consciousness of a single protagonist.

I will examine how McEwan negotiates subjectivity, perspective and the sublime through Kantian paradigms in these novels. Specifically, I consider the highly subjective representation of temporality in *The Child in Time* and the 'curious commitment to the sublime complexity of the mind and its cultural products' (Salisbury 892) in *Saturday* to draw specifically from a Kantian sublime heritage.

3   '"Too large" to be contained': trauma, the sublime, and discursive interplay

The idea that there is a discursive association between trauma and the sublime is not new. In her 2005 dissertation *Trauma as [a Narrative of][6] the Sublime: the Semiotics of Silence*, Eléna-Maria Antonia Chandler cogently outlines several ways in which the two concepts intersect, including the use of the sublime in Sigmund Freud's notion of sublimation – 'the transformation of dangerously powerful drives or impulses into productive channels', or 'the successful resolution of traumatic disorganization resulting from uncontrolled drives' (185, 187). According to Chandler, 'traumatic experience is immeasurably large, extending beyond the articulations and dispositions of meaning', and is 'immeasurably powerful […], exerting pressure on the structure of the organizational domains in order to create the accommodation it needs, and destroying meaning and identity in its efforts to do so' (186). These qualities resonate with the sublime, which itself 'describes the qualities of traumatic experience', or the quality of being '"too large" to be contained in the

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[6] The parentheses are not an insertion, but part of Chandler's thesis title.

existent terms and relations of symbolized meaning' (Chandler 188). In their

introduction to *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*, Susana Onega

and Jean-Michel Ganteau also claim that 'the very openness of trauma (its temporal

openness, the cognitive hole that it implies, the impossibility for the subject to

conceive of its totality) may display some affinity with that time-honoured aesthetic

category, the sublime' (19).

LaCapra refers to the sublime as a counterforce to working through. His use

of the sublime does not seem grounded in any specific conception (such as Kant or

Burke, for example), but is used in a general sense, with connotations of sacralisation,

valorisation, totalisation and transcendence – words with which he often links the

sublime[7]. For LaCapra, working through 'counteracts the tendency to sacralize

trauma or to convert it into a founding or sublime event': what he terms 'a traumatic

sublime' (*HIT* 123). Chandler notes that the varied usages of the term 'sublime'

mostly draw on 'a common image of that which is too vast or powerful to be

confronted or comprehended' (185). LaCapra suggests this association when he

observes the 'relationship between excess and the sublime' (*WHWT* 155). In terms

that resonate with the Burkean 'position of safety' (Crowther 8) and the

transmutation of 'danger or pain' into 'delight' (Burke 40), LaCapra suggests that

'[t]he sublime is, in some sense, an excess, an excess that overwhelms the self,

almost brings it to the point of death, but then leads to elation when the self escapes

the threat of death' (*WHWT* 155). Yet LaCapra criticises the homogeneous

representation of certain events, notably the Holocaust, as sublime in their excess,

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[7] See, for example, *HIT* 115, 122, 123, 142; *WHWT* 23, 155-6

and stresses the need for a 'modulated, self-critical response' when tempted to slip

into such representations (*WHWT* 155-6). At the same time, he argues, one must be

careful when downplaying the degree of 'unsettlement' that traumatic events

produce; to downplay such effects too severely may risk the 'facile notion of

redemption or harmonization' (*WHWT* 156).

LaCapra also applies the term 'sublime' to the opacity of certain kinds of

critical discourse that invoke a vocabulary of the sublime. In *Witness and Memory*,

Thomas A. Vogler similarly notes a tendency for critics in the field of witness poetry

to 'wrap their own writing in the aura of witness', and likewise for sublime discourse

to 'express[…] the quality it aims to convey and to mimic the action it conveys,

being sublime on the sublime' (197). LaCapra acknowledges that fiction can explore

the 'affective and emotional dimensions of experience' (*HIT* 132), but does not

extend this to critical theory. In this view LaCapra is at odds with Caruth, for whom

the question of trauma's 'defy[ing] and demand[ing] our witness […] must be

spoken in a language that is always somehow literary' and 'that defies, even as it

claims, our understanding' (*UE* 5). For LaCapra, the description of trauma in

sublime terms – being sublime on the traumatic, as it were – is perhaps best handled

in the realms of art, where the inherent meaninglessness of trauma can be tested in

illuminative new forms to which the restrictions of theory need not apply (*HIT* 46).

Throughout my study, I will refer to LaCapra predominantly in the context of

trauma theory. However, I will also refer to his considerations of the sublime, where

I consider them beneficial to understanding particular invocations of it in McEwan's

fiction, as well as his views on fiction as a mode of discourse through which trauma

and 'other possible forms of experience' may be explored (*HIT* 132). I will generally test the novel as a space of discursive interplay between trauma and the sublime; their relationship within the fictive space can in turn influence future engagements with these discourses in literary, psychological and philosophical contexts.

4   Selection of McEwan novels and thesis overview

The novels I will analyse are, in order of publication, *The Child in Time* (1987), *Enduring Love* (1997), *Amsterdam* (1998) and *Saturday* (2005). The principal guide in my selection of McEwan's fiction is the presence of moments of crisis (Courtney 186, Begley 97), which in many instances suggest an engagement with traumatic experience or the sublime. With regard to the sublime, literary critics have been silent[8] on this aspect of McEwan's fiction. My analysis of his representation of the sublime is therefore a new contribution to studies of his work.

The four chapter studies are sequenced according to the novels' publication dates, from 1987 through to 2005[9]. This is not with a view to reading McEwan's work in a developmental or teleological light, but rather reading each novel as its own discursive space. I will bring to each chapter my study's core concern of how discourses of trauma and the sublime interact in McEwan's fiction, and apply it to the specific novel being examined. However, different foci emerge in each chapter

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[8] Lynn Wells, in her 2010 study of *Atonement,* remarks that McEwan's language 'verges on the sublime' (103-4). However, Wells does not consider the representation of the sublime or any evocation of sublime effects beyond this.
[9] The unrepresented novels from this period are *The Innocent* (1990), *Black Dogs* (1992), *The Daydreamer* (1994) and *Atonement* (2001).

study in relation to narrative point of view, structure and thematic content, which

vary between novels.

In my thesis, I argue that McEwan harnesses the vocabulary and intellectual

heritage of the sublime in order to describe traumatic experience in a selection of

novels – *The Child in Time*, *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam* and *Saturday*. These novels

represent traumatic experience and the sublime through highly subjective modes of

narration, particularly free indirect discourse, and narrative structure. In Hal Foster's

words, McEwan's fiction often renders effects that resonate with trauma, or the

experience that is '*not* experienced, at least not punctually', but 'comes too early or

too late' and 'must be acted out compulsively or reconstructed after the fact, almost

analytically' ('Obscene, Abject, Traumatic' 123; emphasis in original). McEwan

invokes versions of the sublime, particularly those of Burke and Kant, in coincidence

with these descriptions of traumatic experience. LaCapra's work on trauma and

historiography provides the specific theoretical framework through which I read

trauma in McEwan's fiction. His claims about the efficacy of fiction in exploring the

traumatic (*HIT* 132), and his observations on the sublime as excess or aporia[10], also

inform my analysis, with specific reference to trauma and the sublime being

perceived as '"too large" to be contained in the existent terms and relations of

symbolized meaning' (Chandler 188).

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[10] LaCapra, like Genevieve Lloyd in my study of *The Child in Time*, does not apply the term 'aporia' in a strictly Derridean or deconstructionist sense, but in the broader sense of a 'perplexing difficulty' ("Aporia," def. 2).

In each of the following chapter summaries, I provide a brief synopsis of the McEwan novel that is being examined, explain the reasoning behind the choice of this novel, and then outline the argument of the relevant chapter.

Chapter 1: The traumatic sublime and 'malevolent intervention' in *The Child in Time*

In *The Child in Time* (1987), the life of Stephen Lewis is radically altered when his three-year-old daughter Kate is abducted from a supermarket. The narrative begins two years after this moment, and traces the aftermath of Stephen's loss through his estrangement from his wife and his obsession with the 'phantom growth' of his missing daughter (*CIT* 2). In relation to this central loss, the novel also explores the nature of time through a highly subjective framework, presenting 'a plot that includes quasi-supernatural incidents suggestive of how different the world might appear from within a quantum model of reality' (Root 61). Such 'quasi-supernatural incidents' include Stephen's reversions to child states and his encounter with his own mother before he is born (*CIT* 123-32, 169, 65). The disappearance of Kate is left unresolved in the novel, though Stephen and his wife reconcile, both with the loss and each other, through the birth of a new child in the final chapter.

My selection of *The Child in Time* depends principally on its subject matter, which invites a trauma-oriented reading into the effects of the child abduction, or in McEwan's words, the 'malevolent intervention' (*CIT* 158) at the heart of the novel.

My reading of the sublime in the novel emerges from the consideration of its Kantian
construction of subjectivity and time.

The Child in Time employs 'alternative narrative modalities' (LaCapra,
WHWT 55) and sublime discourse in the evocation of traumatised consciousness and
the process of working through. McEwan's novel represents the temporal ebbs and
flows of a consciousness working through trauma, or gaining 'critical distance' on a
traumatic 'out-of-context' experience in order to 'permit a reengagement with
ongoing concerns and future possibilities' (LaCapra, *HIT* 45). The narrative
techniques that enact this process include third-person restricted point of view, free
indirect discourse, and the presentation of anachronistic events, flashbacks, and
otherwise distorted temporalities. The narrative's complex treatment of time opens
onto Kantian models of temporality, subjectivity and the sublime, each of which
form a component of working through trauma as it is represented in the novel.

The novel positions the abduction of Stephen's daughter as an 'out-of-context'
experience (LaCapra, *HIT* 45) or a 'malevolent intervention' (McEwan, *CIT* 158).
The subsequent events in the narrative resonate with the 'belated effects and
symptoms' (LaCapra, *HIT* 118) of trauma, and the process of working through.
Stephen's narrated consciousness interlaces past and present through 'traumatic
memory', in which 'the past is not simply history as over and done with', but 'lives
on experientially and haunts or possesses the self' (LaCapra, *HIT* 56). The
construction of subjectivity in *The Child in Time* also resonates with the Kantian
view of the subject as 'not a phenomenal entity to be reckoned up along with the
objects it moves among', but as 'that which brings such objects to presence in the

first place' (Eagleton, *IA* 72). This evocation of the Kantian subject opens onto my

reading of the sublime through the novel's distortion of time and its presentation of

an exterior world moulded by the consciousness through which it is perceived. *The*

Child in Time harnesses sublime discourse to the narrative evocation of the

traumatised consciousness as intrinsic to the novel's construction of working through.

Chapter 2: Epistemic instability, the Burkean sublime and the traumatic

'aftermath' in *Enduring Love*

In *Enduring Love* (1997), a fatal air balloon accident brings Joe Rose, the novel's

protagonist and predominant narrator, in contact with Jed Parry, a young man with

de Clérambault's syndrome, 'a delusional conviction of being in amorous

communication with another person' where no such communication exists (McEwan,

EL 235). For Jed, the object of this 'delusional conviction' is Joe. Jed's recurring

intrusions test Joe's relationship with his long-term partner, Clarissa, and become

increasingly violent and unpredictable. Joe and Jed are also ideologically opposed in

the novel, Joe being a rationalistic science writer and atheist, and Jed a Christian of a

zealous and decidedly unorthodox bent. Theirs has thus been read as a 'conflict

between rationalism and religion' (Bewes 429). However, the novel reveals the

'prism of desire and belief' (McEwan, *EL* 180) that warps the perceptions even of its

most prominent narrator, as Joe becomes increasingly paranoid and violent in his

own response to Jed. In the dénouement of the novel, Joe acquires a gun and

confronts Jed when the latter holds Clarissa hostage. Jed is injured and

institutionalised, and Joe and Clarissa begin to reassemble their lives.

As with *The Child in Time*, my selection of *Enduring Love* for this study

depends largely upon its traumatic subject matter, particularly the air balloon

accident and its impact on the survivors. The open invocation of Milton's *Paradise

Lost*, a landmark text in the literary heritage of the sublime, also invites a reading of

the sublime in McEwan's novel. I pursue this reading with reference to Burke's

'position of safety', analysing the configuration of Joe in relation to the accident and

the description of his reaction.

Enduring Love draws on Burkean sublime discourse to evoke the traumatic

'dissociation between cognition and affect' (LaCapra, *HIT* 117) in the scene of the

air balloon accident, or what Joe describes in the novel as a 'divergence from the

expected' (McEwan, *EL* 18). The novel specifically invokes *Paradise Lost* through

Clarissa's descriptions of the fatal accident. Joe's description of the fatality evokes

the Burkean 'position of safety' (Crowther 8) and the transmutation of 'danger or

pain' into delight, through 'certain distances' and 'certain modifications' (Burke 40).

Joe attempts to assimilate his traumatic experience, to 'tame it with words'

(McEwan, *EL* 29) or, in LaCapra's terms, translate it into the manageable

'hesitations, indirections, pauses, and silences' of language (*HIT* 122). However, his

attempts are frustrated by Jed's intrusions. The novel also generates hermeneutic

conflict and epistemic instability in the 'aftermath' (McEwan, *EL* 2) of the accident.

These effects are evoked through the representations of Joe and Jed, and the

inclusion of various narrators through epistolary chapters and appendices. Jed's

recurrent intrusions into Joe's life after the accident may also figure in the narrative

as the 'belated effects or symptoms' of trauma (LaCapra, *HIT* 118). These intrusions

both frustrate Joe's attempts to assimilate his traumatic experience, and contribute to

the epistemic instability of the novel through Joe's paranoia, 'structured by fantasy,

by story' (Greenberg 112), and potential unreliability. This has broader implications

for the representation of 'the power and attractions of narrative' (McEwan, *EL* 41)

within the novel, and the capacity of narrative to describe traumatic experience.

Chapter 3: '[T]he nature of their fate' and 'the nature of their tragedy':

ironising trauma and the Wordsworthian sublime in *Amsterdam*

Amsterdam (1998) focusses on two protagonists: a composer, Clive Linley, and a

newspaper editor, Vernon Halliday. Both men are long-term friends, and each has an

intimate past relationship with Molly Lane, who has succumbed to a rapid

degenerative disease. This death provokes Clive and Vernon to think about their own

mortality, and to dread becoming 'ill in a major way, like Molly', incapacitated and

helpless (McEwan, *Am* 48). They make a pact: that if one man should recognise

signs of such incapacitation or helplessness in the other, he would be able to 'finish it'

(McEwan, *Am* 49) for his friend by any legal means he can. Each of the characters

then confronts a separate moral dilemma: Clive travels to the Lake District to finish

composing his symphony, witnesses an attempted rape and fails to intervene or

report the incident; Vernon gains access to compromising photographs of a cross-

dressing politician and chooses to publish them. The decision of each character

causes outrage for the other, and gives a pretext for acting upon the euthanasia pact.

In the dénouement, Clive and Vernon meet in Amsterdam for the première of Clive's

symphony, sedate and murder one another with the assistance of Dutch medical

personnel, and inadvertently fulfil their pact.

Amsterdam differs from the other selected novels in what many critics

identify as its comic or ironic tone. Yet Hannah Courtney lists the 'mutual murder'

(McEwan, *Am* 177) of Clive and Vernon among the 'pivotal moment[s] of crisis'

(186) in McEwan's fiction. As with *The Child in Time* and *Enduring Love*,

Amsterdam similarly describes an inaugural loss and its aftereffects. The loss of

Molly, however, takes place outside of the frame of the narrative itself, and goes

unwitnessed by the protagonists. Moreover, the effect of this loss on Clive and

Vernon is chiefly cautionary, and the novel does not substantially explore the

affective dimension of Molly's death and its emotional impact; rather, the narrative

remains ironically detached. *Amsterdam* does, however, explicitly represent the

sublime, as I will expand upon below. The representation of the sublime is a key

determinant in my selection of this novel.

Ironic detachment of the narrative point of view in *Amsterdam* prevents the

representation of traumatic experience and unsettles the sublime. Within this ironic

mode and the novel's satiric tone, Molly's suffering is largely hidden in the narrative.

Ironic detachment also foregrounds the novel's formal resonance with tragedy, and

suggests the allure of fate, or the 'predestined or appointed lot' ("Fate," def. 3a, 3b).

In my analysis of these effects, I focus on a particular moment in which the narrator

suggests that 'no other outcomes [i.e. other than double euthanasia] were available' to the protagonists, and that 'this was the nature of their tragedy' (McEwan, *Am* 149). This moment suggests an ironically detached 'control of knowledge' (Sedgewick 38) on the part of the narrator, which accentuates the degree to which the protagonists themselves unwittingly move towards their own deaths. The progression of their pact from mutual safeguard to 'mutual murder' (McEwan, *Am* 177) is in line with D.C. Muecke's classic formulation of an 'Irony of Events', evident 'when we meet what we set out to avoid, especially when the means we take to avoid something turn out to be the very means of bringing about what we sought to avoid' (102).

I examine these effects of ironic detachment and free indirect discourse in relation to how the novel prevents the representation of traumatic experience, as well as its unsettling of the sublime. In my analysis of the sublime, I focus on a particular episode of *Amsterdam* in which Clive travels to the Lake District. In his use of this setting, McEwan draws upon the Romantic heritage of the sublime, and in particular William Wordsworth's version of it. The Wordsworthian sublime, through a 'process of thrusts and counterthrusts, of risings and resistances', serves to both elevate the subject and create a 'thoroughly negative, privative state' (Bahti 493, 488). In this sense, the Wordsworthian sublime in *Amsterdam* represents a confrontation of human limits and a tragic 'recognition of finitude' (Eagleton, *SV* 176). *Amsterdam*'s ironically detached narrator contributes to its satiric stance, through which the representation of traumatic experience is prevented and any emotional resonance with tragedy is foreclosed.

Chapter 4: The 'obliging imagination': empathy, September 11 and the

Burkean sublime in *Saturday*

McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) describes a day in the life of Henry Perowne, a London neurosurgeon. The novel is set on Saturday 15 February 2003, the day of widespread protests against the invasion of Iraq. At the beginning of the narrative, Henry awakens, walks to his bedroom window and sees a burning plane descending into Heathrow. The narrative returns to this event through news updates which Henry views throughout the day. On his way to play squash with a colleague, Henry is involved in a car accident with a young man named Baxter, who is accompanied by two other young men. The encounter becomes violent, but Henry recognises in Baxter the signs of Huntington's disease, and uses this knowledge to manoeuvre out of further danger. Baxter is left humiliated before his companions, while Henry drives on to the squash game. Before returning home, he also purchases fish for a family dinner, visits his mother, and watches his son's band rehearsal. In the evening, Henry prepares fish stew and debates the Iraq War with his daughter. The family gradually return home, including Henry's visiting father-in-law, but the evening is disrupted when Baxter and one of his companions bring Henry's wife into the house at knifepoint. The intruders terrorise the Perowne family, and Baxter instructs Henry's daughter to strip naked. In doing so, she reveals she is pregnant. Baxter learns that she is a poet, and asks her to recite one of her poems; instead, she recites Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*, which discomposes Baxter and leads to his being overwhelmed by Henry and his son. In a struggle, Baxter suffers a head injury, and is

taken to the hospital. Henry at this point operates on Baxter and returns home, where the novel concludes in the early hours of the Sunday morning.

Saturday represents the secondary trauma associated with mediatised acts of witness, through the burning plane and Henry's invocation of September 11. This invocation informs my selection of *Saturday*, with respect to reading trauma. The positioning in the novel of Henry as a remote witness and of 'dangerous objects' (Crowther 8) as safely at a distance, particularly in the episode of the burning plane, evokes the Burkean sublime and its 'position of safety', and informs my choice of *Saturday* as potentially amenable to a sublime-oriented reading.

Through its representation of witnessing, *Saturday* explores the interactions between trauma, empathy and the sublime. I analyse these interactions with particular reference to the scene of the burning plane and Henry's 'obliging imagination' (McEwan, *Sat* 15), through which the novel connotes September 11 and the 'secondary trauma' of its 'plenitude of mediatized witnesses' (Douglass and Vogler 9). *Saturday* represents Henry as empathically engaged, but limited in the extent to which he can accurately empathise with suffering others, including Baxter. Through the third-person restricted point of view, the narrative voice is bound to Henry's consciousness. This highly subjective mode of narration accentuates the limits of the consciousness through which it is focalised, and the degree to which that consciousness can empathise.

The episode of the burning plane, through its depiction of an 'obliging imagination' (McEwan, *Sat* 15) that fantasises itself into a distant event (McEwan,

OL), offers a signal instance of limited consciousness and empathy in the narrative. This episode also opens onto the Burkean sublime and its 'position of safety' from which 'dangerous objects are encountered […] thus causing a weak or moderated state of terror' (Crowther 8). The novel's broader juxtaposition of everyday pleasures and the televised horrors of war and terrorism further evokes the Burkean sublime's comingled 'danger or pain' and 'delight' (Burke 40), and aligns them closely with Henry's 'position of safety' (Crowther 8) as a mediatized witness. Through the episode of the burning plane, the Burkean sublime is situated in close relation to September 11 and the 'secondary trauma' of its 'plenitude of mediatized witnesses' (Douglass and Vogler 9).

In its 'curious commitment to the sublime complexity of the mind and its cultural products' (Salisbury 892), *Saturday* also evokes the Kantian sublime, 'accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy; [or] in some cases merely with quiet wonder' (Kant, *OFBS* 47). However, the novel's constructions of secondary trauma and empathy are closely bound with the Burkean 'position of safety' (Crowther 8). Through Baxter's intrusion, this 'position of safety' is unsettled in the novel, and the figure of the witness made vulnerable.

The findings of my study have implications for the representation of trauma and the sublime in other fiction, and for the literary, psychological and philosophical discourse that surrounds these representations. My study may also help broaden the scope of McEwan studies by drawing more critical attention to his fiction's engagement with the sublime.

