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Ian McEwan's Aesthetic Stakes in Adaptation as Political Rewriting: A Study of *Nutshell* (2016) and *The Cockroach* (2019)

Abstract: This essay will examine two of Ian McEwan's recent novellas as political rewritings of William Shakespeare and Franz Kafka. McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016) re-positions the avenger figure in *Hamlet* as an unborn child whose melancholic awareness of the condition of modern existence allows him a mode of ironic commentary about the possibilities of moral and political choices in a world soon to be destroyed by climate change and nuclear apocalypse. *The Cockroach* (2019) turns Kafkaesque absurdity into political satire as the protagonist-turned-insect first encountered in *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is arrogated a position of absolute power in a fictional dystopia eerily resonant of Britain on the verge of Brexit. I argue that McEwan's re-scripting of these two works of canonical literature imbues his narratives with political resonance, as the formulations and distortions of the physical body in his two novellas map onto the articulations of political belief. In effect, McEwan posits the Foucaultian notion that the body is determined by symbolic systems of power. However, he succeeds in turning the gaze back onto the political by instantiating the radical dimension of a subject whose coming into being is already a political act and event. In other words, McEwan's artistic intervention in rewriting the narratives of Hamlet and Gregor Samsa explodes the hermeticism of the family drama in the originals by relocating the theatre of subjectivity within the sphere of the political.

Key terms: Ian McEwan, William Shakespeare, Franz Kafka, literary adaptation, political aesthetics

> Elsewhere they are burning
> Witches and heretics
> In the boiling squares,
>
> Thousands have died since dawn
> In the service
> Of barbarous kings;

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But there is silence
In the houses of Nagoya
And the hills of Ise.

Derek Mahon, "The Snow Party"

Whatever an individual or a group may undertake against the totality they are part of is infected by that evil of that totality; and no less infected is he who does nothing at all. [...] The individual who dreams of moral certainty is bound to fail, bound to incur guilt because, being harnessed to the social order, he has virtually no power over the conditions whose cry for change appeals to the moral *ingenium*.

Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

Introduction: Reassessing McEwan as a Postmodernist

The fictions of Ian McEwan are mediated between the inheritance of past literary narratives and a guarded optimism as to the novel's aesthetic contributions towards contemporary debates surrounding the place of art within technocratic political economy. A keen sense of what it means to write from the perspective of the 'modern subject' who can shift intellectual and cultural registers from the literary to the scientific imbues his craft with a postmodernist sensibility suitably picked up by critics who note his playful appropriation of themes from Victorian fiction and Darwinist narratives. It is the note of unease and ambivalence which frames McEwan's attitude towards the shape of the future that also precipitates critical attention with respect to his self-conscious distance from the totalizing tendencies of any artistic or scientific movement. Jago Morrison reads the destabilizing tendencies behind McEwan's use of male narrators as symptomatic of the "struggle to articulate the possibility of a narrative voice that is self-conscious in its refusal of full coherence or control and unable or unwilling to disguise the extent of its own instability and unease" (2001: 267–268). David James argues that McEwan deliberately distances himself from the aesthetic impulses of both modernism and postmodernism in order to emphasize the ethical idea that "imaginative literature can [...] maintain an 'engagement with the world'" (2012: 141). There is therefore a scholarly consensus that McEwan attempts to plug his fiction into wider social and political currents; as David Malcolm avers, McEwan's work is "orientated towards topics of social substance and contemporary relevance" (2019: 106). The critical attempt to articulate the intersection between the public and the personal has understandably focused on the self-reflexive construction of narratives which

become indicative of the ways through which political and historical discourses are interpreted and disseminated. For David Punter, McEwan employs fiction not only as a crucial counterpoint to the objectivity enshrined by scientific positivism, but also to probe how every act of storytelling must inevitably cede hermeneutic ground to "a more general unreliability of language" (2017: 17). In the attempt to offer up fiction as a mode of secular transcendence which counters ideological bigotry with empathetic openness towards others, McEwan blunts the political force of narrative by demonstrating how "there is no possibility of an entirely *de-narrated* position" (Bradley and Tate 2010: 20; original emphasis) out of which the real can be accessed and changed.