However, I turn first to *The Child in Time*. In this chapter I will discuss the representation of traumatised consciousness within the framework of Kantian sublime discourse and LaCapra's ideas on trauma and 'alternative narrative modalities' (*WHWT* 55). This will lead to the discussions of Burkean sublimity and traumatic dissociation in relation to *Enduring Love*, and eventually the more complex, dialogic representations of the sublime in *Amsterdam* and *Saturday*.

1   The traumatic sublime and 'malevolent intervention'

in *The Child in Time*

Introduction

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra observes that there are 'alternative narrative modalities that do not simply rely on a variant of a conventional plot structure' (55) – that is, 'the conventional beginning-middle-end plot, which seeks resonant closure or uplift' (54). These 'alternative narrative modalities' 'raise in probing and problematic ways the question of the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence' (55, 54). The potential of narrative to raise such questions is clear elsewhere in LaCapra's discourse, particularly in relation to trauma. In his later work, *History in Transit*, he discerns the potential of fiction to 'explore the traumatic' and 'raise the question of other possible forms of experience' (132).

Trauma is a disjunctive phenomenon, an 'out-of-context experience' that 'upsets expectations and unsettles one's very understanding of existing contexts'. It is also 'a shattering experience that disrupts or even threatens to destroy experience in the sense of an integrated or at least viably articulated life' (LaCapra, *HIT* 117). In these senses, it demands 'alternative narrative modalities' in order to achieve any accurate rendition in fiction.

In this chapter, I will argue that through McEwan's use of 'alternative narrative modalities' and sublime discourse, *The Child in Time* represents the temporal ebbs and flows of a consciousness working through trauma. I examine the positioning of the child abduction in the novel as a traumatic experience, the use of the third-person restricted point of view and free indirect discourse, and temporal distortion in relation to both plot and characterisation. I also posit that Kantian discourse on temporality, subjectivity and the sublime is used in conjunction with, and as a means of accentuating, the 'disorienting or diremptive'[11] nature of traumatic 'out-of-context experiences' (LaCapra, *HIT* 45). In addition, LaCapra's own discourse on the relation between trauma, the sublime and working through is applied to this area of the study.

1.1   A 'malevolent intervention': trauma and working through

The Child in Time hinges on a single moment: 'He set the fish down and asked the girl for a shopping bag. She reached under a shelf and pulled one out. He took it and turned. Kate was gone' (*CIT*[12] 13). As the still daughterless father, Stephen Lewis, reflects years later, 'There had been a malevolent intervention' (*CIT* 158), one from which a before and after must be marked. However, as the temporal distortions of the narrative reveal, this demarcation is not always clear. As I shall address later in the chapter, Stephen is left at times without any temporal bearings at all.

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[11] An adjectival form of 'diremption': a sharp division; a tearing apart or violent separation. This is not a prevalent term in trauma discourse, nor even LaCapra's; it is however a term to which I refer again later in the chapter.
[12] All subsequent references within this chapter are to the 1999 Anchor-Doubleday edition of *The Child in Time*, unless otherwise stated.

The use of the term 'malevolent intervention' (*CIT* 158) positions the abduction as an intrusive event, congruent with a certain understanding of traumatic experience. According to LaCapra, trauma brings with it 'disempowerment, […] radical disorientation, confusion, a fixation on the past', as well as 'flashbacks, startle reactions and other forms of intrusive behaviour' (*HIT* 45). In *The Child in Time*, the narrator clarifies the meaning of 'malevolent intervention'; Stephen's 'difficulties were not bred from within' (*CIT* 158). This highlights the disempowering aspect of Stephen's subjection to an experience so out of context, undergone 'too soon, too unexpectedly' to be understood at the time (Caruth, *UE* 4). In his memory of the abduction, to which his associative mind makes its 'easy move' (*CIT* 8), Stephen is reduced to 'taking long strides, bawling [Kate's] name as he pound[s] the length of an aisle' (*CIT* 14). His reaction is consistent with the 'shattering experience' of trauma and the 'helplessness of a child' that attends it (LaCapra, *HIT* 117, 44-5).

Reading the 'malevolent intervention' (*CIT* 158) as a traumatic experience that has particular effects on Stephen's consciousness means little without a paradigm through which to read these effects. For the traumatised consciousness, '[t]he experience of trauma […] is not punctual or datable' but is 'bound up with its belated effects or symptoms, which render it elusive' (LaCapra, *HIT* 118). LaCapra offers a paradigm in the process of working through trauma and gaining critical distance on it; by the process of working through, the traumatised individual can recontextualise his or her experience 'in ways that permit a reengagement with ongoing concerns and future possibilities' (*HIT* 45). In *Writing History, Writing*

Trauma, LaCapra describes working through[13] as the process by which a traumatised individual attempts to gain this 'critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future' (143). Specifically, '[i]t means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past', and to recognise the need for or desirability of such a critical engagement (144). Critical distance, however, must not be confused with total resolution, as LaCapra acknowledges:

> in drastically oversimplified terms: for the victim, [gaining critical distance] means the ability to say to oneself: 'Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can't entirely disengage myself from it, but I'm existing here and now, and this is different from back then.'   (*WHWT* 144)

This qualification of what critical distance means is crucial to LaCapra's avoidance of 'the rather prevalent valorization, even […] negative sacralization or rendering sublime, of trauma' (*HIT* 122). For LaCapra, working through 'counteracts' this 'tendency to sacralize trauma or to convert it into a founding or sublime event' (*HIT* 123). The difficulty of the process, however, comes in 'the ability to undertake it in a manner that is not tantamount to betraying the trust or love that binds one to lost others' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 144). I will return to this point, and the relation of trauma to the sublime, later in the chapter.

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[13] The term is also defined similarly in *History in Transit* (92, 103-4).

After Kate's disappearance in *The Child in Time*, a crucial shift occurs between the parents' refusal to acknowledge their 'diminished family' and their final recognition of it, when they 'cry together at last for the lost, irreplaceable child who would not grow older for them' (*CIT* 22, 256). This recognition coincides with the arrival of their new child and their coming together again, after years of estrangement, as 'a couple, a marriage, a unified whole' (Slay 216). However, while this child gives them a new object of love, the couple are acutely aware that 'they could never redeem the loss of their daughter', nor could they 'close their minds to the possibility of her return' (*CIT* 256). While procreation, 'this increase, this matter of life loving itself', is celebrated in the novel's closing passages, the 'malevolent intervention' is reasserted through the appearance of Mars in the sky, the 'reminder of a harsh world' (*CIT* 261, 158, 263). This represents a resistance to the prevailing 'sentimentality' of the conclusion (Slay 217), and a critical distance that comes with fully acknowledged limitations. To paraphrase LaCapra's 'drastically oversimplified' version of working through (*WHWT* 144), the parents in the novel recognise that this terrible thing happened back then, perhaps they cannot entirely disengage themselves from it, but they exist here and now, and this is different from back then. Between the parents' refusal to recognise their loss to their final acceptance of it, the novel traces the various effects of trauma on Stephen's consciousness; that is, 'disempowerment, […] radical disorientation, confusion, a fixation on the past, […] flashbacks, startle reactions and other forms of intrusive behaviour' (LaCapra, *HIT* 45).

1.2   Traumatised consciousness, focalisation and the 'middle voice'

The Child in Time presents the effects of trauma through the highly associative consciousness it focalises. From its opening passages, in which Stephen's mind is divided between the bustling street around him and the plaguing awareness of his missing daughter within him (*CIT* 1-3), the novel signals a clear interest in individual consciousness, memory-making and quiddity. McEwan states that one of his imperatives is to render in prose 'what it's like to be thinking', to render the state of consciousness or sentience (Smith 113). The psychological acuity of his fiction has been widely recognised. Hannah Courtney notes that McEwan presents consciousness in all its 'detailed, solitary introspection, often found on the fringes of scenes or during episodes of indeterminate duration' (185). She further notes his 'thorough exploration of third-person-focalized character consciousness that expands the moving moment' – that is, 'the narrator laying bare connections among active, moving, and present thoughts […] in the middle of a *moving*, eventful scene' (Courtney 185; emphasis in original).

In *The Child in Time*, the third-person restricted point of view focalises events through the consciousness of the protagonist, Stephen. This allows the expansion of what Courtney describes as the 'moving moment' to seem natural in the novel, and for the narrative to trace subtler shifts in Stephen's thought process. For example: 'Jigging and weaving to overtake, Stephen remained as always, though barely consciously, on the watch for children, for a five-year-old girl' (*CIT* 2). Here, the narrative focus shifts into Stephen's musing on the 'phantom growth' of his missing daughter and out again to the street, where 'only ex-children' are 'shuffling

to work' (*CIT* 2, 3). Another example is Stephen's recollection of 'an only childhood in hot countries' suddenly 'brought back to him' by 'the smell and feel of his own skin in [the] heat' (*CIT* 77). Such shifts are characteristic of the narrative flow in *The Child in Time*, and signal the use of free indirect discourse, in which 'the character speaks through the voice of the narrator' and the two positions are merged (Genette 174). This merging of narrator-narrated positions creates ambiguity; the third-person voice presents as boundless and objective, but its view is confined and its judgments partial. The use of a narrative device that creates such ambiguity is apposite in a novel engaged with trauma, an experience that 'displaces' one's 'preconceived notions about the world' and leaves one 'radically ungrounded' (Tal 15). Free indirect discourse generates ambiguity in that it 'seems to tell the truth without equivocation, to have all the certainty we could wish any third-person narration to have, and then strands us in complicated doubt' (Wood 29).

Stephen's consciousness, like the narrative perspective that presents it, never completely breaks from this 'complicated doubt'. A key example of free indirect discourse generating ambiguity in *The Child in Time* occurs when Stephen looks from a car window and sees what he thinks is his daughter, Kate, playing in a schoolyard, 'fifty feet away, unmistakable' (*CIT* 165). Stephen leaves the car and enters the school to pursue the lookalike. Throughout this episode, the narrator sustains Stephen's conviction that the girl is indeed his daughter, unequivocally referring to the girl as Kate: 'He had lost sight of Kate'; 'He was studying Kate's face'; 'Kate was pondering and biting on the nail of her thumb'; 'Stephen was about the introduce himself, but Kate restrained him by placing her hand on his forearm'

(*CIT* 165, 172, 173, 175). Only when the headmaster of the school intervenes and reveals the girl's true identity does the narrator cease referring to her as Kate, and instead refer to her as simply the 'girl' (*CIT* 177, 178). This displays a close fidelity to Stephen's consciousness within the narrative perspective, to the point that it shares his convictions, well-placed or not.

LaCapra specifies the discursive value of a 'middle voice' to the representation of trauma, particularly through free indirect discourse (*WHWT* 196), 'a hybridized, internally dialogized form that may involve undecidability of voice' (*WHWT* 196-197). However, the existence of 'undecidability' (*WHWT* 196-7) within this mediative space need not imply obfuscation for obfuscation's sake. The 'middle voice', LaCapra claims, 'may be argued to be most suitable for representing or writing trauma', not in terms of asserting 'truth claims' or 'ethico-political judgments', but in 'problematiz[ing] such claims and judgments' and 'placing basic beliefs or perspectives in an agonistic, possibly fruitful, interaction with one another' (*WHWT* 197). This may constitute one of the 'alternative narrative modalities' that LaCapra suggests 'raise in probing and problematic ways the question of the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence' (*WHWT* 55, 54). In *The Child in Time*, as evidenced in Stephen's encounter with his daughter's lookalike, there is a degree of 'undecidability of voice' (*WHWT* 196-7) involved in the narrative perspective. The narrative voice is not directly Stephen's, but performs a mediative function.

The narrative voice is also unable to shed light on events outside of Stephen's perception. The abduction itself, during a visit to the supermarket, is described with an almost painful awareness of perspectival restriction.

> 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 the shrouded figure in the periphery of vision, the one who was always to the side and slightly behind.   (*CIT* 12)

The third-person restricted point of view offers no concrete description of Kate's abductor or the act of her abduction. The narrative can only relay the extent of Stephen's knowledge: the cashier 'reached under a shelf and pulled [a bag] out. [Stephen] took it and turned. Kate was gone' (*CIT* 13). Stephen does not witness the transition, and nor does the reader. In his recollection, 'all about him' are 'shapes without definition' (*CIT* 12). Through such perspectival restriction, *The Child in Time* resists the assertion of broader truths of which its protagonist is not aware. What the novel does assert is a degree of *unknowability* with which the traumatised individual must come to terms, akin to the 'meaninglessness' inherent in traumatic experience (LaCapra, *HIT* 44, 45). The fate of Stephen's lost daughter, for instance, is never explained, much less given meaning. And despite their coming to terms with Kate's irredeemable 'loss', neither Stephen nor his wife can 'close their minds to the possibility of her return' (*CIT* 256).

1.3   '[A]porias of time' and the Kantian sublime

While the novel very clearly presents the limits of consciousness through the narrative point of view, there is an apparent boundlessness in its presentation of temporality. *The Child in Time* playfully explores the dynamism of time in all its strangeness, ambiguity and 'deeper patterning' (*CIT* 254). As with its 'malevolent intervention' (*CIT* 158) and the third-person restricted point of view, temporality in the novel serves to evoke certain aspects of the traumatised consciousness: in particular, the way in which the traumatic past 'lives on experientially and haunts or possesses the self' (LaCapra, *HIT* 56). Before analysing some of the functions of temporality in *The Child in Time*, however, it will prove helpful to consider the function of temporality in narrative more broadly.

In *Being in Time*, Genevieve Lloyd claims that just as metaphor 'engages with reality in ways that elude literal meaning[,] narrative, likewise, responds to *aporias* of time which elude philosophical resolution' (165; emphasis in original). Lloyd does not apply the term 'aporia' in a strictly Derridean or deconstructionist sense, but in the broader sense of 'a perplexing difficulty' ("Aporia," def. 2). Perhaps the most obvious aporia or 'perplexing difficulty' comes not with measuring or utilising time, but in knowing exactly what time *is*. This resonates with Augustine's remark in his *Confessions*: 'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not' (242). Given the historical difficulty of understanding and defining time, the task of responding to its aporias falls almost naturally to narrative, as a mode that 'can radically deconstruct our real-world notions of time and space' (Alber et al, 116). Of particular interest within the sphere

of narrative is the form of the novel. Joseph Kestner notes that the novel is a form of 'inherent temporality' (100). In contrast to forms of 'spatial art' such as painting and sculpture, which exhibit 'simultaneity', the novel bears the quality of 'succession'; being apprehended in time, it is intrinsically 'consecutive and irreversible' (Kestner 102-3).

Temporality in *The Child in Time* is represented as subjective, varying according to situation and perspective. This agrees with Kant's formulation of time as '*only* a framework of experience [and] not a feature of independently real things' (McInerny 89; emphasis in original). Laura Marcus, in an essay on temporality in *Atonement* and *Saturday*, observes that '[f]rom novel to novel, McEwan's characters come up against' the 'shaping and warping' effects of time (83-84). Of all McEwan's works, *The Child in Time* depicts such effects most explicitly and self-consciously. McEwan has stated that this novel is one of few works in which he expresses, to some degree, a 'conscious design on time'. However, he emphasises that time in his narratives is principally an offshoot of a larger narrative concern: 'the fine print of consciousness itself' (Smith 113). The 'shaping and warping' of time (Marcus 83-4) is thus not distortion for its own sake, but psychological and situational. The narrator, for instance, notes the 'slowing of time' as Stephen makes a split-second decision to avoid a car accident: 'The whole experience had lasted no longer than five seconds' (*CIT* 107, 108). When Stephen realises he is safe and alive, he marvels at 'what had happened to time, how duration shaped itself round the intensity of the event' (*CIT* 108). The density of thought within that five-second 'intensity' (*CIT* 108) lays bare, in Courtney's terms, 'connections among active,

moving, and present thoughts […] in the middle of a *moving*, eventful scene' (185; emphasis in original). The perceptual 'slowing of time' (*CIT* 107) is discussed openly later in the novel, as Thelma, a friend of Stephen's, observes that '[t]ime is variable' and that what appear as 'simultaneous events to one person can appear in sequence to another' (*CIT* 136). These evocations of slowed and variable time bolster the subjective representation of time in the novel as a 'framework of experience' (McInerny 89).

The way in which time is relativised in *The Child in Time* accords with the novel's representation of consciousness; both draw on an apparently Kantian emphasis on the subject's capacity to shape and colour reality through perception. Kant begins his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* with the assertion that '[t]he various feelings of enjoyment or of displeasure rest not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person's own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain' (45). In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton notes that the Kantian subject 'is not a phenomenal entity to be reckoned up along with the objects it moves among' but 'is that which brings such objects to presence in the first place' (72). Eagleton's description suggests the deeper workings of consciousness in this process of bringing 'objects to presence' (*IA* 72), and perhaps memory's role in bringing past objects to presentness. It also resonates with McEwan's own interest in 'how much our recollections can play into what we accept as reality' and 'how much perception is distorted by will' (Smith 113).

The sheer dynamism of time in McEwan's novel is perhaps nowhere more visible than in Stephen's encounter with his own parents before he is born. He sees them through a pub window; his mother looks out, but it is initially unclear whether or not she has seen Stephen (*CIT* 65). This scene occurs without any unusual narrative transitions, and represents an anachronism[14] in the narrative, in the sense of something 'done or existing out of date' or 'out of harmony with the present' ("Anachronism," def. 2). However, the encounter is not presented simply as a hallucination. Later in the novel, it is corroborated by Stephen's mother: 'There was a face at the window, the face of a child, sort of floating there. […] I just *knew* that I was looking at my own child. If you like, I was looking at you [i.e. Stephen]' (*CIT* 207; emphasis in original). This anachronism serves to render the external world through the lens of time, a subjective 'structure of awareness' in the Kantian sense, or 'essential structure of human sensibility' (McInerny 69). It also unsettles the very 'succession' (Kestner 102) of the form of the novel by bringing disparate times into junction within the same space. This sense of 'simultaneity' (Kestner 102) is produced again when Stephen walks a particular section of road his parents had walked many years earlier, and feels their presence despite the passing of time.

> It was a haunted road. He walked silently on its edge, aware of the young couple at his side pushing their bikes into the wind and rain[…]. Where were those young people now? What separated them

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[14] My use of 'anachronism' should not be confused with 'anachronies', the term Gérard Genette applies to 'the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative' (35-6). In *The Child in Time*, anachronism is a feature of the story structure itself.

from him beyond the forty-three years? Their moment here was a

tapering echo.   (*CIT* 250)

This moment, bringing the past and the present into perceptual 'simultaneity'

(Kestner 102), represents another anachronism in the narrative. Significantly,

however, Stephen is denied such vivid anachronistic encounters with his daughter or

any elucidative reliving of the abduction; the 'weight of time' (*CIT* 12) surrounding

this experience remains immovable, aporetic, and Stephen remains 'at a loss'[15].

However, the anachronisms in the novel often pertain to loss and the child. When

Stephen witnesses his parents through the pub window, they are discussing whether

or not to abort his prenatal self. In other episodes, Stephen undergoes a strange

reversion to his own lost childhood when he ventures into a forest with Charles

Darke, another grown man, to climb a tree and build a tree-house (*CIT* 123-132).

Charles, like many of the adults represented in the novel, 'want[s] the security of

childhood, the powerlessness, the obedience, and also the freedom that goes with it'

(*CIT* 238). Stephen is similarly reduced to a child state when he searches for Kate in

a school: wandering into a classroom, he is 'waved […] into a vacant seat' by the

teacher and handed 'a fistful of crayons' (*CIT* 169). On one level, these sudden

reversions to 'mystical' child states (*CIT* 238) serve the novel in its measurement of

'Stephen's search for his lost daughter' against 'the search for the lost child that

exists within every adult' (Slay 210). However, as events that temporally displace

the individual in response to emotional distress, they also suggest the out-of-context

experience of trauma (LaCapra, *HIT* 45).

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[15] I refer here to the etymological roots of 'aporetic' (see bibliographical entry for "Aporetic")

Perhaps the most startling instance of temporal displacement in the novel occurs not during Stephen's strange encounter at the pub window, but immediately after. The description of Stephen's subsequent experience engages the sublime, a salient aspect of Kantian discourse. Kant claims that sublimity can be found in a 'long duration', whether 'of time past' or 'projected into an incalculable future' (49-50). Paul Crowther notes that within the Kantian sublime is 'a full and complete primordial experience of spatio-temporality'. He further ascribes to sublime experience 'a heightened awareness of past and future presences and moments as flowing out from our present awareness of some overwhelming spatial object' (171), and notes a simultaneity of immanence and transcendence within the experiencing self 'in terms of the spatio-temporal flux' – or, as he puts it, '[w]e sense ourselves to be, as it were, *of* it, *in* it, and *astride* it' (172; emphasis in original). This differs from the sublime as described by Edmund Burke who, while taking 'the subjective aspect of this passion as his starting-point, […] ultimately construes it as a *causal* effect of quite specific properties in objects' (Crowther 11; emphasis in original). For Kant, the subject is the very locus of the sublime, and his theory is particularly sensitive to the 'feeling' or 'subjective *disposition*' that 'enables us to find things pleasurable or displeasurable' (Crowther 9; emphasis in original). In *The Child in Time*, as Stephen steps away from the pub window, he is described as undergoing a foetal reversion, 'perhaps […] wailing like a baby waking in the night'; 'his knees rose under him and touched his chin' (*CIT* 65, 66). He then reverts to a primitive state; 'his fingers were scaly flippers, gills beat time'. As he sees 'no moment that could embody him[,] no destination or time', his thoughts touch on 'a sadness that was not his own' but

'centuries, millennia old', and the realisation that 'nothing was nothing's own' (*CIT* 66). In this passage, time becomes absolute agent, stripping away any rudiment of human form, identity or temporal position. A suddenly ichthyic Stephen finds himself plying with 'urgent, hopeless strokes through [a] salty ocean' (*CIT* 66). Marcus notes that Stephen's 'quasi-encounter[…] removes all the security of his being, sending him spinning through a time before, or outside the known structures of, identity and temporality' (Marcus 86). It also strongly evokes the Kantian sublime's 'full and complete primordial experience of spatio-temporality' (Crowther 171).

McEwan's novel also stresses the sublime unfathomability of time, in whose contemplation 'the promise of teasing paradox' that is betrayed by the 'sheer difficulty, the indignity of coming up against the limitations of one's intellectual reach' (*CIT* 137). Crowther notes that the Kantian sublime is 'occasioned by powers which transcend the self, in some specifiable way', and that it represents 'a mode of reverence' uniting 'phenomenologically disparate states of enjoyment with horror, quiet wonder, and a sense of the splendid' (15). Just such a 'mode of reverence' can be seen in *The Child in Time*, through Stephen's eventual capitulation to time: 'all the sorrow, all the empty waiting, had been enclosed within meaningful time, within the richest unfolding conceivable' (*CIT* 251). This capitulation is a crucial part of Stephen's critical distance in the closing pages of the novel. It also suggests an implicit correspondence between the Kantian sublime and temporality within the traumatised consciousness. The temporal displacement Stephen experiences in seeing his parents through the window suggests a similar correspondence. Stephen's

removal from all contexts of time and identity evinces the 'disorienting or diremptive' symptoms of trauma, along with 'disempowerment[,] radical disorientation' and 'confusion' (LaCapra, *HIT* 45). Indeed, these symptoms are closely bound in this episode to the Kantian sublime.

1.4   The 'traumatic sublime' and sacralising counterforces to working through

In his work, LaCapra engages critically with the association between trauma and the sublime. Earlier in the chapter, and indeed in the thesis introduction, I referred to what he describes as the 'tendency to sacralize trauma or to convert it into a founding or sublime event' (*HIT* 123) – indeed, a tendency counteracted by the process of working through. This 'traumatic sublime or transfigured moment of blank insight and revelatory abjection', in LaCapra's terms, 'helps to create a compelling, even disabling sense of betrayal if one departs from a "fidelity" to it' (*HIT* 123). It also creates a 'compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 23). LaCapra's 'traumatic sublime' is not strictly Kantian in nature; at least, LaCapra does not explicitly claim so, though he does suggest that Kant's work bears a 'desire for, or affirmation of, radical transcendence […] at times in a paradoxically religious atheism' (*HIT* 49). He also refers to the sublime (insofar as it represents an ideological resistance to working through) as a kind of secularised sacred (*HIT* 122). In its 'compulsive preoccupation with aporia' and 'endlessly melancholic,

impossible mourning' (*WHWT* 23), the 'traumatic sublime' may also correspond

with the 'certain dread' or 'melancholy' that Kant includes among the sensations that

stir the sublime (47).

    The Child in Time invokes similarly 'sacralising' counterforces to the process

of working through. These function not only as a resistance to working through but

also as a means of evincing the traumatic resonance of the 'malevolent intervention'

(*CIT* 158) in the novel and Stephen's response to it. In the two years between the

abduction and the beginning of the narrative, Stephen has become 'the father of an

invisible child'; if not for 'the fantasy of her continued existence', the narrator states,

he would be 'lost' (*CIT* 2). This fantasy is most acutely described when, on what

would have been Kate's sixth birthday, Stephen visits a toy shop, spends a large

amount of money and takes his gift purchases home, conceiving the whole act as an

'offering to fate' (*CIT* 149). Once home, he unpacks a set of two walkie-talkies and,

to test their range, sings 'Happy Birthday'. The narrator (focalising Stephen's

thoughts) states: 'This was a machine to encourage proximity. It belonged in the plan'

(*CIT* 150). Through the reference to a 'machine' that 'encourage[s] proximity',

Stephen may be obliquely reminding himself of, and rebuking himself for, his

momentary negligence in the supermarket. It also suggests, however, the traumatic

'bond with the dead' through which one 'may invest trauma with value and make its

reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains

dedicated or at least bound' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 22). Stephen's 'plan' is not entirely

clear, though it appears to consist of superstitious gestures, 'magical thought' and

'offering[s] to fate' (*CIT* 146, 149). Stephen's lost daughter is unreachable and

unknowable 'on the material plane', her retrieval only believable through an 'act of faith' and only assayable 'on the level of the symbolic and the numinous' (*CIT* 146, 147). After pursuing a schoolgirl under the misapprehension that she is Kate, and realising that she is not, Stephen searches for alternative explanations, and imagines

> Kate's spirit, how it might hover high above London, how it might
> resemble some kind of brilliantly colored dragonfly, capable of
> unimaginable speeds and yet remaining perfectly still as it waited to
> descend to a playground or street corner to inhabit the body of a
> young girl, infuse it with its own particular essence to demonstrate to
> him its enduring existence before moving on, leaving the empty shell,
> the host, behind.   (*CIT* 178)

These notions may constitute part of the traumatic symptomology in the novel, in particular the 'compelling, even disabling sense of betrayal' (LaCapra, *HIT* 123) and the 'compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 23). Stephen's experience of 'dementedly living through the very reunion that [has] preoccupied him constantly' is a significant marker in the process of working through in the narrative. Its effects are described in the novel:

> Stephen came to feel that if he had not exorcised his obsession, he had
> blunted it. He was beginning to face the difficult truth that Kate was
> no longer a living presence […]. He had been mad, now he felt
> purged.   (*CIT* 179)

Moving beyond the kind of 'magical thought' (*CIT* 146) that sustains notions of the 'traumatic sublime' (LaCapra, *HIT* 123) in the novel comprises a significant part of the representation of Stephen's working through and reaching critical distance.

Conclusion

The narrative mode in *The Child in Time* appears to respond not only to temporal aporias 'that elude philosophical resolution' (Lloyd 165) but also aporias of trauma and the sublime. It sits among the body of 'alternative narrative modalities' that query the very 'nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas' that 'call[…] them into existence' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 55, 54). However, such modalities can still only constitute a response, not a resolution. *The Child in Time* is haunted by irresolution, from the appearance of the 'shrouded figure in the periphery of vision' to the 'reminder of a harsh world' in the final passage (*CIT* 12, 263). This irresolution manifests on the structural level through the use of free indirect discourse, the 'middle voice' that creates 'undecidability' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 196, 196-7). This 'undecidability' is acutely realised through the attachment of the narrative point of view to the protagonist's skewed interpretations (as when he misidentifies a schoolgirl as his daughter), and the presentation of anachronisms without any apparent grounds in reality (as when he sees his own parents before he is born). Irresolution in this sense casts the aporias of *The Child in Time* in new lights, but chiefly to the purpose of raising questions and resisting a conventional narrative approach that would seek 'resonant closure or uplift' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 54). The

acknowledgement in the novel that Stephen and his wife can 'never redeem the loss of their daughter', nor 'close their minds to the possibility of her return' (*CIT* 256), suggests that such a 'resonant closure or uplift' is indeed foreclosed. Similarly, in the conclusion's juxtaposition of a past 'enclosed within meaningful time' and a future opened under sinister Martian auspices (*CIT* 251, 263), the novel pointedly asserts the way trauma complicates the negotiation of both. This problematic negotiation engenders the narrative's distorted temporalities and sublime connotations, and places them 'in an agonistic, […] fruitful interaction with one another' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 197).

The anachronisms in the narrative signal attempts of the consciousness to shed the 'weight of time' (*CIT* 12) as part of Stephen's working through Kate's sudden loss, itself happening anachronistically, in the sense that trauma always occurs 'too soon, too unexpectedly' (Caruth, *UE* 4). This does not, however, suggest that the narrated consciousness sheds this temporal weight completely. As I have noted, a sustained awareness of the source of trauma and the potential for its continued intrusions is still consistent with critical distance; '[W]orking-through', LaCapra notes, does not lead to 'full redemption, total recovery, or unmitigated caesura', but represents 'a recurrent process that[…] may never totally transcend acting-out or compulsive repetition' (*HIT* 144-5). Furthermore, critical distance should be seen as 'a reengagement with ongoing concerns and future possibilities' (*HIT* 45). This is exemplified in *The Child in Time* through the arrival of a new life, 'a beautiful child' (*CIT* 262), in the final chapter. It is tempered, however, by the narrative's final assertion of ominous uncertainty, recalling the 'sadness […]

millennia old' and Stephen's primordial glimpse of a universe in which 'nothing was

his own, not his strokes or his movement,[…] not even the sadness, nothing was

nothing's own' (*CIT* 66).

The Child in Time bears a glimpse of something so nihilistic it borders on the

Kantian sublime, in which 'the imagination is forced up traumatically against its own

limits [and] finds itself straining beyond them in a movement of negative

transcendence' (Eagleton, *IA* 91). With no tenable sense of time, place, morality,

quiddity or meaning left to hold dear in that moment, but only their negatives,

Stephen's consciousness is captured at the 'disorienting' and 'diremptive' (LaCapra,

HIT 45) extreme of traumatic experience. This experience is intimately bound to the

sublime in *The Child in Time*. Indeed, it is through this bind to the Kantian sublime,

'occasioned by powers which transcend the self' (Crowther 15), that McEwan most

fully evokes the traumatised consciousness and its process of working through

'difficulties […] not bred from within' (*CIT* 158).

2   Epistemic instability, the Burkean sublime and the

traumatic 'aftermath' in *Enduring Love*

Introduction

In my study of *The Child in Time*, I considered LaCapra's criticism that the use of

sublime discourse in negotiating trauma represents a sacralising gesture (*HIT* 123).

However, he does not seem to apply the same strictures to fiction as to

historiography and psychology. I have demonstrated some of the ways in which

sublime discourse can complement the fictive representation of trauma, with respect

to issues of temporality, belatedness and disorientation.

For my study of *Enduring Love*, I will bring several considerations forward

from the previous chapter, such as LaCapra's ideas on 'alternative narrative

modalities' (*WHWT* 55) and the frequent recourse to the sublime in trauma and its

related discourses. However, I will also apply new questions in light of the different

narrative techniques that appear in this novel. I begin by establishing the narrative

framework. My analysis of the air balloon accident that begins *Enduring Love* will

then reveal how the evocation of the Burkean sublime in the novel opens onto

conflicting hermeneutics and the traumatic 'dissociation between cognition and

affect' (LaCapra, *HIT* 117). I argue that the separation of narrative perspectives in

the 'aftermath' (*EL* 2)[16] of the accident serve to develop these effects. The result is a

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[16] All subsequent references within this chapter are to the 1998 Vintage-Random edition of *Enduring Love*, unless otherwise stated.

splintered, epistemically unstable narrative structure that asserts unknowability as a part of traumatic and sublime experience.

Before examining the subject matter of the novel, I will briefly outline some of the features of its narration. An understanding of how the narration of *Enduring Love* works will be integral to understanding epistemic instability within the narrative structure. The use of the first-person point of view is sustained throughout the novel (with the sole exception of the first appendix), though the particular narrative voice varies with the inclusion of epistolary chapters and appendices. Despite these variations in narrative voice, the use of past tense is maintained, positioning the 'totality of actions and situations' – that is, the complete 'succession of events' related in the novel (Genette 25) – at some temporal distance from the time of narration. I am concerned in my analysis not so much with the instance of narration or 'the event that consists of someone recounting something' (Genette 26), but with the medium through which we receive the 'totality of actions and situations'. Joe's account represents twenty-one of *Enduring Love*'s twenty-four chapters (excluding the appendices). As Joe's narration predominates in the novel and offers the fullest description of this 'totality', particularly the air balloon accident, it will be the main focus of much of my discussion. I analyse the effects of the varied narrative voice later in the chapter, in terms of the epistemic instability of the novel.

2.1   '[F]rom th'Ethereal Sky': the Burkean sublime and 'terrible objects'

To orient my study, I will summarise the accident with which *Enduring Love* begins.

While attempting to land in a field, a pilot loses control of his air balloon. It is swept

away by a gust with the pilot's grandson on board, but not before five witnesses

(including Joe Rose, the protagonist) have converged at the balloon's rope and, in a

bid to anchor the craft, clung to it. One by one, as the balloon continues to ascend,

the men on the rope let go, unable to hold on, until only John Logan is left. By the

time Logan releases the rope, the fall is too great to survive. As Joe recalls, 'We

watched him drop. […] No forgiveness, no special dispensation for flesh, or bravery,

or kindness. Only ruthless gravity' (*EL* 16). The sublime resonance of this event is

figured early in the narrative, before the nature of the crisis is fully described. The

moments I will analyse from the narrative intersect at many points with trauma, but I

will reserve this discussion for later in the chapter.

       In representing the sublime, something is invariably lost in translation. For

Isobel Armstrong, the sublime is 'a supreme moment of aporia, a breakdown of

representation when emotional shock and language do not match' (115). Armstrong,

like Genevieve Lloyd, employs the term 'aporia' in the sense of a 'perplexing

difficulty' ("Aporia," def. 2). This aporia points to the sublime 'power of an object or

event' before which 'words fail and points of comparison disappear' (Shaw 2). In

Enduring Love, such a vision of the sublime is realised through the air balloon

accident that leads to Logan's death. Joe recalls the 'prior moment', before he

reaches the rope and the events are set in train, as 'the last time [he] understood

anything clearly at all' (*EL* 2, 3). Indeed, Joe's description of the balloon, even

before he has defined it, is more suggestive of its inscrutability than the specific, observable details of the moment.

> What were we running towards? I don't think any of us would ever know fully. But superficially the answer was, a balloon. Not the nominal space that encloses a cartoon character's speech or thought, or, by analogy, the kind that's driven by mere hot air. It was an enormous balloon filled with helium, that elemental gas forged from hydrogen in the nuclear furnace of the stars, first step along the way in the generation of multiplicity and variety of matter in the universe, including ourselves and all our thoughts.
>
> (*EL* 3)

Joe's inability to describe the object simply as an air balloon points to an incapacity to accommodate it psychologically or express it in language. Joe represents the accident as somehow impenetrable, something he cannot 'ever know fully' (*EL* 3). A common feature of the sublime is that it represents extremes, a confounding magnitude or absence. LaCapra observes that '[t]he sublime is related to excess or, conversely, lacuna or lack – that which is disconcertingly, perhaps ecstatically other and aporetically beyond (or beneath) any ability to name or to know' (*HIT* 145-6). The description of the air balloon in *Enduring Love* in almost cosmological terms leans conspicuously to the side of excess. The object is made causative in the most elemental sense, the stuff of atomic 'matter', signifier of the vast 'generation of multiplicity and variety of matter in the universe', the very substance of 'ourselves and all our thoughts' (*EL* 3).

Though these details point to excess and sublimity, they do not strongly indicate any specific conception of the sublime. However, as the first chapter progresses, and in the retrospections on the accident later in the novel, the evocation of terror in response to the accident suggests that the narrative draws on Burkean sublime discourse. According to Edmund Burke, the sublime inheres within 'whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror' (Burke 39), and, in contrast to the small and containable aspects of the beautiful, sublime objects are 'vast in their dimensions', 'obscure', 'dark and gloomy', 'solid' (Burke 124). Indeed, as observed in the previous chapter, Burke reads the sublime 'as a *causal* effect of quite specific properties in objects' (Crowther 11; emphasis in original). The sublime object is innately 'terrible' (Burke 39) and, as Eagleton observes, '[a]s a kind of terror', the Burkean sublime 'crushes us into admiring submission' (*IA* 54). However, there is a distinct pleasure in this, which derives from the 'position of safety' (Crowther 8) of the observer. I will consider the various means by which *Enduring Love* evokes these sublime effects through the representation of the accident at its beginning.

In the passage I quoted earlier in this chapter, the air balloon is described in terms of its enormity (*EL* 3). This same aspect and what it signifies is referenced earlier in the novel, while Joe 'linger[s] in the prior moment' (2), before the crisis itself has unfolded. While Joe is not a pure observer but rather a participant in the scene, he defines the object in crisis solely in terms of its Burkean sublime qualities: its vast dimensions and threatening power, and how it dwarfs the subject.

> The encounter that would unhinge us was minutes away, its enormity
>
> disguised from us not only by the barrier of time but by the colossus
>
> in the centre of the field that drew us in with the power of a terrible
>
> ratio that set fabulous magnitude against the puny human distress at
>
> its base.   (*EL* 2)

The final moments of Logan draw similarly on Burkean sublime discourse, but
through Joe as the observer rather than the participant.

> The balloon and its basket lifted away and westwards, and the smaller
>
> Logan became, the more terrible it was, so terrible it was funny, it
>
> was a stunt, a joke, a cartoon, and a frightened laugh heaved out of
>
> my chest.   (*EL* 15)

In Joe's response (as well as Clarissa's, which I will address shortly), the proximity
to Logan is lost, spatially and affectively, and his death becomes a distant, bathetic
spectacle, connoting a Burkean 'appreciation of sublimity, as an aesthetic response to
the terrible' (Crawford). Perhaps a trace of Adorno flashes across the spectacle, the
sublime that 'is only a step removed from the ridiculous' and that '[e]ven in Kant's
formulation [...] was tinged with the nothingness of man' (Adorno 198). Joe's
response distances and in a sense trivialises Logan's plight at the rope, if only
momentarily. It is a response that only an observer is privileged to give. For Burke,
these are the ideal conditions for a sublime moment; 'When danger or pain press too
nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain
distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we

every day experience' (Burke 40). The pleasurable fear in beholding 'terrible objects' (Burke 39) from safe vantage points, in the Burkean sense, 'is actually inimical to thought, since fear "robs the mind" of its power to reason. The mind is so filled with the object of contemplation that "it cannot reason on that object"' (Vanessa Ryan 271).

In reaction to the same sight, though recounted later in the narrative, Clarissa invokes 'a scrap of Milton': '*Hurl'd headlong flaming from th'Ethereal Sky*' (*EL* 29; emphasis in original). In terms of sublime resonance, McEwan's choice of intertext is apposite; *Paradise Lost* holds a pivotal place in the sublime's literary heritage[17]. Burke himself claims that Milton best 'understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, […] in their strongest light by the force of a judicious obscurity' (Burke 59), and identified 'not any where… a more sublime description than [the] justly celebrated one of Milton' (Burke 61) – specifically, the description of Satan, to which Clarissa alludes. The influence of Milton on Burke's concept of the sublime is notable, an influence that 'made him a perfect exemplar of the Burkean sublime' (Crawford).

In the description of Joe's and Clarissa's return home after the accident, the novel continues to draw on the Burkean sublime, in particular its connection of pleasure to self-preservation (Crowther 8). The couple release their experience in 'a torrent, a post-mortem, a re-living, a de-briefing, the rehearsal of grief, and the

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[17] The 'coincidental publication' in 1674 of the twelve-book edition of Milton's epic poem and a French translation of Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri hypsous*), 'marked the beginnings of what would become the eighteenth century's obsession with the sublime' (Furniss 20). Joseph Addison viewed 'the Sublimity of [Milton's] Thoughts' as being where his 'chief Talent, and indeed his distinguishing Excellence' lay (Addison, *Criticism* 28), as did Kant, for whom *Paradise Lost* evokes sublime 'enjoyment but with horror' (Kant, *OFBS* 47).

exorcism of terror' (*EL* 28). They make tentative conversational approaches to

Logan's fall: '[W]e backed away from that moment again and again, circling it,

stalking it, until we had it cornered and began to tame it with words' (*EL* 29).

However, the novel quickly begins to trace a movement from hesitancy to something

more purposeful, almost pleasurable, as they 'lean[…] over the table like dedicated

craftsmen at work, grinding the jagged edge of memories, hammering the

unspeakable into forms of words, threading single perceptions into narrative' (*EL* 30).

They interrupt this process by making love, 'a shift to the essential', a response to

having 'seen something terrible together' (*EL* 33). Eagleton attributes sexual

overtones to the Burkean sublime, which he claims is 'on the side of enterprise,

rivalry and individuation', and represents 'a phallic "swelling" arising from our

confrontation of danger'. This is experienced 'in the pleasurable knowledge that we

cannot actually be harmed' (*IA* 54)[18]. For Joe, the sense of 'deliverance' that comes

with sexual intercourse, the sense of being 'a point of warmth in the vastness' (*EL*

34), may be the lingering frisson of his earlier contemplation on life and death, after

seeing Logan fall;

> I looked out across the fields and the thought scrolled across: *that*
>
> *man is dead*. I felt a warmth spreading through me, a kind of self-love,
>
> and my folded arms hugged me tight. The corollary seemed to be: *and*
>
> *I am alive.*   (*EL* 19; emphasis in original)

---

[18] I will also discuss Eagleton's association of the Burkean sublime with the 'phallic' later in my study, in relation to McEwan's *Saturday*, and the role of the sublime in restoring order.

The novel's description of Joe's and Clarissa's 'exorcism of terror' concludes with the reassertion of their 'whole world': '[e]motional comfort, sex, home, wine, food, society' (*EL* 28, 36). They invite friends to their apartment and share their account of the accident, their story 'gaining in coherence', assuming 'shape', and 'spoken from a place of safety' (*EL* 36). However, even in their first rehearsal of the accident narrative, Joe indicates a form of aporetic impasse – in his terms, 'the abyss that divided experience from its representation by anecdote' (*EL* 36). This points to the larger question regarding not only the veracity of the first-person narrators in *Enduring Love*, but the extent to which subjective perception forecloses objective understanding and representation.

2.2   Traumatic dissociation and the response to 'meaninglessness'

McEwan's use of Burkean sublime discourse serves the novel's evocation of traumatic experience. Before analysing this relationship, however, I will outline some of the relevant trauma discourse through which I read traumatic experience in *Enduring Love*. I consider the air balloon accident with reference firstly to LaCapra's notion of the 'out-of-context experience' of trauma, and secondly to the 'dissociation between cognition and affect' and 'aporetic relation between representation and affect' that may emerge from such 'out-of-context experience' (*HIT* 117).