McEwan and the Body: Towards a Politics of Adaptation

Against this postmodernist scepticism towards the possibilities of the emergence of a coherent political subject, I wish to argue that McEwan imbricates the personal with the political in his recent novels *Nutshell* (2016) and *The Cockroach* (2019) through adaptation and rewriting. In my view, McEwan brings to bear a heightened awareness of political and moral failure, and the resistances offered by the committed subject refracted by the awareness of corruption, through a transposition effected by adapting William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* and Franz Kafka's short story *The Metamorphosis* in a more contemporary setting. In doing so, McEwan articulates a more active stance towards the political valencies of novel-writing than those enunciated by critics who subsume his oeuvre under the aegis of postmodernism or meta-fictionality, while also being cannily aware that all writing is inextricably mediated by other texts and discourses. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *A Theory of Adaptation*, "what is involved in adapting can be a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another's story and filtering it [...] through one's own sensibility, interest and talents" (2006: 18). If adaptation is such an active shift "away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 2006: 26), this move does not so much as negate the source text, but to re-activate the interpretive difference both *between* source and adapted text and *within* the source text. In other words, adaptation accrues a political force when it re-energises the political and social contradictions of a past historical epoch as they shape the articulations of literary texts. As adaptations "move from one semiotic system to another" and "dramatize the encounter[s] between two texts and contexts" (Corrigan 2017: 31), they also bring into the open unaddressed questions of power and inequality which determine the relationship

between private artistic creation and public rhetoric. Situating McEwan's adaptive strategy with respect to current theories of adaptation not only allows us to discern the political moment in the novels as a commentary on the ways in which the private body (de)forms itself in response to the 'threat' of public space, but also locate an interventionist impulse within the difference between source and adapted text that imbricates the material body with the unfolding of textuality.

Surveying contemporary theories of adaptation leads one to the conclusion that the political implications of adaptation have not been explored enough. The overtly positive embracing of a postmodern textual position has rightly been upheld as a liberating attack on the primacy of the source text over the adapted text, thereby calling into question notions of authorship and hermeneutic centrality. James Naremore summarises this tendency (which he finds still to be current amongst adaptation scholars) as to be "inherently respectful of the 'precursor text,' and constitutive of a series of binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct: literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original vs copy" (qtd. in Slethaug 2014: 18). Naremore's inclination towards a postmodern plurality finds credence in Slethaug's own critical opinion of the need for a postmodern lens with which to read the development of adaptation. Drawing on theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Slethaug frames his own scholarly intervention as outrightly postmodernist in orientation. As he writes, "[c]learly adaptations within the last decade loosen up definitions of a text, foster dialogue between texts, take intertextuality to new limits [and] inhabit ever-expanding postmodern spaces" (2014: 27–28). So much is the positive bent towards destabilizing the traditional authority of the source text over adapted text that Glenn Jellenik frames the "task" of the adaptation critic as an outrightly postmodernist one:

> Indeed, the adaptation critic represents the ultimate postmodern critic, because s/he is *unbound* by genre, period, or critical approach. S/he can set to charting the ways a text works through other texts—the ways intertexts weave and dovetail into one another, the specific ways that they all reflect and drive the cultures that produce and consume them. (2017: 40; original emphasis)

However, I wish to push back upon this postmodernist impulse by bringing into conversation a sense of the political that postmodern frameworks do not necessarily privilege in their valorisation of the 'intertextual' As I see it, a postmodern destabilisation of categories of 'authorship' has set up an overly hermetic dialogue between source text and all other adapted texts that often elide the question of the 'life' of the text as it is embedded in material culture. In other words, the question of writerly intentionality, which gets overlooked in perspectives that take for granted Barthes' grand pronouncement of the 'death of the author', needs

to be brought back into critical conversation, not to resuscitate the humanistic resonances of author as sole genius of the created text, but in order to probe the political and cultural conditions that determine the aesthetic (and surely intended) difference between source and adapted text. Postmodernism's unfortunate reification of difference thereby lacks the critical vocabulary to discuss difference as difference, without defeating its own framework as ahistorical play of differences. As I read McEwan, the critical decision to read a specific adaptation as *adaptation* from the source is political in nature: it intervenes in a defined historical and cultural moment in order to self-reflexively shed light on the practice of adaptation as being both a continuation and a disruption.