In *History in Transit*, LaCapra offers a succinct definition and description of trauma as an 'out-of-context experience that upsets expectations and unsettles one's very understanding of existing contexts' (*HIT* 117). This formulation seems to apply

as relevantly to the child abduction in *The Child in Time* as to the fatal air balloon accident in *Enduring Love*. Cathy Caruth refers specifically to this latter kind of scenario when she describes trauma as 'not just any event' but 'the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident' (*UE* 6). In *Enduring Love*, as noted earlier, Joe considers the 'prior moment' before the ballooning tragedy unfolds as 'the last time [he] understood anything clearly at all' (*EL* 2, 3). The whole episode is, to a certain extent, resistant to understanding, even for a character in whose view '[t]here are always antecedent causes' (*EL* 17). Joe claims that the initial shout of the pilot that interrupts his picnic 'fixed a transition, a divergence from the expected': 'When I let the wine bottle fall to run across the field[,] I chose a branching in the paths that foreclosed a certain kind of easeful life' (*EL* 18). These details help situate the air balloon accident as a disjunctive or, in LaCapra's terms, 'shattering' (*HIT* 117) experience.

Situating the accident in this way is not altogether different, in terms of narrative effect and function, to the 'malevolent intervention' (McEwan 158) in *The Child in Time.* In both novels, the out-of-context experience of trauma creates a site of recursive obsession for the protagonist and functions as a catalyst for the plot. However, the representation of such an experience differs markedly in *Enduring Love*. The air balloon accident is not a 'malevolent intervention' (McEwan *CIT* 158), as there is no evil intent behind it. Indeed, Joe's account underscores the role of the impersonal forces of chance in what transpires; 'It was a random matter, who was alive or dead at any given time' (*EL* 19). Even the actions of those at the rope are put down to evolutionary mechanisms beyond human control. Jonathan Greenberg

suggests that Joe's reduction of 'human motives to an unconscious and biological calculus among inborn instincts […] appears as avoidance or displacement of the emotional horror of Logan's death', and that Joe, 'both in the past as a character and in the present as a narrator, tends to divorce ideas from people', signalling a rift between the 'intellectual' and 'affective' (102). Greenberg's point offers insight into reading the dissociative effects of trauma in the narrative. LaCapra posits that an integral component of the 'radically disorienting experience of trauma' is 'a dissociation between cognition and affect' (*HIT* 117). Essentially, what the subject perceives or apprehends is disjoined from what the subject feels. In *Enduring Love*, during Logan's final moments, Joe fails to apprehend the scene or the very reality of what transpires. He lets out a 'frightened laugh', despite the 'terrible' nature of what he is seeing (*EL* 15). The 'emotional horror' (Greenberg 102) of what he witnesses clearly does not filter through in the moment, but comes in the form of a cognitive and affective dissociation, indicative of traumatic experience.

The cognitive side of this dissociation is described by Joe 'in the past as a character'. This becomes a representational problem when applied to Joe 'in the present as a narrator' (Greenberg 102), or when we consider what Genette terms 'the event that consists of someone recounting something' (26). LaCapra claims that, in addition to the 'dissociation between cognition and affect', trauma creates 'an aporetic relation between *representation* and affect' (*HIT* 117; emphasis added). Greenberg notes that while certain traces of shame and guilt emerge in Joe's account in *Enduring Love*, 'in its clinical precision, [it] leaves little room for examination of such feelings' (101-2). Indeed, Joe relies heavily on scientific discourse in his

narration. In the opening scene, described as 'a crisp illustration of game theory' (Zalewski), Joe interlaces his account of the accident with frequent references to evolutionary psychology. In describing the men's attempts to bring the balloon to earth, he laments their lack of a leader (*EL* 11) and contemplates altruism, the 'mammalian conflict – what to give to the others, and what to keep for yourself' (*EL* 14) – and 'morality's ancient, irresolvable dilemma: us, or me' (*EL* 15). Joe observes that the pilot's grandson, as he lies curled in the balloon's basket, 'was in paralysis of will, a state known as learned helplessness, often noted in laboratory animals subjected to unusual stress' (*EL* 11). The resistance of Joe's narration to touching on the affective nature of his experience suggests more than 'avoidance or displacement of the emotional horror of Logan's death'; it suggests that the 'dissociation between cognition and affect' for Joe 'in the past as a character' endures as 'an aporetic relation between representation and affect' for him 'in the present as a narrator'.

Such a relation not only resonates with traumatic experience, in which 'one typically can represent numbly or with aloofness what one cannot feel, and one feels overwhelmingly what one is unable to represent' (LaCapra, *HIT* 117); it also resonates with the sublime, 'inimical to thought' (Vanessa Ryan 271), 'a supreme moment of aporia, a breakdown of representation when emotional shock and language do not match' (Armstrong 115). Both trauma and sublime discourses educe similar effects of aporia, some 'perplexing difficulty' ("Aporia," def. 2) or impasse to understanding and representation, in relation to the air balloon accident. These effects continue beyond the accident, and position it as a scene of 'obsessive re-

examination' and an occurrence that is bewilderingly void of meaning; 'The

impossible idea,' reflects Joe, 'was that Logan had died for nothing' (*EL* 2, 32).

McEwan's novel presents Joe's effort to accommodate and respond to the

'meaninglessness' of trauma (LaCapra, *HIT* 45), negotiating the psychological

intrusions that result. These intrusions are figured externally in Jed Parry, a fellow

survivor of the air balloon accident. The majority of *Enduring Love* takes place in the

wake of the accident, and so the novel explores these effects in the 'aftermath' – as

Joe observes, 'an appropriate term for what happened in a field waiting for its early

summer mowing' (*EL* 2). Within this 'aftermath', Joe becomes the target of the

sudden and repeated intrusions of Jed. Inspired by a brief exchange at the scene of

the accident (*EL* 93), Jed begins to profess his love for Joe through letters, phone

calls, answering machine messages and long hours standing outside Joe's apartment.

Jed suffers from de Clérambault's syndrome, described in the novel as 'a delusional

conviction of being in amorous communication with another person' where no such

communication exists (*EL* 235); this conviction is unshaken by 'protestations of

indifference or even hatred', which are interpreted as 'paradoxical or contradictory'

(*EL* 234). For Jed, the object of this delusional love is Joe. The consequence is

continual intrusion, through which the affective shock of the accident is brought

forth belatedly for Joe as an embodied symptom, in line with the 'belated effects or

symptoms' of trauma (LaCapra, *HIT* 118). Such a reading of Jed is most overtly

suggested in the novel through Clarissa, who persistently doubts the veracity of Joe's

claims. She not only questions the authenticity of Jed's letters, but claims that their

author is 'not the cause of [Joe's] agitation' but 'a symptom' (*EL* 100, 84).

Caruth refers to 'the story of trauma […] as the narrative of a belated experience' (*UE* 7), and addresses trauma in Freudian terms as an imposition on consciousness that is undetected, and indeed only nascent, during the traumatic event itself, but which manifests repeatedly and involuntarily over time (*UE* 4). In McEwan's novel, any significance to Jed in the scene of the accident is given by Joe only retrospectively; at the time of the accident, the presence of Jed barely registers. Indeed, the immensity of the balloon, and the traumatic excess it signifies, conceal Jed; Joe recalls that in his approach to the rope, his 'view of [Jed] was blocked by the balloon that lay between [them]' (*EL* 9). The effect of Jed's subsequent reappearance, however, mirrors the psychological effect of trauma on Joe, and indeed figures as the real displacement of the affective shock or 'emotional horror' (Greenberg 102) of witnessing Logan's death. As Joe reflects, 'The moment Logan hit the ground should have been the end of this story rather than one more beginning' (*EL* 18). If the affective shock of Logan's death is displaced, Jed seems the ideal vehicle for such a displacement; he forecloses any effort of Joe's to move on.

Jed's letters – what Greenberg considers 'intrusion[s] of the epistolary' (113) – give Jed his own narrative voice and, while not appearing in an epistolary novel, serve a similar function 'both [as] a medium of the narrative and an element of the plot' (Genette 217). They also reveal the extent of Jed's 'deep intra-psychic world' (Noakes 83), or, as described by Joe, his 'solipsism', within which '[t]he logic that might drive him from despair to hatred, or from love to destruction in one leap, would be private, unguessable' (*EL* 144). These letters take the form of 'long and ardent' confessional writings through which Jed addresses Joe; 'you […] have

welcomed me in ways that no intrusive ears or eyes will intercept,' he writes, 'by means that I alone can understand' (*EL* 141, 94). Childs notes that Jed's letters 'constitute [his] only direct voice in the book' (117); all of his discourse outside of the letters is mediated by Joe. The letters also underscore the difference between his and Joe's appraisals of the same experiences. For example, where Joe sees the fatal balloon accident as traumatic chance at work, 'a random matter' (*EL* 19), a social and theodicean breakdown (14-16, 32), Jed sees an encounter marked by 'pure energy, pure light', filled with 'the charge and power and blessedness of love' (65, 93). Joe describes Jed as 'the stuff of bad dreams', inhabiting and perceiving 'a world determined from the inside, driven by private necessity', and 'illuminat[ing] the world with his feelings, and the world confirm[ing] him at every turn his feelings [take]' (147, 143). The inclusion of the letters in this case confirms Joe's report, as in his first letter when Jed describes an encounter with Joe. After seeing Joe leave his house and 'brush […] the top of the hedge with [his] hand', he walks nearer and inspects the leaves that Joe's hand has brushed against;

> I felt each one and it was a shock when I realised it was different from the ones you hadn't touched. There was a glow, a kind of burning on my fingers along the edges of those wet leaves. Then I got it. You had touched them in a certain way, in a pattern that spelled a simple message. […] What a fabulous way to hear of love, through rain and leaves and skin, the pattern woven through the skein of God's sensuous creation unfolding in a scorching sense of touch.
>
> (*EL* 96)

Again, Jed is shown to be 'scrutinising the physical world, its random placements

and chaotic noise and colours, for the correlatives of his current emotional state' (*EL*

143). In this sense, he does not interpret reality so much as render a new one, beyond

analysis or exegesis, full of false ascriptions, misconstructions. This is in keeping

with de Clérambault's syndrome, the disorder that first incites his obsession, the

'dark, distorting mirror' (*EL* 128). In a sense, it also expands on, or takes to its

extreme, 'the power and attractions of narrative' (*EL* 41) that Joe disdains. Jed

clashes with Joe on a fundamental hermeneutic level, which I will analyse in relation

to 'intellectual conflicts' (Greenberg 102) in the novel, the potential unreliability of

Joe's account, and the novel's varied narration and inclusion of appendices.

2.3   Epistemic instability and warping 'prism[s] of desire and belief'

Enduring Love is often identified as a novel of antitheses – for example, rationalism

and irrationalism, scepticism and mysticism (Childs 32, 34), science and the

humanities (Carbonell 2), and 'linear narration and postmodern fragmentation'

(Walker 1): a novel, in McEwan's terms, 'in which *ideas* [are] dramatized or played

out' (Noakes 88; emphasis in original). It is this quality to which Timothy Bewes

responds in his study of the novel, citing the way in which *Enduring Love* 'stages'

oppositions that scale up from the personal and relational (Joe and Clarissa, for

example), to the level of theme, and works as a 'novel of ideas' (429, 430). The

novel also unfolds distinctions within discourses, such as 'popular' science and 'real'

science. These distinctions are, according to Bewes, 'sustained' within *Enduring*

Love, leading to a 'chronic dissociation' between and within discourses and a retention of 'radical ambiguity' (431-2). Greenberg similarly notes discursive dissociation in the novel, particularly between the 'intellectual' and 'affective', but indicates that as 'a work of imaginative fiction and psychological realism', *Enduring Love* cannot resolve or remedy this dissociation but only 'situate [its] intellectual conflicts within psychological contexts' (102).

Several figures stand in for these intellectual conflicts in the novel. Joe is a science writer whose 'rationalism saturates the text' (Bewes 430) and strips the described world of its enchantment, distilling even the frenetic motions of a ballooning accident to causal sequences, 'state[s] of mathematical grace' (*EL* 3). Conversely, Jed is an unbalanced figure, whose frequently invoked 'God' is poorly defined and whose syndrome conjures a world of 'emotion, invention and yearning' (*EL* 152, 147). Clarissa, Joe's partner, is a Keats scholar, a woman of literary sensibility with whom Joe thrives in 'combative exchanges' (*EL* 8). She demonstrates a degree of rationalism, though considers Joe to take it to a childish extreme (*EL* 33). As critic Peter Childs notes, McEwan's novel is 'very much […] about perspective' (118). While Joe narrates the majority of *Enduring Love*, his is not the only point of view being presented; both Jed and Clarissa are given epistolary chapters (three and one, respectively). They rely on intuition rather than analysis as a means of interpreting events. In piecing together the air balloon accident and Logan's death, Clarissa's instinctual response is that it 'must mean something'. This is in contrast to Joe's assertion that 'Logan's death [is] pointless' (*EL* 32). Jed takes

intuition significantly further than Clarissa. His very condition, de Clérambault's

syndrome, represents a breakdown of hermeneutics.

Jed's syndrome is not the only element of *Enduring Love* that speaks to

hermeneutical breakdown; it tests Joe's own ability to interpret, and not always to his

credit. Childs notes that McEwan's novel is potentially 'claustrophobic in its reliance

on [Joe's] mediation' (116). Even through that mediation, the reader is presented

with positions that challenge Joe's interpretations or even insinuate that they are

misguided. The police officer, to whom Joe brings his concerns, regards the extent of

Jed's offences as merely very persistent evangelism (*EL* 74). Later in the novel,

Clarissa becomes a sceptical spectator of Joe in his mania, as he uses a gun to

incapacitate Jed: 'she was staring at the gun in my hand with an expression of such

repulsion and surprise that I thought we would never get past this moment' (*EL* 214-

5). Greenberg considers Joe's evident paranoia as significant not only for Clarissa

but for the novel at large (111); Joe's assessment of Jed is vindicated, but only as a

'confirm[ed] reality that is in the first place', like Jed's, 'structured by fantasy, by

story' (112). In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster writes of the traumatic 'confusion

of subject and world, inside and outside', and notes that 'it is an aspect of trauma;

indeed, it may be this confusion that is traumatic' (134). In the moment of Joe's

holding the gun and encountering Clarissa's 'repulsion and surprise' (*EL* 214), he

has become confused with Jed, a man operating beyond 'framework[s] of prediction',

with a logic 'private, unguessable' (*EL* 124, 144). The boundary between Joe's logic

and Jed's is hardly erased, but it is disturbed. This disturbance raises epistemic

questions to which Joe's rationalist narrative is as vulnerable as Jed's 'steamily self-

convinced, […] unfaked narrative[s] of emotion' (*EL* 101). Joe relates being

questioned by the police and encountering disagreement among witnesses to the

restaurant shooting, claiming:

> No one could agree on anything. We lived in a mist of half-shared,
>
> unreliable perception, and our sense data came warped by a prism of
>
> desire and belief, which tilted our memories too. We saw and
>
> remembered in our own favour and we persuaded ourselves along the
>
> way. Pitiless objectivity, especially about ourselves, was always a
>
> doomed social strategy.

(*EL* 180-1)

Joe's expression of such views has implications for his own narration. According to

Bewes, Joe is 'no scientist' but 'only a *translator* of science', and should be carefully

scrutinised, as one whose 'status as a reliable advocate of scientific rationalism is

compromised from the start' (431; emphasis in original). Childs notes that, when

questioned by the police about a restaurant shooting, Joe recalls being served apple

ice cream, yet unerringly describes being served lime sorbet in the previous chapter

(Childs 37; *EL* 171, 181). The evident muddling of these details is a small but

tangible instance of Joe getting it wrong in an otherwise methodical recount. This is

self-reflexive proof of his own dictum on the 'doomed social strategy' of '[p]itiless

objectivity' (*EL* 180-1). Through perspectival shifts and 'realit[ies] structured by

fantasy' (Greenberg 112), the novel formally enacts the kind of 'half-shared,

unreliable perception' and memory-tilting that Joe laments in recalling the

interrogation (*EL* 180), and evokes a world quite like Jed's, 'illuminat[ed] with feelings' and ever ready to confirm them (*EL* 143).

The potential unreliability of Joe's narration is thrown into sharp relief by the inclusion of alternative accounts. Through variation of the narrative voice, *Enduring Love* allows competing voices into the narrative space and calls attention to other possible 'points of view and ordering principles' (Randall 57). According to Greenberg, this 'presence of other characters' voices' serves to undermine the narrative 'authority' of Joe's voice. He also observes that Jed's letters, though 'at worst lunatic and at best naïve', occasionally 'touch a chord', particularly in their critical stance on Joe's journalism, a body of work 'driven less by a scientific pursuit of truth than by […] the imperatives of the publishing market' (103). Joe's status as a popular science writer, 'a commentator, an outsider to [his] own profession' (*EL* 77), may indeed, as Bewes suggests, inscribe 'unreliability […] into the novel *as a formal principle*' (431; emphasis in original).

The first of the two appendices in *Enduring Love* offers perhaps its nearest glimpse of an emotionally detached narrator. It is authored by two psychologists, one of whom is referred to again in the second appendix (*EL* 244); however, neither appendix constitutes a first-person account. The first is represented as a reprinted article from the *British Review of Psychiatry*, denotes Joe, Jed and Clarissa with single initials, and presents the events of the novel as a case study, complete with citations. The details summarised in the article agree with Joe's account, thus leading Bewes to read the appendix as 'overwhelming evidence of Jed's insanity' (430). The status of the article as a 'scholarly forgery' (Bradley and Tate 21), however, confuses

its role in verifying Joe's version of events. In light of this, Bewes qualifies his

statement, noting that by his own admission McEwan '"hoodwinked"[19] the scientific

establishment with his fictionalized appendix from […] a non-existent journal',

claiming that such a fabrication 'undermines the "rationalist" conclusions of the

novel' (434). Greenberg considers the appendices to act 'as an authorial endorsement

of Joe's judgments about [Jed] and his confidence in his scientific epistemology', but,

like Bewes, offers a qualification: 'Joe proves to be reliable on a factual level, but

any larger evaluation of events remains up for grabs' (111). The case study, then,

does not quite do away with the warping 'prism[s] of desire and belief' (*EL* 180), but

subtly confirms them, supporting Joe's first-person account 'with fabricated

evidence' (Kiernan Ryan 46) and affirming epistemic instability in the narrative.

Even if one considers the first appendix not to be 'fabricated evidence' (Kiernan

Ryan 46), taken solely as a case study it represents a further complication to the

hermeneutical conflict in the novel. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, in their

volume *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, state that '[a]ll research is

interpretive: guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should

be understood and studied' (26). The case study in a sense adds another perspective,

that of the psychologist authors, to the mounting collection in the novel. The second

appendix – another letter from Jed, 'written towards end of his third year' in an

asylum (*EL* 244) – supplements the first 'as another "found" text' (Bewes 430), and

closes the novel 'on a note of defiant irrationality', with Jed's 'rapturous *cri de coeur*'

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[19] McEwan 'hoodwinked' some of the literary establishment, too. In a *New York Times* review, Sven Birkerts notes the 'impressive transformation' of 'rearing up […] a fictional world around summary notations', then laments that the progression of *Enduring Love*'s narrative 'seems to lack some of the hard granularity of true invention'.

further 'suggest[ing] that the victory of dispassionate rationality is far from secure' (Kiernan Ryan 46).

Conclusion

The implication of epistemic instability for *Enduring Love* as a narrative whole is significant, especially with regard to trauma and the sublime. Rather than offering a third-person narration or even a sustained single first-person narration, McEwan divides the account among several witnesses and forecloses the kind of '[p]itiless objectivity' (*EL* 181) that may fully elucidate its events. The addition of the appendices further complicates any attempt at clarity and reaffirms 'the power and attractions of narrative' (*EL* 41). The varied, often conflicting hermeneutics presented in *Enduring Love* stem from the unaccountable death of Logan, signifier of both the sublime 'breakdown of representation', in which 'emotional shock and language do not match' (Armstrong 115), and the traumatic 'dissociation between cognition and affect' (LaCapra, *HIT* 117). These effects, along with the hermeneutical conflicts, are developed through the intrusions of Jed, one aberrant or freak phenomenon in the wake of another, whose solipsism epitomises the unknowable. These intrusions frustrate the attempts of both Joe and Clarissa to move forward as a couple, acting as the 'belated effects or symptoms' of trauma (LaCapra, *HIT* 118). They also contribute to Joe and Clarissa's estrangement, similar to the effect of the 'malevolent intervention' (McEwan 158) in *The Child in Time*.

In *Enduring Love*, however, the splintering of the narrative perspective creates ambiguity around the described events. Bradley and Tate suggest that while Jed may 'embod[y] McEwan's belief that the human desire for narrative can turn into a kind of quasi-religious pathology', perhaps, after all, 'there is no possibility of an entirely *de-narrated* position' (Bradley and Tate 20; emphasis in original). Joe appears to be vindicated in the novel through his accurate perception of Jed as a threat, and the dissolution of this threat through Jed's institutionalisation. This vindication is qualified, however, by Joe's own warping 'prism of desire and belief' (*EL* 180). The discursive divisions in *Enduring Love*, ostensibly resolved, are on closer inspection only confirmed; as Bewes notes, the novel retains its 'chronic dissociation' between discourses, and 'radical ambiguity' (431-2). Such ambiguity serves to question the appropriateness of narrative as a means of understanding and representing experience.

Trauma and the sublime are particularly central to the 'chronic dissociation' in *Enduring Love*; both experiences represent a disorienting extreme, something sublimely 'other and aporetically beyond (or beneath) any ability to name or to know' (LaCapra, *HIT* 145-6). McEwan's novel applies the question of how to *know* such experiences through narrative means, and emerges as subtly critical of its own faulty epistemologies and acutely aware of its 'many points of view and ordering principles' (Randall 57), representing consciousness 'as an interpretative act, an explicit sense-making process' (Green 456). In the trenchant commentary on flawed perception and memory that Joe shares in the novel, he claims that '[w]e're descended from indignant, passionate tellers of half truths who in order to convince others,

simultaneously convinced themselves' (*EL* 181). It is a pointed claim to make in a work that is itself part of the 'fictions, histories and biographies' of which Joe is so cynical (*EL* 42), and to which he can offer no alternative. Through its splintering of narrative perspective, however, *Enduring Love* renders in its structure the diversity of interpretive approaches that traumatic events invite, and in a sense, demand. The sublime broadly speaks to the problem of subjectivity and the inherent need to negotiate reality within its constraints. Eagleton observes that a 'hermeneutical world is likely to be a violent one' (*SV* 113). Certainly, the diversity of conflicting hermeneutics on display in *Enduring Love* offers a keen narrative insight into such a world.

3   **'[T]he nature of their fate' and 'the nature of their**

tragedy': ironising trauma and the Wordsworthian

sublime in *Amsterdam*

Introduction

The Child in Time and *Enduring Love* implicitly question not only the extreme nature

of the experiences they represent, but also the means by which they represent those

experiences. In the two preceding chapters, I have addressed how the former novel

renders an 'undecidability of voice' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 196-197) through the use of

free indirect discourse, and how the latter creates epistemic instability through its

array of first-person narrative voices. In comparison, McEwan's 1998 novel[20],

Amsterdam, shows a satiric, apparently straightforward third-person narration.

However, in his book-length study of McEwan's fiction, Dominic Head notes that

Amsterdam bears 'conflicting moods', and 'vacillates between an uncomfortable

self-consciousness at one extreme, and direct, knock-about satire at the other' (152).

He also observes 'a detached narrative voice that vacillates between an ironic mood

and one that is less implicitly critical' (145). In my study I consider the complex role

of this 'ironic mood', or what I will address as the narrator's ironic detachment, in

relation to the representation of traumatic experience, the Wordsworthian sublime

and fate. The ironic detachment of *Amsterdam*'s narrative point of view, as well as

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[20] Due to its short length, *Amsterdam* is occasionally described as a novella. Dominic Head, for
example, refers to it as such (144-55). For other examples, see Cowley and Lezard. However, I will
refer to the work as a novel, following the lead of critics such as Earl G. Ingersoll and Robert E. Kohn.

its broader ironic plot structure, essentially prevents the representation of traumatic

effects in the narrative. At a crucial point in the novel, the narrator suggests the

potential inevitability of the plot; this moment points to an alluring narrative of fate,

of which the 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177)[21] in the novel's dénouement serves as the

ironic endpoint. The narrative point of view and allure of fate in *Amsterdam* suggest

an engagement with tragic form, which lacks 'the slightest stain of contingency'

(Eagleton, *SV* 101). Despite this resemblance to tragic form, however, the ironic

detachment of the narrative point of view prevents any emotional resonance with

tragedy. I will also examine the narrative effect of ironic detachment and free

indirect discourse in the episode of the Lake District, which draws on the

Wordsworthian sublime. While the sustained ironic detachment of *Amsterdam*'s

narration prevents the representation of traumatic experience, it unsettles the

Wordsworthian sublime. With this representation of the sublime comes a final and

tragic 'recognition of finitude' (Eagleton, *SV* 176).

3.1   Molly's 'muffled shrieking' and the non-representation of traumatic experience

Among the novels in my study, *Amsterdam* is unique not only for its neat,

mechanistic plot and satiric tone, but also for the peculiar difficulty it poses to a

trauma-oriented reading. It is the story of Clive and Vernon, which essentially begins

where Molly Lane's story ends. Molly's death represents a catalytic loss, like the

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[21] All subsequent references within this chapter are to the 1998 Vintage-Random edition of *Amsterdam*, unless otherwise stated.

abducted Kate in *The Child in Time* or the falling Logan in *Enduring Love*. However,

in terms of traumatic resonance, this is where the resemblance ends. Where the bereft

father lives in a perpetual loop of the moment his daughter is snatched, and the

science writer struggles to hold his rationalist worldview together In the wake of a

freak accident, Clive and Vernon simply become absorbed in their own preservation.

In summary, the two men, 'former lovers of Molly Lane' (*Am* 3), are provoked by

her demise into their own 'abstractions' of 'illness and death' (*Am* 3, 25). This

manifests for Clive as a tingling sensation in the left hand, and for Vernon as a

'physical symptom' in the right side of his cranium, 'a sensation for which there was

simply no word' (*Am* 25, 31). Both men consider their own susceptibility to just the

kind of 'madness and pain' (*Am* 3) and death suffered by Molly, and take measures

to avoid the same end, at Clive's suggestion:

> 'Just supposing I [got] ill in a major way, like Molly, and I started to
>
> go downhill and make terrible mistakes, you know, errors of
>
> judgement, not knowing the names of things or who I was, that kind
>
> of thing. I'd like to know there was someone who'd help me to finish
>
> it… I mean, help me to die.'   (*Am* 48-9)

Vernon responds to this proposal: '*Yes, on one condition only: that you'd do the*

same for me' (*Am* 57; emphasis in original). This euthanasia pact is fulfilled in the

novel, though not in the way they intend. Each protagonist makes a moral decision

that the other finds deplorable, and interprets as a 'terrible mistake' or 'error of

judgement'. The premiere of Clive's symphony in the city of Amsterdam provides an

opportunity for Clive and Vernon, unbeknownst to the other, to exploit the Dutch

euthanasia laws and dispose of one another. Subsequently, the dénouement describes the 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177) of both protagonists. *Amsterdam* carries this plot through a third-person, past-tense narration that uses ironic detachment and free indirect discourse to respectively establish distance from and proximity to the protagonists.

The scarcity of detail around Molly's suffering, however, is significant to an account of how *Amsterdam* prevents the representation of traumatic experience. Molly's death draws attention to the unexpected and contingent in a manner akin to trauma: the fact that Molly 'never knew what hit her', for instance, and '[w]hen she did it was too late' (*Am* 3). However, an unexpected or contingent event is not in itself traumatic; for example, it may be an 'out-of-context experience', but not necessarily an experience that comes with 'belated effects or symptoms' (LaCapra, *HIT* 117, 118). In *Amsterdam*, Molly is deceased before the narrative begins, and her experience leading up to that point is described in sparing, somewhat oblique terms. She is remembered by those who survive her as a vivacious figure, cut down in the prime of life; 'feisty Molly […], restaurant critic, gorgeous wit and photography, the daring gardener who had been loved by the Foreign Secretary and could still turn a perfect cartwheel at the age of forty-six', is turned into the 'sick-room prisoner of her morose, possessive husband' (*Am* 3). When Vernon visits Molly's widower, he wonders if there were 'moments of clarity as [Molly] slid under, when she felt abandoned' (*Am* 55). Clive imagines 'passing the point Molly reached so quickly, when he would be too helpless, too disoriented, too stupid to kill himself' (*Am* 25). He again refers to '[t]he way she died, the speed of it, her helplessness' (*Am* 48).

Molly's degeneration is presented as unforeseen, unaccountable and rapid –

transpiring, indeed, without pause enough to be understood.

> The speed of her descent into madness and pain became a matter of
>
> common gossip: the loss of control of bodily function and with it all
>
> sense of humour, and then the tailing off into vagueness interspersed
>
> with episodes of ineffectual violence and muffled shrieking.
>
> (*Am* 3-4)

Here the narrative voice offers a horrifying opening onto Molly's suffering. However,

it is barely more than a passing allusion to an experience of which the larger

narrative offers no fuller exploration. Moreover, Molly's death does not take place

within the chronology of the novel itself; rather, it occurs before the described events

(which begin at her funeral), and exerts a crucial influence on them. Her past

sufferings are transmuted into Clive and Vernon's shared 'hypochondriac fears about

their own mortality' (Head 150), and through this, precipitate their own demise. In

this sense, her suffering has no importance to the narrative beyond its effect on her

survivors, and is given no closer examination within the wry, satiric world of

Amsterdam's narration and characterisation.

  In assuming a satiric stance, the narrative denies meaningful access to

Molly's suffering and thereby prevents any sustained reading of her experience as

traumatic. By and large, the ironic tone of the narrative forecloses any empathic

consideration of Molly. Such symptoms as 'muffled shrieking' may represent very

thin slivers of her real 'descent into madness and pain' (*Am* 3-4). In a sense, this

resonates with the Greek tragic tradition of reporting violence and bloodshed rather

than showing it (Henrichs 176-7) – and I shall address the novel's other

resemblances to tragedy later in this study. Yet the disturbing details of Molly's

suffering are not only sparingly reported, they are also subdued by the voices of

others, essentially overridden by the mourners' reminiscences, platitudes and sexual

gloats: the ribald 'Adam and Eve tableau' she once staged, Clive's lessons in 'sexual

stealth', Vernon's 'second bite' in Umbria (*Am* 7, 8). The descriptions of Molly's

suffering and the strange manner in which the protagonists go about their mourning

suggest a stark emotional remove – a narrative curtailment of traumatic experience,

in favour of 'direct, knock-about satire' (Head 152).

3.2   Narrative ironies, tragic resonance and the allure of fate

The narrative perspective enacts ironic detachment at various moments in

Amsterdam. Perhaps the most notable example occurs when Vernon misconstrues a

postcard[22] from Clive. The message, arriving slightly too late, is read in

circumstances Clive could not foresee, and creates a misunderstanding that

seemingly leads both protagonists to their 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177). However, the

third-person narrator in this moment is quick to observe 'the comic nature' of Clive

and Vernon's 'fate': 'a first-class stamp would have served both men well', but '[o]n

---

[22] This episode comes quite late in the narrative. Clive is outraged that Vernon has chosen to publish private photographs of the cross-dressing Foreign Secretary, Julian Garmony. He writes a postcard to Vernon which reads, 'You deserve to be sacked'. Unbeknownst to Clive, by the time the postcard reaches Vernon, he has been dismissed. 'What Clive had intended on Thursday and posted on Friday was, You deserve to be *sacked*. What Vernon was bound to understand on Tuesday in the aftermath of his dismissal was, You *deserve* to be sacked. Had the card arrived on Monday, he might have read it differently' (*Am* 148; emphasis in original).

the other hand, perhaps no other outcomes were available to them, and this was the

nature of their tragedy' (*Am* 148, 149). McEwan's use of the terms 'fate' and

'tragedy' point to larger structural qualities of the novel itself, pertinent to the

function of irony.

D. C. Muecke notes that dramatic irony 'is pre-eminently the irony of the

theatre, being implicit in the very nature of a play, "the spectacle of a life in which

[we] do not interfere but over which we exercise the control of knowledge"' (105).

Muecke here cites G. G. Sedgewick's *Of Irony: Especially in Drama*, in which

Sedgewick states that dramatic irony, while representing a sympathetic connection,

is 'likewise *detached*' (38; emphasis in original). In *Amsterdam*, the above-

mentioned narrative aside, 'perhaps no other outcomes were available to them, and

this was the nature of their tragedy' (*Am* 149), represents a moment of ironic

detachment akin to what Muecke and Sedgewick describe; however, in this instance

the narrator reveals an understanding of events that the protagonists lack and, as it

were, 'exercise[s] the control of knowledge' (Sedgewick 38). A similar distancing

effect is evoked in the scenes of Clive and Vernon's deaths; free indirect discourse

(and with it, proximity) is abruptly abandoned as they succumb to their lethal

injections (*Am* 169, 173). This effect is especially pronounced in the description of

Clive's death, in which '[f]rom the perspective of the Dutch doctor and nurse, [he]

lifted his head and, before closing his eyes, seemed to attempt, from his pillow, the

most modest of bows' (*Am* 169). For Eagleton, perspective is 'the phenomenological

form of irony, irony fleshed out as situation or event' (*SV* 111). These instances of

the third-person narrator becoming detached from the described events render the

effect of irony within the narrative perspective itself. The often sudden transitions out of free indirect discourse and into this detachment accentuate what Head describes as 'a detached narrative voice that vacillates between an ironic mood and one that is less implicitly critical' (145).

The plot of *Amsterdam* also serves to evince ironic effects through the configuration of events in the narrative. These events resonate with tragedy and suggest a narrative drive toward the dénouement that resembles fate, the 'predestined or appointed lot', or what an individual 'is fated to do or suffer' ("Fate," def. 3a, 3b). There is a certain allure to fate, as constructed in *Amsterdam*; through this construction of fate, the protagonists unwittingly head toward their own demise. Muecke claims that the 'Irony of Events' is evident 'when we meet what we set out to avoid, especially when the means we take to avoid something turn out to be the very means of bringing about what we sought to avoid' (102). In McEwan's novel, Clive and Vernon make their euthanasia pact to spare each other an undignified death, yet it is by the pact that they justify administering just such a death. This lends to the chain of events in *Amsterdam* a sense of fate's allure and the 'predestined or appointed lot', as well as 'the shapely necessity of art[23] itself' which, according to Eagleton, is unspotted by 'the slightest stain of contingency' (*SV* 101). Robert E. Kohn compares the 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177) to the ending of *Hamlet*, hinting at the theatrical tragic heritage on which McEwan's novel draws; he observes that the

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[23] Eagleton here refers to 'tragic art' and, by extension, tragic drama, as distinct from tragic literature, in that '[u]nlike the more diffuse, capacious epic or novel', it 'displays a certain inevitability in its very formal rigour' (*SV* 101).

'poisoning of Hamlet and Laertes, two friends once close as brothers, […] resonates in the tragic poisonings of Clive and Vernon' (100).

While tragedy is largely seen as the province of drama, the novel form is also recognised as a fully-fledged medium for exploring the tragic. Eagleton notes a history of critics who blame the novel for 'the death of tragedy' (*SV* 178), but suggests it is this genre to which we owe nothing short of 'major works of tragedy', citing Richardson's *Clarissa* and Melville's *Moby-Dick* as exemplary (*SV* 180).

> Whereas tragic drama, so the argument goes, distils some pure
> *moment of crisis* from the ruck of life around it, the novel is a species
> of imaginative sociology which returns such intense, isolated
> moments to the flow and counter-flow of history, patiently
> unravelling the rather less exotic, workaday forces which went into
> their making, and in doing so relativizing judgements which in their
> dramatic form can seem a good deal more stark and intractable.
>
> (*SV* 181; emphasis added)

Amsterdam's own 'moment of crisis' (Courtney 186) does not come at the expense of psychological acuity, for in its form it bears a sensitive awareness to 'less exotic, workaday forces' and, through free indirect discourse, is capable of 'relativizing' the characters' 'judgements' (Eagleton *SV* 181).

The rendition of consciousness in *Amsterdam* not only delineates the characters' relativized judgements, but shows where the characters' own thoughts fit

within the larger ironic structure of the novel. In a sense, Clive and Vernon's

thoughts are part of the 'carefully constructed narrative machine' that is 'engineered

to ensure [their] mutual destruction' (Garrard 710). Indeed, no matter what Clive and

Vernon choose to do, Amsterdam, the 'symbolic city of endings' (Ingersoll 125),

calls them from the beginning. The novel foreshadows many elements of the

dénouement as a means of suggesting the allure of fate. Earl G. Ingersoll, in his

study of the novel, notes the foreshadowing in the first chapter, in which Clive

ruminates on the 'unfinished score' of his symphony and his desire to 'reach the end'

(*Am* 6). Ingersoll considers this to represent part of *Amsterdam*'s larger 'symphony

of interrelated endings', and a profoundly ironic gesture (127). Such use of *double*

entendre suggests the ironic 'accept[ance] in all innocence [of] something which is

true in another sense than [is] imagine[d]' (Muecke 105). Clive's unscrupulous

pursuit of his 'final melody' provides the reason for Vernon's wanting to murder him,

or help him 'reach the end' (*Am* 24, 6). The euthanasia pact itself proves to be 'true

in another sense than [is] imagine[d]' (Muecke 105); its accommodative criteria –

'terrible mistakes' or 'errors of judgement' (*Am* 49) – provide an implicit sanction to

murder, on grounds not of mental but moral incapacitation. As Clive prepares

himself for the murder, the narrator observes that '[w]hat he was about to do was

contractually right, it had the amoral inevitability of pure geometry' (*Am* 161). In

terms of fate, the 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177) is an ironic act of fulfilment.

The funeral of Molly in a sense also presages the eventual fate of Clive and

Vernon. The whole tragic progression of *Amsterdam*, from its early foreshadowing

of the dénouement to the 'amoral inevitability' (*Am* 161) of its fulfilment, emerges

from this event. The novel begins and ends with a conversation over the deceased: in

the beginning, over Molly; in the end, over Clive and Vernon. Molly herself, though

not a living character, is a constant reference point and motivating force for the

protagonists. According to Robert E. Kohn, she is the character to whom '[t]he first

and last paragraphs and all of the major events in *Amsterdam* connect' (94; italics in

original). And, in a sense, Molly's fate is also the protagonists' fate: 'to die,' as Clive

observes, 'with no awareness, like an animal. To be reduced, humiliated…' (*Am* 4-5).

Her experience provokes them to make their pact, and her memory is used to justify

its fulfilment (*Am* 137-9). She appears to both Clive and Vernon in their final

moments, as they are under the influence of lethal injections (*Am* 167-8, 171-2).

Hannah Courtney includes the 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177) of *Amsterdam*'s

dénouement among the 'pivotal moment[s] of crisis' that dot McEwan's fiction (186).

While such a moment of crisis may open onto trauma in other works (for example,

The Child in Time or *Enduring Love*), this does not appear to be the case in

Amsterdam. For example, Clive's and Vernon's deaths are not out-of-context

experiences but experiences to which they are steered by fate. In this, the novel

effects a shift from the contingent to the determined. Molly's disorder, beginning as

'a tingling in her arm' (*Am* 3), manifests as a freak, inexplicable phenomenon. The

events that stem from it, however, appear to be mapped in advance for Clive and

Vernon. *Amsterdam*'s rendition of fate, with its suggestions of the 'radical

insecurity', limited 'powers of agency' and 'at times adversarial and destructive

potency of transpersonal forces' associated with tragedy (Button 71), questions the

protagonists' agency and seemingly divests their world of traumatic contingency.

This is keenly expressed in the moments of ironic detachment in the narrative voice, particularly the narrator's aside that 'perhaps no other outcomes [i.e. other than double euthanasia] were available to them, and this was the nature of their tragedy' (*Am* 149). Out of Molly's experience and their reflections on it, an apparently inexorable path is set in place for Clive and Vernon.

Of course, while individual agency is questioned in the narrative, the characters are not presented as automatons. Even the narrator, in commenting that '*perhaps* no other outcomes were available' to Clive and Vernon (*Am* 149; emphasis added), suggests that while fate's allure in the narrative might be strong, it may not be solely accountable for Clive and Vernon's missteps. Head notes that McEwan often poses moral dilemmas in his work, but 'simultaneously problematize[s] the grounds from which the novelist presumes to moralize'; *Amsterdam* presents a similarly 'ambivalent moral purview, but takes it to an extreme where the treatment of the moral dilemma verges on parody' (152). Indeed, this parodic element comes through in what McEwan understatedly describes as the 'rather improbable comic plot' (Begley 103) of two friends committing 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177) as a result of mutual moral outrage. The protagonists' mistakes, like the ironic fulfilment to which those mistakes lead, seem to have 'the amoral inevitability of pure geometry' (*Am* 161). The symmetrical construction of *Amsterdam* and its playfully ironic ending (Head 153) renders the outcome of Clive and Vernon's pact a little less serious than it might be, in a less satiric mode. This lack of seriousness also makes clear that while *Amsterdam* resonates with tragedy on a formal level, it does not resonate with tragedy on an emotional level.

Pity and fear are the emotions traditionally associated with tragedy (Konstan 1). Speaking from an Aristotelian standpoint, Stephen Halliwell notes that 'a properly conceived plot-structure implicitly calls for, and will inevitably evoke in the attuned audience or reader, the *distinctive tragic experience* of pity and fear' (168-9; emphasis added). However, he also observes that 'the association of pity and fear' with tragedy goes further back than Aristotle – as far back, indeed, as Homeric epic (170). According to Halliwell, the *metabasis* or 'crucial transformation of fortune' is central to the 'tragic plot-structure' as Aristotle envisioned it; through this 'transformation of fortune', the tragic protagonist suffers a fall in status and becomes the object of the tragic emotions (Halliwell 171). In McEwan's novel, one may read such a tragic change of fortune in Clive and Vernon's joint moral and professional failures, which lead to their 'mutual murder' (*Am* 177). These events convey tragic 'human frailty and vulnerability' (Halliwell 171) that would, rendered differently, evoke tragic emotions to match; however, the stark ironic detachment of the narrative voice maintains the novel's satiric tone, and forecloses any emotional resonance with tragedy.

3.3   The 'thrusts and counterthrusts' of the Wordsworthian sublime

Through the figure of the composer Clive and his journey to the Lake District, *Amsterdam* broadly invokes the eighteenth-century understanding of the sublime, which describes 'awe, reverence, admiration, astonishment, and terror', as well as 'the causes of these emotions in both art and nature' (Albrecht 2). Clive is essentially

the artist wandering into nature. More particularly, his journey connotes the 'process of thrusts and counterthrusts, of risings and resistances' (Bahti 493) associated with Wordsworth's version of the sublime.

In the Wordsworthian sublime, 'nature and mind imaginatively challenge, contradict, and metaphorize one another' (Bahti 484). In McEwan's novel, Clive takes something from nature; through 'the alert passivity of an engaged creative mind', he forges his melody 'out of the call of a bird' (*Am* 87). At the same time, nature is giving something to Clive; according to the narrator, but focalised through Clive's thoughts, this melody comes 'as a gift' (*Am* 84). This strong imaginative engagement between the subject and nature has Wordsworthian resonance. McEwan effectively employs free indirect discourse in this portion of the novel to (in Genette's terms) perfectly merge character and narrator (174), and indeed to acutely trace the connections between Clive's mind and the sublime landscape.