In contrast to the implicit dyadic structure between source and adapted text that postmodern approaches focus upon, theories of adaptation that pursue the biological resonances in the phrase 'to adapt' draw closer to my argument in this essay. Whereas postmodernism unfortunately stabilizes the definitions of a text as 'text', an approach which dialecticizes the relationship between a text and its environment stresses the contingent links between the body and its lifeworld, thereby placing emphasis on the political dimensions behind literary production. This approach is pursued at length by adaptation scholar Regina Schober, who points out that "[w]hat is rarely mentioned [...] is that 'adaptation' is originally a term borrowed from biology, describing the evolutionary transformation processes according to which species are fitted to their environment" (2019: 33). By transposing the Darwinian logic of evolutionary change as adaptation to an organism's environment, Schober argues for a network model for thinking about adaptation, in which adaptations form connections which "can be explicit or implicit, total or partial" (2019: 45). For Schober, "networks of adaptation are inherently open, meaning they are only potentially there as soon as connections are traced and agreed upon by an individual or by an 'interpretive community' that then also becomes an agent in the network" (2019: 45). This model suggestively imbricates textuality with corporeality by implying that adaptation is an act that opens up a text to a milieu (of reception, interpretation and dissemination) that is defined by its constant mutability and unpredictability. This framework seems to me to be especially pertinent in considering McEwan's adaptative strategy, which is as much focused on foregrounding the currency of the adapted text as a literary response to contemporary culture (or the impending loss of it) as it is concerned with an ontology of corporeality as a marker of fragile openness towards the world. However, to the extent that McEwan's interest in adaptation defines a political position and ethics, I go beyond John Bryant's claim that "adaptation may be seen as an epitome of multicultural democracy with its inescapable anxieties over the evolution of one's ethnicity, the threat of assimilation, the forging of a new identity and the retention or forgetting of past identities" (2013: 55), for what

is at stake in McEwan's novels is nothing less than the inheritance of the Western values of rationality and scientific positivism in the face of what Cécile Leupolt calls "the fundamental human fascination with apocalyptic fantasies" (qtd. in Hoydis 2019: 563). Such an awareness of crisis deeply informs McEwan's turn towards the anxieties of living in the world burdened by irresolvable conflict and unspeakable historical trauma in the later fiction, and it is my argument that adaptation functions as a literary and political response to this "uneasy state of mind" (Brown 2008: 81) because it embodies a secular faith in a continuation of a humanistic inheritance which is also inherently responsive to what Dominic Head terms as "cultural variation rather than indices of evolution" (2007: 203). As I understand Head, adaptation for McEwan is deeply anti-teleological: it reacts sharply against Western narratives of perfectibility and racial superiority in order to put into play a constant transaction between phenomenal consciousness and the unpredictable effects of the quotidian. As Thom Dancer argues, the challenge McEwan puts to his readers is how to "move forward in a world devoid of narratives of recuperation or redemption" (2012: 216–217).

My response to Dancer in this essay will be that McEwan uses adaptation to focus his reader's attention on the body as the site of political intervention and critique. Just as the body adjusts to its environment not in a neutral way but as a marker of its birth as political subject, adaptation recuperates textual meaning not as *restitution* but as a *continuation* of interpretation. As R. Barton Palmer argues, "adaptations share an identity with their source, but in representing that identity it is more important that they point forward not backward" (2017: 77). Understood politically, this implies that each adaptation performs a decided intervention by hermeneutically changing an entire tradition of literary reception. To follow Walter Benjamin's celebrated arguments on translation, every trans-lation – and adaptation – lifts the 'original' into a higher state of being by supplementing what was missing to begin with. In this way, McEwan's adaptations do more than simply transpose Shakespeare and Kafka to a contemporary political scene and audience – they locate the event of the text as the uncovering of a determined historical moment and perspective. This is perhaps why both novels centre around the human form as it is being (de)formed by politics: the text of the body, and body of the text, appropriate and are ex-propriated by the openness of Being. By reading the close connection between adaptation and the body, I hope to nuance Foucaultian notions of biopolitics, in which the development of Western conceptual knowledge in the eighteenth century arises in tandem with a subjugation of the body to the totalizing gaze of a statist apparatus. As Foucault writes apropos of the sick body,