Wordsworth is not the only influence on *Amsterdam*'s representation of the sublime, though he is the most prominent. Indeed, other influences work within Wordsworthian discourse: for example, Burke's 'vocabulary of gloom, infinity, and grandeur' (Bahti 500), and Kant's stress on the 'faculty of imagination' that 'kicks in and triggers an imaginative response' (Bahti 489). The striking use of the Lake District suggests that McEwan consciously invokes the Romantic era that 'saw one of the high-water marks […] of the sublime as a mode of cultural production and a concern of critical thinking' (Balfour 503). In *Amsterdam*, Clive journeys to the Lake District in order to immerse himself in 'mountains' and 'big skies', and pursue this 'final melody' (*Am* 24). This landscape is none other than the 'great sanctuary for the

Romantics' (Tsai 17), haunted by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey. Clive is

confronted with a momentous prospect, one that affronts the 'sense of scale

habituated to the daily perspectives of rooms and streets' (*Am* 77). This provides a

'release,' a 'proof that his daily grind […] had reduced him to a cringing state' (*Am*

78).

> Soon human meaning would be bleached from the rocks, the
>
> landscape would assume its beauty and draw him in; the
>
> unimaginable age of the mountains and the fine mesh of living things
>
> that lay across them would remind him that he was part of this order
>
> and insignificant within it, and he would be set free.
>
> (*Am* 78)

In this encounter between Clive and the landscape, we are presented with another

Wordsworthian engagement between 'nature and mind' (Bahti 484) that speaks from

a distinctly Romantic heritage. The eighteenth century 'saw a decided intensification

in performing and reflecting on [the sublime], whether it approximated Longinian

transport, Burkean terror or the at once simpler and more conceptually weighty

modes […] of Kant' (Balfour 504). In particular, McEwan's Lake District recalls

what Joseph Addison described as 'that rude kind of magnificence which appears in

many […] stupendous works of nature', such as 'huge heaps of mountains, high

rocks and precipices', and the eye to which 'a spacious horizon is an image of liberty'

(Addison *Essays* 178).

In *Amsterdam*, it is in just such a landscape that Clive, with 'his mind […] contentedly elsewhere', receives his longed-for melody 'as a gift' (84), only to be robbed of it. He is removed from his prized solitude by the 'sudden shout' of a woman who is being assaulted (*Am* 62). Clive endeavours to finish his transcription of the melody and eschews his moral duty to help the woman. A subtle reversal of *Enduring Love* takes place; instead of 'we heard a man's shout[…]. Next thing, I was running towards it', we have a woman's shout, and 'he hurried back along the way he had come' (*EL* 1; *Am* 88). And so begins 'the insistent, interior voice of self-justification':

> Given the width of the ridge and the numerous paths that crossed it, how easily he could have missed them. It was as if he wasn't there. He wasn't there. He was in his music. His fate, their fate, separate paths. It was not his business. This was his business, and it wasn't easy, and he wasn't asking for anyone's help.
>
> (*Am* 88-89)

The use of free indirect discourse enables an acute rendition of this 'insistent, interior voice' (*Am* 88). This is in stark contrast to the effect of ironic detachment produced in several of the narrator's comments I have considered previously. The episode of the Lake District is rich in this more intimate, focalised mode of narration, though it is not the only example in *Amsterdam*: others include Clive's mortal ruminations, and his self-satisfied reflections on his potential 'genius' (*Am* 25-6, 133-4). In many cases, the use of free indirect discourse in the novel serves a larger structural purpose, often in terms of foreshadowing and ironic effect. The descriptions of Clive's

compositional process, for example, are closely related to the final failure of his

symphony. Before he has written his melody, Clive considers that 'the model, surely,

was Beethoven's Ode to Joy'; his finished work, in the cold light of a cancelled

première and a double autopsy, turns out to be a 'shameless *copy* of Beethoven's

Ode to Joy, give or take a note or two' (*Am* 76, 176; emphasis added). This

represents a conspicuous stroke of irony in the novel, something that in Muecke's

words turns out to be 'true in another sense than [is] imagine[d]' (105) – in this case,

in another sense than Clive imagines.

Through free indirect discourse, the novel also traces the 'psychic flurry' (*Am*

88) brought on for Clive by the woman's shout. Ingersoll describes the interruption

of Clive's musical transcription as an artistic '*coitus interruptus*' (130; italics in

original), and compares it to Coleridge's purported experience of the transcription of

Kubla Khan. According to this story, Coleridge is allegedly 'interrupted' by a

'visitor from Porlock[,] a practical man, talking business. The result is that the text

[i.e. *Kubla Khan*] is lost, broken off, left a fragment' (Westbrook 45). Of course, the

moral dilemma presented to Clive is more compelling than a knock at the door, the

interruption being not 'a practical man, talking business' but the prelude to an

attempted rape. Focalised through Clive's thoughts, however, the loss appears

commensurate; 'The woman shouted again and Clive, lying pressed against the rock,

closed his eyes. Something precious, a little jewel, was rolling away from him' (*Am*

87). Moreover, the narrative voice seems almost *with* Clive in his retreat. It acutely

traces the psychology of the moment, the slipping away of '[t]he jewel, the melody':

its 'momentousness pressed upon him. So much depended on it[.] In its simplicity

lay all the authority of a lifetime's work' (*Am* 87). As he hurries back to London,

however, the narrative voice appears to condemn Clive, while sustaining free indirect

discourse. This is particularly notable in the final paragraph of the chapter, in which

'the insistent, interior voice of self-justification' (*Am* 88) reaches its zenith:

> Surely it was creative excitement that made him pace up and
>
> down[…] waiting for his taxi[…]. It was excitement that caused him
>
> to step out into the lane a couple of times to see if his car was coming.
>
> [S]urely it was excitement that made him feel this way, not shame.
>
>
>
> (*Am* 89-90)

The self-admonitory tone conveyed by 'the insistent, interior voice of self-

justification' (*Am* 88) also resonates with the sublime landscape that surrounds Clive.

The Wordsworthian sublime does not always serve to inspire or elevate the subject,

but can also create a 'thoroughly negative, privative state' (Bahti 488). This is what

is meant by 'counterthrusts' and 'resistances' (Bahti 493). In *Amsterdam*, the same

nature that offers the 'gift' of the melody (*Am* 84) meets Clive with a stern face,

reminiscent of the 'moral dimension' lent by Wordsworth to the 'aesthetic categories

of sublime and beautiful' (Heffernan 610). Heffernan cites the 'horror of a mountain,

looming menacingly over' the scene of a boat theft in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*

(609), and the landscape's disciplinary aspect. In the scene to which Heffernan refers,

a boy rows away in a stolen craft, only to confront 'a huge peak, black and huge',

whose 'grim shape' seems to pursue him 'with purpose of its own / And measured

motion like a living thing' (*Prelude* I. 378, 381, 383-4). The austerity of

Wordsworth's landscape has echoes in McEwan's Lake District. *Amsterdam* describes '[t]he mass of rock rising above the valley' as 'one long frown set in stone', and '[t]he hiss and thunder of the stream' as 'the language of threat' (*Am* 77). These surrounds bring Clive to a sense of 'shrinking and apprehension' (78). In the spirit of 'thrusts and counterthrusts' (Bahti 493), the landscape, from which 'human meaning' is 'bleached' (*Am* 78), also strikes Clive with the terror of his own futile calling. The Lake District's 'colossal emptiness' initially frustrates Clive's hopes of 'be[ing] large again, and unafraid' (*Am* 77, 78).

> The open spaces that were meant to belittle his cares, were belittling everything: endeavour seemed pointless. Symphonies especially: feeble blasts, bombast, doomed attempts to build a mountain in sound. Passionate striving. And for what?
>
> (*Am* 78)

The narrative undermines Clive's '[p]assionate striving' while it is only budding. Clive's sense of the triviality of art, of the human need for structure, resonates with his environs, which he starts to perceive as 'nothing more than a gigantic brown gymnasium', with 'every last insignificant feature labelled and smugly celebrated' (*Am* 80). Going further, Clive is confronted with the thoroughly mundane, the anti-sublime: a school excursion, '[s]pread out over more than a mile, marked by brilliant points of fluorescent oranges, blues and greens'. At a stroke, the Lake District is 'transformed, tamed, reduced to a trampled beauty spot' (*Am* 83).

This transformation of the hallowed roaming ground of the Romantics into a tourist park represents a certain unsettling of the sublime, and a jarring detachment from any sense of '[p]assionate striving' (*Am* 78). In its way, it foreshadows Clive's emergence from this journey as a failure, morally and artistically; in his 'sublime sequence of notes', he has in fact 'ripped off Beethoven something rotten' (*Am* 89, 164). Music itself is, for Clive, a kind of 'non-language whose meanings [are] forever just beyond reach' (*Am* 159). According to Eagleton, this business of falling short or failing despite oneself 'in the face of an indomitable destiny' is, for the 'tragic protagonist', commensurable with the 'imagination shrink[ing] and quail[ing] when confronted with the fearful majesty of the sublime' (*SV* 121). This running up against limits is what frustrates Clive's efforts in the Lake District, the very heartland of limit-confronting in which Caspar Friedrich's Wanderer[24] is doomed always to be spying the other summit with the better prospect. Eagleton considers tragedy to bear 'something of the melancholic joy of the sublime' as well as, 'for some critics[,] a similar structure': a painful 'recognition of finitude' and a 'striv[ing] to measure up to some unfathomable Law or Reason, but inevitably fail[ing]' (*SV* 176). Of course, in *Amsterdam* the tragic 'recognition of finitude' comes with a certain emotional aridity attached, but also bathos. Clive's symphony is perhaps the exemplar of bathos in *Amsterdam*, reduced in the dénouement from a 'sublime sequence of notes' to a 'blaring carnivalesque tutti' (*Am* 89, 159). Clive, self-described 'genius' (*Am* 133-4), hopes that 'what would remain of [him] would be his music' and that '[w]ork, quiet, determined, triumphant work[…], would be a kind of revenge [on Vernon]' (*Am*

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[24] My allusion is to Friedrich's 1818 painting *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer,* or *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*

138-9). The posthumous ridicule to which Clive is subjected, and the description of

his 'dead century's elegy' as a 'dud' (*Am* 20, 176), accentuate just how far he falls

short. It also represents the final, deflationary 'counterthrust' (Bahti 493) of the

Wordsworthian sublime.

Conclusion

Ironic detachment in the narrative point of view in *Amsterdam* forecloses resonance

with the tragic emotions of pity and fear, while accentuating the novel's formal

resemblance to tragedy. McEwan's novel is not especially amenable to a trauma-

oriented reading, at least in a manner akin to the previous novels I have analysed, or

to *Saturday* in the following chapter. As with the foreclosure of tragic emotional

resonance, an ironically detached narration prevents the representation of traumatic

experience in *Amsterdam*. The narrative point of view is also especially effective in

creating distance, while the past tense adds to the sense of inevitability with which

fate steeps the novel. Free indirect discourse works to reveal each protagonist's

consciousness and, when the third-person narrator withdraws into ironic detachment,

throws into sharp relief the distance between narrator and character. Through the

glimpses of consciousness enabled by free indirect discourse, *Amsterdam* avoids

rendering its characters as automatons within a mechanistic plot, instead 'relativizing

judgements which in their dramatic form can seem a good deal more stark and

intractable' (Eagleton, *SV* 181). However, the formal strictures of the novel, in

guiding the protagonists to a dénouement of overwhelming symmetrical elegance,

render their decisions as part of their inevitable 'tragedy' (*Am* 149). The

Wordsworthian sublime, like fate, serves to belittle the subject and further restrict the

role of individual agency. The experience of the sublime as a confrontation of human

limits, and the tragic 'recognition of finitude', 'striv[ing] to measure up' and

'inevitably fail[ing]' (*SV* 176), cogently drive at the novel's exploration of the 'dry

yearning for something out of reach' (*Am* 19) – perhaps, indeed, anything beyond the

reach of its own ironising touch.

4   The 'obliging imagination': empathy, September 11 and
the Burkean sublime in *Saturday*

Introduction

I now turn from *Amsterdam*, a past-tense narrative divided between two protagonists,

to McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday*, a present-tense narrative focalised through a

single protagonist. In terms of its sustained, singular focalisation, and use of free

indirect discourse, *Saturday* bears perspectival similarities to *The Child in Time*;

essentially, the narration is 'always bound to a perceptual activity of the hero's'

(Genette 204). However, as I shall address later in this chapter, in *Saturday* McEwan

works from a neurological and strictly realist model of perception; it is a world void

of any spatial or temporal anomalies. Moreover, more than any other novel in my

study, *Saturday* firmly situates itself in the world of its time – specifically, the

London of 15 February 2003, the day of global protests against the invasion of Iraq.

To this end, *Saturday* also uses the televised horrors of September 11 as a key real-

world referent, not only in terms of time and setting but also its representations of

trauma and the sublime.

John Banville, appraising *Saturday* in *The New York Review of Books*, notes

that McEwan seems the ideal literary figure to respond to September 11[25] and

'express the lingering horror of that sunlit morning when mass murder came winging

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[25] Banville laments the 'tendency toward mellowness' in McEwan's recent work at the time (i.e. 2005), and is quite scathing in his assessment of the novel.

out of the blue'. In the world that *Saturday* presents, September 11 itself is distant,

its images of terror pervading the media, and its witnesses 'mediatised' (Douglass

and Vogler 9). However, this event has also come to haunt the public consciousness.

For the protagonist, Henry Perowne, the understanding that he and his loved ones are

vulnerable, and that in all likelihood '[t]here are people around the planet, well-

connected and organised, who would like to kill him and his family and friends to

make a point' (*Sat* 80)[26], is the corollary of seeing such extreme, traumatic events

happen to ordinary, unsuspecting people, live on television.

McEwan was prompt to respond journalistically[27] to September 11, and the

heavily media-oriented nature of the attacks evokes his own authorial interest in

'how private fates and public events collide' (Noakes 80). *Saturday* in a sense

describes what this collision between 'private fates and public events' looks like.

Through its representation of witnessing, the novel explores the interactions between

trauma, empathy and the sublime. I will establish the significance of September 11 to

Saturday's representation of witnessing principally through my analysis of the scene

of the burning plane near the beginning of the novel. This scene and what McEwan

describes as the 'obliging imagination' (*Sat* 15) have particular resonance in terms of

secondary trauma, empathy and the Burkean 'position of safety' (Crowther 8). The

position of the witness as constructed in this scene, with Henry imaginatively (if

inaccurately) speculating on what is happening inside a distant, stricken aircraft,

establishes for the rest of the novel the representation of empathic engagement as

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[26] All subsequent references within this chapter are to the 2006 Anchor-Doubleday edition of
Saturday, unless otherwise stated.
[27] See McEwan's article for *The Guardian*, "Only love and then oblivion", published 15 September
2001.

imaginative but necessarily restricted. This construction of the witness also

accentuates how mistaken the 'obliging imagination' can be, and how easily

empathy can be perverted. Beyond the episode of the burning plane, I will examine

other aspects of *Saturday* that speak to its construction of the witness, such as the

narrative point of view, the characterisation of Henry and Baxter, the representation

of war and terror as mediatised through news outlets, and the scene of the home

invasion in the novel's dénouement. Firstly, however, I will address the significance

of September 11 to the opening of *Saturday* and its representation of secondary

trauma.

4.1   '[M]ediatized witnesses': September 11, secondary trauma and empathy

September 11 represents 'the freak, aleatory event – the black dogs – to which

[McEwan's] own desire for narrative order must respond' (Bradley and Tate 21). As

Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn observe in their book *Literature after*

9/11,

> while the initial experience of 9/11 seemed unprecedented and
>
> cataclysmic, the experience of incommensurability generated a
>
> culture-wide need for explanatory narratives, not simply as a means
>
> for countering the trauma, but as a means for refusing
>
> incommensurability, prompting attempts to place 9/11 into an
>
> historical framework.   (3)

Saturday appears to place September 11 'into an historical framework' (Keniston and Quinn 3). At the beginning, Henry arises and feels 'as if, standing there in the darkness, he's materialised out of nothing' (*Sat* 1)[28]. Henry is promptly placed not only at the frame of a window, witness to the foreboding crisis of a burning plane, but also into an historical framework, 'almost eighteen months' after September 11 (*Sat* 15). The plane is what calls to Henry's mind September 11, as he reflects on the attachment of 'a novel association' to 'the innocent silhouette of any jet plane': 'Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed' (*Sat* 15). The 'innocent silhouette' resonates with 'the second plane', United Airlines Flight 175, which Martin Amis describes as the 'generically familiar object […] transformed by *affect*' (Amis 3; emphasis in original).

As Douglass and Vogler note in *Witness & Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*, the ubiquity of the attacks and their images of devastation have entailed a worldwide act of witness; 'the inaugural events of 9/11 were made dramatically visible to hundreds of millions of viewers, producing a plenitude of mediatized witnesses, with the effect of secondary trauma in unknowable numbers' (9). The traumatic implications of September 11 are therefore broader than the already vast circle of those immediately or personally affected, and its influence in *Saturday* forms 'an unavoidable frame of reference against which [Henry] will measure his own actions and inactions[,] his own certainties and uncertainties' (Carpenter 151). Henry registers the scale of the attacks' influence when he reflects that 'half the

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[28] Within the confines of a work of fiction, this marks a self-referential gesture, as McEwan himself notes: it is at once the appearance and creation of 'a character in the dark, as it were, just emerging, waiting to be dressed' (Lynn 145).

planet watched, and watched again' (*Sat* 15). His position at the window, standing

'[c]ulpable in his helplessness' (*Sat* 22) as he watches the burning plane, is

analogous to the viewer of 'media representation[s] of traumatic events' such as

September 11, the mediatised witness for whom 'secondary trauma' may be a result

(Douglass and Vogler 36, 9).

In *History in Transit*, LaCapra addresses September 11 and what he describes

as the 'sociopolitical uses and constructions of trauma', the amalgamation of 'all

forms of experience related to traumatic limit events', and the valorisation or

sacralisation of 'secondary forms of traumatization that depend on unmediated, at

times uncritical, modes of identification' (95). Such aspects of the discourse

surrounding the attacks raise questions about how to approach traumatic events in a

narrative context: for example, being modest about one's claims of what an event

may signify, how transformative it may be, or even to what degree it can be

represented. Around trauma more broadly, LaCapra also raises the question of how,

or even if, a distant observer of traumatic events can identify with victims of those

events, or how far empathy can extend.

In her work *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen 'presents a

comprehensive account of the relationships among novel reading, empathy, and

altruism' (Keen vii). She defines empathy as 'a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of

affect' that 'can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing

about another's condition, or even by reading' (4). Keen employs a

'multidimensional affective-cognitive understanding of empathy' (Keen 28) and, like

McEwan, cites the importance of imagination to the process (Keen 27-8). Henry's

empathically 'obliging imagination' (*Sat* 15) manifests repeatedly in *Saturday*, occasioned by acts of witnessing. From his window over Fitzroy Square, he observes the interactions below, the 'intimate dramas' (*Sat* 59), and surmises the narratives behind them. For example, two women walk by, and 'with his advantage of height and in his curious mood, [Henry] not only watches them, but watches over them, supervising their progress with the remote possessiveness of a god' (*Sat* 11-2). This 'remote possessiveness' (*Sat* 12), this attendant delusion of control, speaks volubly to what Keen describes as 'the Western imagination's imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to "feel with," in a cultural imperialism of the emotions' (Keen 147-8). In reference to *Saturday*, Tim Gauthier notes that 'while [the novel] may declare the need for empathy and extol it as a cornerstone of Western, secularized society, [it] simultaneously reveals how its application is constructed and so easily perverted' (8).

LaCapra also recognises the potential perversion of empathy. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, he is conservative about the real reach of empathy and resistant to any confusion of identity boundaries (212), asserting that empathy 'should rather be understood in terms of an affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other recognized and respected as other' and 'may be further related to the affirmation of otherness within the self' (212-3). LaCapra's consideration of empathy is, I think, accommodative yet productively sceptical, avoiding what Gauthier describes as 'misguided presumptions' (24) – that is, presuming to feel what the other feels. In relation to trauma, there is an understandably pressing need to avoid colonising gestures of empathy. For LaCapra, the recognition and respect of

the other *as* other is enabled through what he terms 'empathic unsettlement' (*WHWT* xi). While being irreducible 'to formulas or rules of method', empathic unsettlement is clear enough in its aims: to enable 'responsive[ness] to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims', while crucially avoiding 'the appropriation of their experience' or tendencies toward sacralisation, through 'harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events' (*WHWT* 41). In *History in Transit*, LaCapra observes that '[d]esirable empathy'

> involves not self-sufficient, projective or incorporative identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims. [A]ffective involvement in, and response to, the other comes with respect for the otherness of the other.
>
> (135)

Keen similarly offers her own critique of concepts that 'depend upon generalizations about universal human traits', and observes that 'the directional quality of empathy offends' because it presumes upon a possibly voiceless, disempowered subject, who is unable to 'correct misconceptions' or to 'refuse the pitying gaze' (162).

McEwan has expressed something of this 'directional quality of empathy' (Keen 162) in his views on fiction – for him, the medium par excellence through which one explores empathic engagement. In spatial (and vaguely colonising) terms, McEwan asserts that fiction is 'the perfect medium for entering the mind of another' (Louvel, Ménégaldo and Fortin 70). Keen is wary of such assertions, noting that

'pervasive beliefs about the efficacy of fiction' in promulgating empathy, 'advanced in many cases by novelists themselves, should be investigated in multiple historical contexts, with sensitivity to cultural differences' (Keen 167). Still, while fiction may not yield measurable differences in empathic engagement, either at the individual or societal level, it would be remiss not to consider its potential in addressing prevalent questions raised about empathy. In LaCapra's terms, the medium of fiction has the potential to 'explore the traumatic, including the fragmentation, emptiness, or evacuation of experience, and may raise the question of *other possible forms of experience*' (*HIT* 132; emphasis added). As with empathy, LaCapra is modest in his claims about fiction, considering it only in terms of what questions it may raise and how it may raise them. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, he states that empathy can be 'understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others' (40). Empathy itself, like fiction, is only an attempt; it is a venture not in transcending the limitations of consciousness but in understanding or learning how to work within them.