> What now constituted the unity of the medical gaze was not the circle of knowledge in which it was achieved but that open, infinite, moving totality, ceaselessly displaced and enriched

by time, whose course it began but would never be able to stop—by this time a clinical recording of the infinite, variable series of events. But its support was not the patient in his singularity, but a collective consciousness, with all the information that intersects in it, growing in a complex, ever-proliferating way until it finally achieves the dimensions of a history, a geography, a state. (1963/1994: 29)

I aim to react to this determinism by arguing that adaptability designates a more fluid conception of power as inscribed on the body, as it implies a more dynamic transaction between private space and public language. To conceive of the body as being what philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as a "constant movement between the loss of equilibrium and the search for a new point of stability" (1993/2004: 78), is to see a crucial homology between the history of adaptation as an ongoing negotiation between inheritance and vitalism, and corporeal reality as being given over to facticity while malleable enough to shape futurity. Mc-Ewan's narratives thereby foreground the power of political intervention as such: if no text and body is apolitical, to adapt is to bring into being a political way of comporting to life.

Adaptation as Radical Difference: Ghostly Inheritance and Textual Deterritorialization

Seen in this way, adaptation negotiates the burden of historical meaning through the process of re-writing and re-scripting past narratives, this activity being both an active inheritance of the past and being haunted by its presence-absence. I want to pursue this framework of difference as reflected through adaptation by bringing in the theories of philosophers Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These perspectives will highlight what I find important about the philosophical and political force of adaptation as conceived by McEwan's two novels. Indeed, I take McEwan's use of Shakespeare and Kafka to be theoretically aligned with what Derrida and Deleuze and Guatarri find interesting about literary texts and what they illustrate about the nature of language and political critique. As we will see, McEwan's novelistic investments in adapting narratives not only imbricates biological growth with textual transformations, but also views adaptation as an act of political intervention in its tendency to de-centre and re-formulate the encrustations of ideology.

Derrida's philosophical engagement with the complex legacies of Marxism and Shakespearean criticism finds fullest expression in his text *Spectres of Marx* (1993/1994). Derrida implicitly opens up the question of thinking and writing *in the wake* of Marx and Shakespeare through the ambiguous figure of the spectre.

Just as Hamlet's father appears before him as a ghost and speaks from the vantage point of a past which can never be fully integrated into the fullness of the present, the legacy of a text cannot be completely assimilated through reproduction and re-writing. Instead, we inherit a text through its capacity to haunt us. For Derrida, the haunting of a text underscores how the lost originality of the text presides over its various interpretations and adaptations without ever properly inhabiting them. As he writes, "the animated work becomes that thing, the Thing that, like an elusive spectre, *engineers* [...] a habitation without proper inhabiting [...] of both memory and translation. A masterpiece moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost" (Derrida 1993/1994: 18; original emphasis). The 'ghost' of Shakespeare and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* both open up the possibility of adaptation and translation and absent themselves from every possible version of the new texts which are thereby produced.