According to Bradley and Tate, '*Saturday* is [McEwan's] real 9/11 novel because it allegorically stages the war he saw being waged that day: literature versus terror, empathy against solipsism' (29). Indeed, McEwan was quick to formulate and express a response to September 11 in just this vein. '[W]e fantasize ourselves into the events,' he wrote in an article for *The Guardian*, published four days after the attacks; 'What if it was me?' (*OL*). The protagonist of *Saturday* attempts something akin to this imaginary substitution, through the connection he establishes between

the burning plane and 'the other familiar element [of September 11] – the horror of

what he can't see. […] No blood, no screams, no human figures at all, and into this

emptiness, the obliging imagination set free' (*Sat* 15). The vision of his 'obliging

imagination' then plays out: a cabin in crisis, suddenly void of protocol, in which

passengers decide where best to escape the flames, or whether to save or abandon

their luggage (*Sat* 15-6). Thrailkill notes that 'Henry not only narrates to himself the

passengers' confusion and fright, he imagines their reflective consciousness, their

own assessment of their panicked actions' (184). His musings enact '[i]magining

what it is like to be someone other than yourself' and assuredly avoid the 'failure of

the imagination' that McEwan suggests elsewhere is also a failure of empathy (*OL*).

However, while *Saturday* draws attention to the individual and societal need for

empathy, it also in part asserts the 'concrete limitations' (Gauthier 9) of empathic

engagement. Tammy Amiel-Houser notes an apparent contrast between McEwan's

expressed vision of the novel form as 'soliciting our imaginative understanding of

other human beings' and the vision he presents in *Saturday* of 'the impenetrability of

the Other, […] the *inability* to step into another's mind' (129; emphasis in original).

Baxter, whose 'interiority' most pointedly resists Henry's decipherment in *Saturday*

(Amiel-Houser 130, 131), is a figure of key interest in Amiel-Houser's study.

Baxter's point of entry into Henry's day is a car accident (*Sat* 81), but it is a more

fundamental collision that the novel traces out.

> *Saturday* draws attention to Baxter's abstruse quality that can neither
>
> be represented nor empathetically understood […]. Baxter, with his
>
> unknown identity – no first name, no origin, no identifying details –

with his confusing temperament and inexplicable reactions, becomes

the stumbling block of the narrative.

(Amiel-Houser 131)

Henry is unable to *know* Baxter, and consequently any attempt to understand him even from a position of basic familiarity is thwarted from the start. An empathic approach to that which 'can neither be represented nor empathically understood' (Amiel-Houser 131) can only lead to 'misguided presumptions' (Gauthier 24). For Gauthier, empathy in *Saturday* is further problematised by the kind of 'power differential' that exists between Henry and Baxter, because Henry, unlike Baxter, is a man of 'privileged status' (8); 'the novel highlights the inequitable aspects of the empathic gesture, pointing to its colonizing impulses' (27). Furthermore, empathy is complicated by the 'threat' that Baxter presents to Henry (Gauthier 10); not only is Henry's life at risk, but his family's safety and his 'whole way of life' (*Sat* 33-4, 36). In the scenes in which Baxter appears as a threat – namely, the scene of the car accident and of the home invasion – the 'power differential' (Gauthier 8) arguably shifts to Baxter's advantage. Though both characters still occupy differing social strata, the physical strength and mortal threat that Baxter presents (*Sat* 92-3, 213) complicate Henry's attempts at empathy as much as Baxter's disadvantage and vulnerability.

Amiel-Houser further notes that Baxter 'pose[s] an impenetrable barrier' in the novel for Henry, being 'neither open to [his] rational knowledge nor to an aesthetic literary rendition', but 'only to a sketchy, external, and mainly visual description' (132). Such a representation not only problematises empathy in the

novel, but also connotes the unknowable, merely imaginable dangers that such an

'enigmatic individuality' (Keniston and Quinn 3) may bring. In this sense, Henry's

'obliging imagination' (*Sat* 15), as when it is confronted by the burning plane, can

only speculate on the dangerous possibilities that Baxter presents, and the interior

life to which Henry is denied access. With regard to the burning plane, the divorce

between what Henry imagines has happened, and what has actually happened, is

made all too evident when he learns not only that the aircraft is a cargo plane, but

also that '[n]either of the two-man crew is hurt' (*Sat* 35-6). Baxter represents a

similar obstacle to interpretation and empathic understanding for Henry in the novel.

4.2   Consciousness, narrative point of view and *Saturday*'s neurological model of perception

The restriction of empathy in *Saturday* is realised through the novel's representation

of consciousness. In this, and in its London setting and temporal scope of a single

day, *Saturday* draws upon a clear progenitor, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

McEwan's novel, like Woolf's, also describes 'the meanderings of a middle-aged,

well-to-do member of society' who, among other things, 'marvels at the

technologized splendors of the metropolis, ponders the effects of war', and has to

'restore an uneasy sense of normalcy after a tragic event that threatens to ruin a party'

(Adams 553-4). And as with *Mrs Dalloway*, the third-person restricted narrative

voice in *Saturday* is focalised through the consciousness of the protagonist; though,

in Woolf's novel, the narration is in the past tense rather than present, and splits itself

'between the thoughts of a wide cross-section of characters' (Snaith 71). McEwan, conversely, 'keeps it tightly' focalised through a single character, Henry, 'who – himself like a novelist – extends his point of view to imagined others' (Thrailkill 184). To this end, McEwan prevalently employs free indirect discourse (Adams 554), a mode through which the novel is 'always bound to a perceptual activity' of the protagonist (Genette 204) and, in *Saturday* particularly, kept 'so obsessively close to Henry's consciousness as to be almost blinkered by it' (Root 64). For all its restriction, however, the narrative voice remains brightly alert to what is external to Henry; the novel 'conjures the ghosts of other consciousnesses just outside the window of his mind' (Root 64). *Saturday* thereby remains thoroughly committed to verisimilitude, while being narrated from within a highly subjective framework.

The subjectivity of *Saturday*, its narrative point of view, and its apparent creation of 'correspondences through image, symbol, association, and implication alone' (Adams 554), lend it some formal similarities to McEwan's earlier novel, *The Child in Time*. However, it is decidedly void of any 'quasi-supernatural incidents' (Root 61). Within *Saturday*, Henry even refers derisively to *The Child in Time* itself, which is summarised as '[o]ne visionary [who] saw through a pub window his parents as they had been some weeks after his conception, discussing the possibility of aborting him', lumped with magical realist texts that he considers 'irksome confections' (*Sat* 66). Rather than working from *The Child in Time*'s 'quantum model of reality' (Root 61), *Saturday* works from within a neurological model of perception, attentive 'to the motions of embodied human consciousness engaging with and shaping a complex and chancy world' (Thrailkill 176). The use of the third-

person restricted point of view renders a more stable narration than *Enduring Love*, yet without the ironic detachment of *Amsterdam*. The consistent use of the present tense also keeps the narrative perspective in close temporal relation to the focalised consciousness of Henry and the narrated events.

According to Thrailkill, 'the narrative of *Saturday* has a stitching motion', an 'inward' and 'outward' swoop, into 'Henry's thoughts and feelings', and out to 'objects and events transpiring around him'; such a motion 'mimes the work of everyday consciousness busily suturing mind and world' (185). Anna Snaith notes[29] a similar function of free indirect discourse in Woolf's work, in which 'the technique neither unites nor separates the public and private realms', but rather 'places them in a dialectal relation' (69). The interplay or 'stitching' of internal and external reality laces *Saturday* throughout, even from the point of Henry's waking 'to find himself already in motion, pushing back the covers from a sitting position, […] rising to his feet' (*Sat* 1). Adams observes that the narrator in *Saturday* 'dwells on the external details that fuel [Henry]'s senses […] and makes frequent recourse to physiological and behavioral descriptions that explain, from an almost clinical vantage point, his characters' actions' (554). These 'physiological and behavioral descriptions' (Adams 554) also highlight the limits of consciousness as represented in the novel. The scene of the burning plane at the beginning of the narrative is signal to *Saturday*'s representation of limited consciousness and what that means for the witness who seeks to empathise with distant or even not-so-distant others. Moreover, it suggests

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[29] I am here citing Snaith's 2000 work, Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations. In an earlier essay, she identifies Woolf's narrative technique as indirect interior monologue. See "Virginia Woolf's Narrative Strategies: Negotiating between Public and Private Voices."

an engagement with the Burkean sublime and the 'position of safety'[30] from which 'dangerous objects are encountered […] thus causing a weak or moderated state of terror' (Crowther 8).

4.3   The Burkean 'position of safety' and the sublimation of terror

Paul Crowther notes that another means by which the Burkean sublime 'can be occasioned' is 'when the perceptually overwhelming properties of objects test and strain our perceptual faculties so as to cause a weak state of pre-conscious pain' (Crowther 8). In the episode of the burning plane, Henry's contemplation of the '[c]atastrophe observed from a safe distance' is positioned in immediate relation to September 11 and the 'familiar element – the horror of what he can't see' (*Sat* 15). The engagement of his 'obliging imagination' (*Sat* 15), then, is more than empathic: it is an engagement with the comingled 'danger or pain' and 'delight' of the Burkean sublime (Burke 40). The 'terror', 'terrible objects', or even 'whatever […] operates in a manner analogous to terror' that engenders this sublime (Burke 39) is converted to aesthetic stimulation. In this relationship, the distance between the subject and the sublime object appears to be closely related to whether the encounter is 'delightful' or 'simply terrible' (Burke 40). As Burke notes, and as cited in my chapter on *Enduring Love*,

> When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving
> any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with

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[30] This is another point, like Baxter's almost Jed-like interiority, in which *Saturday* bears similarity to *Enduring Love*.

certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we

every day experience.   (40)

In *Saturday*, the pleasure occasioned by the sublime is often aligned with the more

distant position of the witness. In certain passages of the novel, however, a sense of

aesthetic distance and near-pleasure accompanies events in which Henry is not a

witness, but a participant. For example, the car accident through which Henry first

encounters Baxter is rendered in quite detached, almost aesthetic terms, despite

Henry's direct involvement; Baxter's car appears as 'a flash of red[,] a shape on

[Henry's] retina', bearing 'the quality of an idea, a new idea, unexpected and

dangerous, but entirely his, and not of the world beyond himself' (*Sat* 81). After

Henry leaves the safety of his car and is surrounded by Baxter and two other thugs,

'[p]erversely, he no longer believes himself to be in any great danger' (*Sat* 90). Even

though Henry is in close physical proximity to danger, he is detached. In Burkean

terms, he is sublimely removed, within his own imagined 'position of safety'

(Crowther 8). The real threat that Baxter presents is not wholly apparent until his fist

'lands on [Henry's] sternum with colossal force' (*Sat* 92-3). This gesture – the only

blow he receives in the novel – arguably represents Henry's most direct involvement

with Baxter, bringing with it 'a brief deathly chill' (*Sat* 93). The resultant bruise will

remind Henry of the encounter throughout the novel (*Sat* 113, 151, 272). These

reminders, however, also distance Henry from the encounter and bear overtones of

the aesthetic – the still-life 'colour of an aubergine' and 'diameter of a plum' – as

well as the mass media: 'What would be the heading[…]? Road-rage showdown.

Attempted mugging. A neural disease. The wing mirror. The rear-view wing mirror'

(*Sat* 113, 151).

   Saturday frequently calls attention to the role of mass media, particularly

television, in Henry's engagement with the external world. This is not limited to

empathy and the implicit question that, according to McEwan, is asked of us by

media depictions of events such as September 11 – 'What if it was me?' (McEwan

OL). Mass media representations of terror and war, as described in McEwan's novel,

also resonate with the Burkean sublime. Roland Bleiker and Martin Leet note that

the event 'fuse[s] an aesthetic of horror with an aesthetic of beauty' (718)[31]. These

fused aesthetics are echoed in the 'highly romanticised' vision of war presented by

the media during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (718) and the juxtaposition of

'destruction and aestheticisation' (719) in contemporary news coverage relating to

September 11, the conflicts it legitimised and the politics into which it fed. Bleiker

and Leet cite the 'seductively rhythmic music' and 'pulsating tunes' that

accompanied BBC news footage of the Iraq War (718). The same romantic vision is

conveyed in *Saturday*, as Henry turns on his television and 'wait[s] for the grandiose

preamble of the four o'clock news to finish – pulsing synthetic music, spiralling,

radiating computer graphics, combined in a *son et lumière* of Wagnerian scale to

suggest urgency, technology, global coverage' (*Sat* 29). For Henry, 'global coverage'

can be an intrusive phenomenon; at his squash game, he refreshes himself in the

washroom only to notice a television showing a news report, and wonders if it is

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[31] Bleiker and Leet also note that September 11 represents a sublime interruption to the 'normal
course of life' and a resistance to prevalent 'conception[s] of what could, conceivably, happen' (718).
In their analysis of the political life of sublime discourse, particularly in relation to September 11,
Bleiker and Leet predominantly draw upon Burkean and Kantian thought (716).

'possible to enjoy an hour's recreation without this invasion, this infection of the public domain' (*Sat* 109). Later in the day, however, as in the morning, the same 'global coverage' is something he seeks out, and indeed welcomes into the private space of the home, the novel again bringing to the fore 'the polarities at work in [the] navigation of the post-9/11 world' (Gauthier 10).

Discussing the passage in which Henry prepares a fish stew for his family while remaining tuned into the world's troubles, Thrailkill observes that '[t]he scene is perfectly balanced, with depictions of chopping and sautéing interlarded, sentence by sentence, with a television news report on the anti-Iraq-war demonstrations that have provided the background hum of Henry's day' (Thrailkill 192). The broader issues of society simultaneously perturb or, as in the case of the protesters, inconvenience Henry (*Sat* 78-81), and countervail the routine motions of his life. Such is, for Henry, the significance and allure, the gravitational pull (*Sat* 180), of the breaking news report;

> It's a condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands in
> the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety.
> The habit's grown stronger these past two years; a different scale of
> news value has been set by monstrous and spectacular scenes. […]
> Everyone fears [their recurrence], but there's also a darker longing in
> the collective mind, a sickening for self-punishment and a
> blasphemous curiosity.   (*Sat* 180)

Here, *Saturday* also calls attention to September 11 and the 'sociopolitical uses and constructions of trauma' (LaCapra, *HIT* 95) for which that event has been prominently employed. The time frame, 'these past two years', encompasses September 11, the referent of the 'monstrous and spectacular scenes' (*Sat* 180). Such scenes are portrayed as feeding the 'darker longing' (*Sat* 180) for further scenes of terror, 'in all cases whatsoever, […] the ruling principle of the sublime' (Burke 58). Attached in *Saturday* to the apprehension around, and fascination with, the broadcast horrors of terrorism and war are the everyday pleasures of coffee, sports, cooking, alcohol (*Sat* 33, 109, 180-4); for Henry, '[w]ith the idea of the news, inseparable from it, at least at weekends, is the lustrous prospect of a glass of red wine' (*Sat* 180). From the 'position of safety' (Crowther 8) – in the early twenty-first century context of *Saturday*, the position of the reader or viewer at home – terrorism and war are perceptually altered, taking on 'a weak or moderated' form (Crowther 8), the qualities of the Burkean sublime.

More is happening here, however, than the 'certain distances' and 'certain modifications' imbuing the sublime with its 'delight' that 'turns on pain' (Burke 40, 51). There is a further suggestion of the impulse to master the sublime. In reaction to the shock of the sublime, the individual, already in a position of safety, retreats and seeks 'to restore order, to resort to the comfort of old routines' (Bleiker and Leet 728). The restoration of order is a recurring movement in the progression of *Saturday*, most dramatically in the dénouement, in which, after Baxter is overcome and removed from the household, he 'no longer problematizes that which [Henry]

cherishes' (Gauthier 17). Or, as Banville sardonically puts it, 'Henry has everything, and as in all good fairy tales, he gets to keep it'.

There are smaller enactments of this restoration of order, however, beyond the meal preparations and squash games. Early in the novel, shortly after he witnesses the burning plane, Henry lies with his wife Rosalind and 'settle[s] in the eternal necessities of warmth, comfort, safety, […] a simple daily consolation' (*Sat* 50). He throws himself into the 'different medium' of sex, which 'free[s him] from thought, from memory, from the passing seconds and from the state of the world' (*Sat* 52). He again throws himself into this same 'medium' near the end of the novel, after he returns from performing life-saving surgery on Baxter; it is the point 'where he marks the end of his day', and the gesture by which he finally 'return[s] from exile' (McEwan 280). In this sense, Henry 'restore[s] order' and 'resort[s] to the comfort of old routines' (Bleiker and Leet 728). Just before '[t]he end [that] comes as a fall, […] concentrated in its pleasure', Rosalind whispers a reminder of their brush with death that night, as if for their own excitation: 'My darling one. We could have been killed and we're alive' (*Sat* 280). This declaration of their exemption from death, spoken in a space of 'warmth, comfort, [and] safety' (*Sat* 50), resonates with the Burkean 'passions[32] belonging to self-preservation', and the sublime whose 'delight […] turns on pain' (Burke 51).

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (as discussed in my earlier study of *Enduring Love*), Eagleton reads Burke's sublime in near carnal terms, a force of 'virile

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[32] According to Burke, 'The passions […] which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, turn chiefly on *pain* and *danger*' (38; emphasis in original).

strenuousness', indeed 'a phallic "swelling" arising from our confrontation of danger, although a danger we encounter figuratively, vicariously, in the pleasurable knowledge that we cannot actually be harmed' (54). The home invasion as represented in *Saturday* bears no sense of such a figurative or vicarious encounter with danger, but rather a real and volatile threat: suddenly, for Henry, '[w]hen anything can happen, everything matters' (*Sat* 214). Baxter and the threat he presents are not aesthetically distanced, as they are in the episode of the car accident; the appearance of Baxter in the Perownes' home, his 'agitated physical reality' (*Sat* 214) and the danger he poses to the family reduce Henry to a panic (*Sat* 223). In these details, any representation of the sublime is ostensibly absent. As with the 'brief deathly chill' (*Sat* 93) of Baxter's punch, there are no 'distances' or 'modifications' (Burke 40) that can sublimate Henry's terror in the immediacy of this encounter. The Burkean sublime attends imaginative or retrospective engagement with the 'danger or pain' that no longer 'press too nearly' (Burke 40): imaginative in the case of the burning plane and the 'obliging imagination set free' (*Sat* 15), for example, and retrospective in the case of Henry and Rosalind's sexual play (*Sat* 50-2, 279-80).

4.4   A sublime 'of different kinds': Kant, Burke and the limits of consciousness

Though the Burkean sublime is 'conversant about the preservation of the individual' and 'about terrible objects' (Burke 38, 39), and resonates with *Saturday*'s representations of witnessing, it is not the only manifestation of sublime discourse in

the novel. *Saturday*, like *The Child in Time*, also evokes the Kantian sublime. While it does not situate the 'subjective capacity for feeling' (Crowther 11) as a chief determinant in its protagonist's responses, *Saturday* does foreground the role of material reality or 'the external details that fuel [Henry]'s senses' (Adams 554). Through this representation, *Saturday* describes the rich variability of sublime experience, resonating with Kant's view of a sublime 'of different kinds' – for example, 'accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy; [or] in some cases merely with quiet wonder' (Kant, *OFBS* 47). The central aspect of the Burkean sublime, indeed 'the ruling principle' (Burke 58), terror, still suffuses the novel, but works in dialogue with the more diverse Kantian model. For instance, when Henry is on an errand to purchase ingredients for a family dinner, there is a terror implicit in the 'world' that 'seems so entirely at peace' in 'gentle Marylebone' (*Sat* 128). This implicit terror emerges during a visit to the fishmonger, in which Henry's 'obliging imagination' (*Sat* 15) extends even to the non-human;

> It's fortunate for the fishmonger and his customers that sea creatures are not adapted to make use of sound waves and have no voice. Otherwise there'd be howling from those crates.
>
> (*Sat* 127)

Henry then watches as his fish is wrapped in newspaper. Not only is voiceless suffering neatly contained in newsprint, or alternatively, the centrepiece of the family dinner bound up with the troubles of the world, but Henry is struck by 'the chances of this particular fish, from that shoal, off that continental shelf ending up in the pages, no, on this page of this copy of the *Daily Mirror*' (*Sat* 128). Here, he is

enthralled by '[t]he random ordering of the world, the unimaginable odds against any particular condition' (*Sat* 128). A subtle shift takes place in this moment between contemplating the hidden terror and suffering of aquatic lifeforms and marvelling at a hidden probability so easily overlooked. The representation of such hidden realities behind an apparently simple gesture – wrapping a fish in newspaper – as an impasse to understanding, and indeed 'unimaginable', resonates with Stephen's contemplations of time in *The Child in Time* and the Kantian sublime's strained 'movement of negative transcendence' (Eagleton, *IA* 91).

Elsewhere in *Saturday*, Henry is enthralled by the intricacies of science, in both biological and technological terms (*Sat* 12, 46, 262-3). Through moments such as these, the novel demonstrates a 'curious commitment to the sublime complexity of the mind and its cultural products' (Salisbury 892). This also extends to the setting, London itself being at once described as 'a brilliant invention' and 'a biological masterpiece', with 'millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef' (*Sat* 3). *Saturday* consistently brings forth 'the vital, thickened[…] complexity of human sociality' in a kind of 'awed atheist transcendence' (Salisbury 906). Rendering transcendence in such terms, the novel resists any notion of going beyond the limits of consciousness and corporeality. Rather,

> [it] takes up the question […] of how the human mind collectively
> and individually mediates the external world, […] without
> undermining an essentially realist commitment to observable relations
> of cause and effect, the tendency of human events to conform to rules

of probability, and the need for ongoing verification and revision.