Addressing the work of adaptation in terms of a movement which deconstructs the opposition between imitation and deviation allows us to understand how the adapted text enables the source text to become different from itself. Indeed, this allows us to go beyond the simplistic "dialectic between deference and defiance" (Desmet 2018: 243) which structures the critical debate of Shakespearean appropriation and adaptation. McEwan's rewriting of *Hamlet* is thereby sensitive as to how the modern writer 'inherits' the Shakespearean text without ever being fully equal to the 'moment' of the original. As Derrida points out, "an inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. [...] [O]ne must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction" (1993/1994: 16). In this way, an adaptation is an event of interpretation, in that it both precipitates something completely new, and supplements the absence inherent in the original. Shakespeare's triangulation of Hamlet's father, Gertrude and Claudius gets refracted into McEwan's John Cairncross, Trudy and Claude while insisting on their difference from their adapted doubles: McEwan's text resides in this *mise en abyme* of difference which never fully stabilises. At the same time, McEwan pursues the metaphorical resonances of 'adaptation' on the biological and textual levels. To adapt is to change and adjust through negotiating a historical inheritance which structures complicated legacies of adherence and betrayals. As we will see, McEwan's primary question in *Nutshell* is one which perhaps precipitates his choice of Shakespearean text: how can the subject assume the burden of responsibility for the past which he or she did not create, but which he or she inherits? As the unnamed narrator crucially conflates the moral corruption of his mother and uncle with the evils of Western civilisation, McEwan explores the possibility of a political reckoning with the spectre of history consonant with the fictional account of trauma and unexplainable evil found in *Black Dogs* (1992).

The philosophers Deleuze and Guattari attempt to describe the semiotic relationship between texts as consisting of de-centred flows. For them, texts manifest not as ontological totalities, but as assemblages constituted out of heterogenous elements which are always in the process of detotalizing and *becoming* something else. As they emphasise, "the assemblages are in constant variation, are themselves constantly subject to transformation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 95). Extending the pertinence of their arguments to adaptation, we might say that there is no predetermined essentiality to the source text which awaits adaptation into the new text; instead, the source text crystalizes certain modes of potentiality which are themselves in the process of combining into something new. The relationship between the source and adapted text is in this sense non-dialectizable; they cannot be sublated and reduced into a higher form of knowledge or social practice. Instead, texts are made up of complex registers of signs which build up and break down on an absolute plane of immanence.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the constitution of language is thus entirely political; as they write, "it must be observed how thoroughly politics works language from within, causing not only the vocabulary but also the structure and all of the phrasal elements to vary as the order-words change" (1980/2013: 97). Political and social institutions thereby interpellate political subjects within a certain existing regime of signs, forming a decentralized 'machine' whose parts interpenetrate one another. In a text on Foucault, Deleuze emphasises how the organs of capitalist society entrench control by both disseminating power and integrating disparate assemblages:

> The concrete assemblages of school, workshops, army, etc., integrate qualified substances (children, workers, soldiers) and finalized functions (education, etc.,) and this carries on right up to the State, which strives for global integration. (1986/1988: 37)

Reading McEwan's *The Cockroach* as political satire is thus to understand his interest in adaptation in terms of a flow. Indeed, his cynical take on political corruption cannot be separated from Kafka's bizarre conceit of an ordinary human being turning into an insect. In McEwan's sardonic version, the becoming-insect of the British Prime Minister enables him to adapt fully to his role as a self-serving and amoral head of state. As Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate, power in McEwan's novel is characterized through the multitude of de-centred flows which map the functioning of late capitalism onto the impersonal workings of a detotalized machine. Adapting Kafka's parable of alienation in this way allows McEwan to explode the cloistered familial drama in the source text and re-centre his critique on the abstract workings of the modern state. In the unholy and immoral confluence between human being, insect and machine, McEwan's dystopian fantasia broadens the reader's sense of uneasiness found in *The Metamorphosis*, thereby reconfiguring it as political disaffection.