(Thrailkill 198)

Saturday's Kantian sense of wonder in these 'relations of cause and effect' and 'rules of probability' (Thrailkill 198) is also evoked in the passages describing Baxter's affliction, Huntington's disease.

Henry maps Baxter's path to a 'meaningless end', from 'the first small alterations of character' through to 'nightmarish hallucinations', and starkly points out that '[t]his is how the brilliant machinery of being is undone by the tiniest of faulty cogs, the insidious whisper of ruin, a single bad idea lodged in every cell, on every chromosome four' (*Sat* 94). Probability brings to Henry both the fish whose terrors are past, and the man whose terrors are yet to come; yet, when Baxter intrudes into his home, Henry 'can't convince himself that molecules and faulty genes alone are terrorising his family' (*Sat* 218). Baxter, whose character poses an 'impenetrable barrier' (Amiel-Houser 132), troubles Henry's understanding of the very essentials of the 'realist commitment to observable relations of cause and effect' (Thrailkill 198), throwing into relief the singularity of consciousness, as well as the wonder of it; when he later operates on Baxter's brain, Henry marvels at the 'mere wet stuff [that] can make this bright inward cinema' of perception, complete 'with a self […] hovering like a ghost at its centre' (*Sat* 262). Even being as physically close to Baxter as possible, literally hands deep in the 'wet stuff', the 'dense and brilliant circuitry' of his brain (*Sat* 262, 263), Henry is no closer to knowing him. Just as the 'limits of the art, of neurosurgery as it stands today' (*Sat* 263), foreclose the

possibility of healing Baxter's disorder, the limits of consciousness remain unable to be transcended.

As with the limits of consciousness, the limits of empathy are considered 'without undermining [the novel's] essentially realist commitment' to what can be observed, verified and revised (Thrailkill 198). In accord with LaCapra, empathy in *Saturday* is represented as 'an affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other recognised and respected as other' (*WHWT* 212-3). As Amiel-Houser notes, Henry is ultimately 'able to acknowledge the difference between himself and his aggressor as a difference between two distinct human beings: he recognises that Baxter is a *real* person', irreducible 'to medical explanations or to social ideas' (149; emphasis in original). The novel does not so much suggest a failure of empathy, but an awareness of its limits – limits that for Gauthier represent 'a Western empathy trapped in its own solipsistic conception and perspective of the world' (25). They also, however, suggest the inevitable restrictions that come with sublimely complex human consciousness. The 'affective relation, rapport or bond with the other' (*WHWT* 212) in this sense is not mistaken for a conflation with the other. With relation to trauma, this conception of empathy avoids the amalgamation of 'all forms of experience related to traumatic limit events' and the valorisation or sacralisation of 'secondary forms of traumatization that depend on unmediated, at times uncritical, modes of identification' (*HIT* 95), which LaCapra cites as a central problem in the treatment of events such as September 11. This is not only confirmed in the novel through Henry's realisation that he is mistaken about the plane's situation (*Sat* 35-6), but also through his fundamental inability to know Baxter.

These limitations of consciousness and empathy also extend to the construction of the sublime as a 'sort of secular sacred, related to that which goes beyond ordinary experience and is almost, if not altogether, transcendent' (*WHWT* 165). LaCapra notes the connection between trauma and the sublime, and the 'tendency in modern culture and thought to convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into a test of the self or the group and an entry into the extraordinary' (*WHWT* 23). LaCapra's notion of 'empathic unsettlement', through which 'responsive[ness] to the traumatic experience of others' supersedes the 'appropriation' of such experience (*WHWT* xi, 41), is intended in part to remedy the conversion or transvaluation of trauma into the sublime, particularly 'secondary forms of traumatization that depend on unmediated, at times uncritical, modes of identification' (LaCapra, *HIT* 95). It also poses 'a barrier to closure in discourse' and places 'in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or benefit' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 41-2).

In *Saturday*, Henry is given to frequently discrediting notions of the supernatural, 'magical thinking' and the theodicean (*Sat* 66, 180, 32, 128-9). He also denies 'fate or providence' in favour of, 'at every instant, a trillion trillion possible futures' (*Sat* 128-9). This recognition of contingency resonates with empathic unsettlement, which refutes the notion of history as somehow schematic or purposive, and instead elucidates its complexity, as a sequence of events that are experienced, construed and related by ongoing arrays of subjects. In discussing the 'incredible fascination with an aesthetic of the sublime' in relation to trauma, for example, LaCapra refers to how the Holocaust has been envisioned 'homogeneously as some

overwhelming, sublime event', a sublime of excess (*WHWT* 156). To present

similarly homogeneous visions of September 11 could be likewise to invite 'certain

kinds of redemptive thinking' (*WHWT* 154) and to misjudge its influence, politically,

culturally and historically.

Conclusion

In the context of *Saturday*'s geographical and cultural distance from September 11,

the terror attacks are rendered less immediate than in several contemporary works [33]

that orient themselves more closely around the event. This geographical and cultural

distance enables *Saturday* to speak with particular resonance to the position of the

witness; the novel's protagonist has no personal connection to September 11, yet his

world is tangibly affected by it. September 11 itself is, in a sense, scaled down to the

'microcosmic' (Carpenter 146), its 'sense of invasion' reduced to the 'private,' to the

local (Smith 130). While McEwan's novel is set during the early wake of the attacks,

a time for which their 'novel association[s]' (*Sat* 15) are *particularly* novel, it makes

clear the uncertainty of how consequential the attacks have been or will be. Henry

speculates that 'the New York attacks precipitated a global crisis that would, if we

were lucky, take a hundred years to resolve' (*Sat* 33); conversely, '[t]here are always

crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle into place, alongside recent wars, climate

change, the politics of international trade, land and fresh water shortages, hunger,

poverty and the rest' (*Sat* 76).

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[33] Examples include Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003).

Of course, the real legacy of the attacks, their reverberative 'mystery,'

'instability', and 'terrible dynamism' (Amis 206), remain an area of ongoing

commentary. In *Saturday*, more than in any of McEwan's other works, there is a

clear interest in 'min[ing] the tension as well as the consanguinity between fiction

and worldly events' (Thrailkill 192). The particular 'worldly event' that speaks most

volubly in *Saturday* – September 11 – leaves some trace in the novel of the

'plenitude of mediatized witnesses' (Douglass and Vogler 9), through Henry and his

encounter with the burning plane, as well as his continual compulsion, his

'blasphemous curiosity' (*Sat* 180), to view the latest news report. The 'mediatized

witnesses' of September 11 have experienced, if distantly, 'monstrous and

spectacular scenes' (*Sat* 180) that defy 'conception[s] of what could, conceivably,

happen' (Bleiker and Leet 718); through their 'loosen[ing] the ground between

reality and delirium' (Amis 206), such scenes unsettle positions of safety and reveal

the vulnerability of the witness. They also reveal the witness's inability to assimilate

and comprehend such events, yet call the witness to empathise. For LaCapra, this is a

call to be 'responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims',

without appropriating their experience (*WHWT* 41). To this end, McEwan's novel

offers keen insight. The tentative restoration of calm, comfort and security in

Saturday's concluding passages, capped by the full text of Matthew Arnold's *Dover

Beach* (*Sat* 290-1), reaffirms the ambivalence that laces the novel regarding how to

situate 'worldly events' (Thrailkill 192) and oneself, as a witness, in relation to them,

and how to relate empathically to those experiencing such events.

Conclusion

The manner in which McEwan reconstructs 'the personal, temporally warped experience' of 'often traumatic and life[-]changing' moments (Courtney 184-5), is diverse, even across the modest selection of novels I have examined. In this thesis, I have shown specifically how McEwan's fiction can explore traumatic experience through such moments and their aftermaths, and more broadly how fiction can 'explore in a particularly telling and unsettling way the affective or emotional dimensions of experience and understanding' (LaCapra, *HIT* 132). I have also demonstrated how the vocabulary and intellectual heritage of the sublime informs McEwan's representation of trauma. In particular, I have examined the narrative techniques by which McEwan represents both of these discourses across the four selected novels, in terms of narrative point of view and structure. In this conclusion, I will review my findings, draw comparisons between the novels and consider some of the broader implications of this study for literary criticism and beyond.

Both *Enduring Love* and *The Child in Time* describe a traumatic interruption to the everyday – respectively, a 'divergence from the expected' (McEwan, *EL* 18) in the form of an air balloon accident, and a 'malevolent intervention' (McEwan, *CIT* 158) through a child abduction. Because these two novels feature sustained descriptions of traumatic experience, they offer more to a reading of traumatised consciousness than *Amsterdam* or *Saturday*. In each of the former two novels, the intensity and immediacy of the catalytic event is carefully delineated or, in the

traumatic sense described by Hal Foster, is 'reconstructed after the fact, almost analytically' ('Obscene, Abject, Traumatic' 255). In *The Child in Time*, the distortions of the protagonist's traumatised consciousness figure structurally in the novel, through anachronisms within the plot. Time itself is slowed or reversed, and is experienced within the protagonist's consciousness in a manner that insistently calls him back to the source of pain. McEwan's use of free indirect discourse also works incisively in representing the thought patterns of the protagonist. Stephen's disorienting experience of sudden, unexpected loss, focalised through the third-person narration, is rendered as an 'undecidability of voice' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 197) within the narrative point of view.

The merging of narrator and character through free indirect discourse also opens onto the subject-centred Kantian sublime. With the intimate proximity to traumatised consciousness that free indirect discourse permits, *The Child in Time* describes Stephen's anachronistic encounter with his pregnant mother in terms resonant with the Kantian sublime's 'full and complete primordial experience of spatio-temporality' (Crowther 171). The novel also achieves this through the representation of time and space as pliable, and in a sense amenable to 'shaping' by the protagonist's traumatised consciousness. This is a demonstration of what in McEwan's words is 'perception […] distorted by will' (Smith 113), and potentially by traumatic experience.

The Child in Time is structured in a way that particularly foregrounds Kantian notions of subjectivity and suggests the problems of interpreting reality within the confines of inherently partial, easily damageable human consciousness. Just as Joe's

paranoia in *Enduring Love* leads to realities 'structured by fantasy' (Greenberg 112),

Stephen's yearning to find his missing daughter similarly leads to 'the fantasy of her

continued existence' (McEwan, *CIT* 2), which manifests in ways that fundamentally

affect his perception: for example, his 'dementedly living through' a father-daughter

'reunion' (McEwan, *CIT* 179). The Kantian subject enables the rendition of

Stephen's perceptions in the novel at the level of structure; rather than being 'a

phenomenal entity to be reckoned up along with the objects it moves among', the

subject 'is that which brings such objects to presence in the first place' (Eagleton, *IA*

72). In *The Child in Time*, the traumatised consciousness of the subject (Stephen)

renders its own temporal confusion or dislocation through the described events. The

experience of trauma in this sense, as an out-of-context experience that 'upsets

expectations and unsettles one's very understanding of existing contexts' (LaCapra,

HIT 117), disarticulates the subject and opens onto the Kantian sublime. These

effects provide a compelling link in the novel between representations of the sublime

and traumatised consciousness. This link suggests that McEwan harnesses Kantian

sublime discourse in order to represent the radical unsettlement of traumatised

consciousness, and the aporetic nature of trauma itself.

Trauma also figures in the narrative structure of *Enduring Love*. Joe is not

only repeatedly visited by Jed and drawn back to the air ballooning accident, but

Jed's voice breaks into the narrative itself through letters or 'intrusion[s] of the

epistolary' (Greenberg 113). Joe also obsessively examines his own actions at the

balloon rope in 'a post-mortem, a re-living, a de-briefing, the rehearsal of grief' (*EL*

28). The novel's variety of narrators – Joe, Jed, Clarissa, and the authors of the first

appendix – evokes an array of interpretive frameworks that creates epistemic

instability. Through different narrative techniques, both *The Child in Time* and

Enduring Love produce ambiguity and, true to the 'alternative narrative modalities'

posited by LaCapra, 'raise in probing and problematic ways the question of the

nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into

existence' (*WHWT* 55, 54). *The Child in Time* produces these ambiguous effects

through free indirect discourse, or what LaCapra describes as a 'middle voice'

(*WHWT* 196), which opens onto the affective dimensions of both trauma and the

sublime. *Enduring Love* produces the effects of a 'middle voice', essentially 'placing

basic beliefs or perspectives in an agonistic, possibly fruitful, interaction with one

another' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 197), yet unlike *The Child in Time*, it does so without

using free indirect discourse; the ambiguity and 'agonistic' interactions in *Enduring*

Love are instead the result of its array of first person narrations.

　　　Saturday, like *The Child in Time*, also utilises free indirect discourse as a

'middle voice', rendering its described world through Henry's consciousness.

However, the novel does not describe traumatic experience in terms as immediate as

those of *The Child in Time* or *Enduring Love*; rather, it connotes the 'secondary

trauma' of 'mediatized witnesses' (Douglass and Vogler 9) through allusions to

September 11. This 'secondary trauma' (Douglass and Vogler 9) haunts the

protagonist's memory and imagination, informing his perception of the burning

plane, highlighting a 'sense of assailability' (Gauthier 11) and heightening Henry's

awareness of the possibility, however remote, of terrorists harming his family

(McEwan, *Sat* 208). While *Saturday* somewhat aligns with *The Child in Time* in

terms of narrative point of view, however, it appears to align more closely with

Enduring Love in its representation of the sublime. In both novels, McEwan draws

upon the Burkean version of the sublime through the configuration of 'certain

distances' and 'certain modifications' that situate 'danger or pain' at a remove

(Burke 40) and induce some form of sublime pleasure.

The air balloon accident in *Enduring Love* launches the narrative with a

profoundly Burkean configuration: from the safety of the ground, the protagonist

watches as John Logan falls to his death. Distance is key in the novel's description of

this event and its sublime resonance; 'the smaller Logan became, the more terrible it

was, so terrible it was funny, it was a stunt, a joke, a cartoon' (McEwan, *EL* 15). The

use of the first-person point of view clearly evokes the perspectival quality of the

Burkean sublime in this encounter: the subject's shameful, almost perverse delight in

witnessing another's misfortune, deriving from the subject's appreciation that it

could be his or her own misfortune instead, but is not. The restorative act of sexual

intercourse between Joe and Clarissa in the immediate wake of the accident asserts

this sublime appreciation of safety and the Burkean 'connection of pleasure to self-

preservation' (Crowther 8). A similar episode is described in *Saturday*, as Henry and

Rosalind reunite after Baxter's violent intrusion (McEwan 280); and even in *The

Child in Time*, the scene of Stephen and Julie's lovemaking emerges from 'the wild

expansiveness of their sorrow', as part of their attempt 'to heal everyone and

everything' (McEwan 256). The representation of perspective early in *Enduring

Love*, with respect to the Burkean sublime, presages the later problematisation of

perspective that comes with the inclusion of other narrative voices and hermeneutic

approaches. In the case of Jed and the profound distortions of de Clérambault's

syndrome, these hermeneutic differences become radically pronounced. These

differences work together with the evocations of the sublime in the novel to question

the capacity of narrative itself to describe extreme or aberrant forms of experience,

as represented by the air balloon accident and Jed Parry.

In *Saturday*, the Burkean sublime resonates with the remote event of

September 11 as perceived by the protagonist from a 'position of safety' (Crowther

8). This representation of the sublime also coincides with descriptions of secondary

trauma. *Saturday* foregrounds the role of the 'obliging imagination' (McEwan, *Sat*

15) in creating fantasy versions of the (sometimes traumatic) experiences of others.

These imagined scenes or situations enable the protagonist to feel empathically what

others have felt – or rather, to feel his version of what others might have felt. As

represented in *Saturday*, empathy is subject to the same limitations as any

transcendental project. According to Henry (focalised through the third-person

narrator), consciousness itself is housed in 'mere wet stuff' (McEwan, *Sat* 262), and

any apparent connectivity between one consciousness and another is illusory, a

projection of the 'bright inward cinema' (McEwan, *Sat* 262) of the human brain.

This aspect of *Saturday* resonates with the Kantian sublime, 'occasioned by powers

which transcend the self' (Crowther 15). September 11 itself, as represented in the

novel, evokes a sublime outlandishness or excess that breaks into the routine,

defying notions of 'what could, conceivably, happen' (Bleiker and Leet 718). The

image of vulnerability, the city lying 'wide open, impossible to defend' (McEwan

286), and Henry standing before the window at the end of *Saturday* evokes the

novel's earlier reference to September 11, the Burkean configuration of 'danger or pain' situated at a distance (Burke 40), and the Kantian 'powers which transcend the self' (Crowther 15).

While the McEwan novels I have selected largely bear out the claim that fiction can 'explore the traumatic' (LaCapra, *HIT* 132) and the sublime, and often through similar narrative techniques, not all of these novels combine or collocate the two discourses. In the case of *Amsterdam*, where one discourse is explicitly represented, the other is conspicuously silent; while clearly drawing on the Wordsworthian sublime, this novel shows no open engagement with trauma, despite its beginning with an unexpected loss, and concluding with an ostensible 'moment of crisis' (Courtney 186). In its mechanistic plotting and the ironic detachment of its narrative point of view, *Amsterdam* is set apart. The novel demonstrates a satiric stance and narrative distancing, which in this case prevents the representation of trauma. Free indirect discourse in *Amsterdam*, in select passages – for example, Clive's visit to the Lake District, or his ruminations on mortality (McEwan 76-90, 25-6) – binds the narrator and the character in a manner akin to the narrations of *The Child in Time* and *Saturday*. However, *Amsterdam* broadens the distance between narrator and character to the point at which individual consciousness, affective states and empathy appear incidental. The ironically detached narrator appears distanced from the protagonists and speculates on their actions, remarking that 'perhaps no other outcomes were available' (McEwan 149). Within such a narrative mode, the potentially traumatic 'moment of crisis' of the novel's dénouement, like the 'blaring

carnivalesque tutti' (McEwan, *Am* 159) of Clive's symphony, becomes merely a bathetic spectacle.

The sense of narrative distance is also effectively an emotive and empathic distance, and appears to operate at all levels of *Amsterdam*. The protagonists themselves demonstrate something of this distance, through their moralities that centre on their own wellbeing and care nothing for others'; 'His fate, their fate, separate paths,' Clive reflects, as he quietly leaves the scene of the rape (McEwan, *Am* 88-9). This contrasts with the representation of Henry in *Saturday* who, though with limited accuracy, attempts to understand and empathise with others, and even magnanimously operates on the man who threatened to kill his wife. Similarly, in *Enduring Love*, Joe agonises over his decision to let go of the balloon rope; 'Hanging a few feet above the Chilterns escarpment, our crew enacted morality's ancient, irresolvable dilemma: us, or me' (McEwan, *EL* 14-5). McEwan's sustained attentiveness to individual consciousness in these other novels, be it through free indirect discourse or the first-person narrative point of view, not only helps him in giving moral nuance to his characters, but also in delineating the experience of trauma with psychological acuity. The same, indeed, may be said of the sublime, the experience of which depends on a perceiving consciousness, and with it, some degree of affect; these figure strongly in both Burkean and Kantian sublime discourse.

Though, as in *Amsterdam*, the sublime may be invoked without reference to trauma, its usage in the other novels in such close relation to traumatic experience suggests its significance to, or utility in, the description of such experience. As

Chandler observes, traumatic experience, like the sublime, is '"too large" to be

contained in the existent terms and relations of symbolized meaning' (188). This is

true of several key descriptions in the McEwan novels I have examined in this study.

In *The Child in Time*, Stephen is confronted by the 'sheer difficulty' of

understanding time, 'the indignity of coming up against the limitations of one's

intellectual reach' (McEwan 127). In *Enduring Love*, Joe describes the air balloon as

'the colossus' that draws the variety of witnesses in 'with the power of a terrible ratio

that set fabulous magnitude against the puny human distress at its base' (McEwan 2).

And in *Saturday*, Henry speculates on the fates of those inside a burning plane, fates

that are unknowable to him and exist 'separately in the world, independent of

himself' (McEwan 18). These moments evoke the 'common image' of the sublime,

'that which is too vast or powerful to be confronted or comprehended' (Chandler

185), in conjunction with the overwhelming excess of trauma.

Such evocations are integral to the descriptions of trauma in *The Child in

Time*, *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*. The use of free indirect discourse and (in

Enduring Love) the first-person point of view enable McEwan to delineate the

fractured lives and psychologies of his protagonists. More than this, however, it

suggests the broader capacity of fiction to address traumatic experience from the

inside, or an imagined 'inside'. In LaCapra's terms, fiction has the potential to

'explore in a particularly telling and unsettling way the affective or emotional

dimensions of experience and understanding' (*HIT* 132).

More broadly, my findings present opportunities for further studies of the

representational links between trauma and the sublime. These potential studies may

read later modernist and postmodernist conceptions of the sublime in relation to

contemporary representations of trauma in fiction, including McEwan's work. The

continued appropriation of the sublime, as a 'time-honoured aesthetic category'

(Onega and Ganteau 19) and as a word, and how this contributes to its ongoing life is

a conversation in which this study, and those that follow, may take part. It may also

to a certain extent inform studies on the influence of trauma on sublime discourse;

certainly, the formative influence of traumatic events such as the Holocaust on

contemporary conceptions of the sublime – for example, in the work of Adorno and

Lyotard –invites further inquiry. Moreover, an ongoing critical engagement with the

vocabulary used to define and describe trauma may itself perform the function of a

'middle voice', in 'placing basic beliefs or perspectives in an agonistic, possibly

fruitful, interaction with one another' (LaCapra, *WHWT* 197), to the benefit of

literary criticism, narratology and trauma studies.

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