Nutshell and the Birth of the Political Subject

From its epigraph onwards, *Nutshell* wears its Shakespearean precursor on its sleeve: quoting from the melancholic prince's speech to his treacherous companions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, McEwan transposes Hamlet's metaphysical solitude to a foetus' physical helplessness within his mother's womb. Narrated from the perspective of the foetus, the novel almost too crassly morphs the names of Hamlet's mother and uncle (Gertrude and Claude) into the hapless Trudy and ruthless property agent Claude. Several well-known (almost clichéd) hallmarks of the Shakespearean play find their way into the novel: Hamlet's penchant for soliloquising finds resonance in the obsessive first-person narration of the foetus, the murder of Hamlet's father to gain throne and wife is replicated in the poisoning of John Cairncross by Trudy and Claude in order to receive his inheritance, and phrases such as "[t]his too solid stench" (McEwan 2016b: 74) and "[t]he rest is chaos" (McEwan 2016b: 200) depend on a reader familiar enough with the source text to achieve their intertextual significance. Speaking in 2016 about the intertextual links between his novel and Shakespeare's revenge tragedy, McEwan is keen to highlight the particularly modern inflection his retelling bears towards the play: "My narrator [...] contemplates suicide, sees a ghost and has the triangle of his father, uncle and mother, but in *modern terms*" (2016a: 1; original emphasis). We may extend McEwan's thought to say that the novel's modernity consists not only in a heightening of Hamlet's inability to take decisive action, but also in negotiating the cultural prestige of Shakespeare in terms of the reception and interpretation of *Hamlet*. That McEwan both raises the spectre of Freudian criticism and playfully negates its conclusions is evident from the narrator's almost dreamlike whimsy that his mother "sits within a big leather armchair that dates from Freud's Vienna" (2016b: 14), and the many parodic allusions to the Oedipus complex which the psychoanalyst thought provided the crucial key to Hamlet's failure to act. Indeed, McEwan's novel is cannily literate not only with regards to *Hamlet*, but also concerning the intellectual and cultural history of Western Europe: alongside quotations from metaphysical poetry lie references to philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Thomas Hobbes and Roland Barthes. The textual space of the novel is thus haunted not only by the unanswered questions surrounding *Hamlet*, but also by the debris of culture which the narrator uneasily inherits. Like Benjamin's 'Angel of History', McEwan's narrator passively witnesses how European civilisation has piled up manmade catastrophe after catastrophe, without being in a position to withstand the ineluctable momentum of historical time:

> Europe's most virtuous spectres, religion and, when it faltered, godless utopias bursting with scientific proofs, together they scorched the earth from the tenth to the twentieth centuries. (2016b: 161)

Like Hamlet, the narrator is compelled to assume responsibility for the fallenness of a world which preceded him, and which nevertheless he understands he is as much a part of as the next person.

It is therefore my argument that rather than let the intertextual references dissolve the novel into an inward-turning postmodern web of intertextual relationships, McEwan pointedly demonstrates how the narrator's main concern is framed in terms of political and ecological crisis. Hamlet's well-analysed melancholy, which in Shakespeare's play stems from an obsessive fixation upon moral turpitude and sexual license, finds an existential inflection in the narrator's constant worry that the "world [has become] too complicated and dangerous for our quarrelsome natures to manage" (McEwan 2016b: 27). This melancholy is underpinned by a modern knowledge of brutality and paranoia about impending holocaust unavailable to Hamlet and Shakespeare's audience: "Too much to bear, too grim to be true. Why would the world configure itself so harshly?" (McEwan 2016b: 34). Alongside this fear is also a scepticism that scientific and technological advances can effectively halt this by reversing the deep facts of our biological makeup and psychological 'Unconscious'. McEwan's explicit adaptation of Hamlet's famous speech in Act 2 Scene 2 of the play serves to, once again, crystallise the hero's misanthropy in terms of a disillusionment towards societal progress:

> These admirable radio talks and bulletins, the excellent podcasts that moved me, seem at best hot air, at worst a vaporous stench. The brave polity I'm soon to join, the noble congregation of humanity, its customs, gods and angels, its fiery ideas and brilliant ferment, no longer thrill me. A weight bears down heavily on the canopy that wraps my little frame. There's hardly enough of me to form one small animal, still less to express a man. My disposition is to stillborn sterility, then to dust. (McEwan 2016b: 91)

> I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What piece of work is man – how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals. And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (*Hamlet* 2.2.261–274)

The narrator's tone aptly references Hamlet's world-weariness, but locates the source of spiritual fatigue differently from the tragic hero. If, as standard Shakespearean criticism would have it, this speech foregrounds an ambivalent optimism towards the rise of Renaissance humanism which championed the explanatory force of scientific inquiry, McEwan's adaptation locates the story in another historical epoch which casts ironic light upon the notion of progress as understood through scientific development. Rachel Holland's view that McEwan posits

that "science can access and describe reality in a unique and somehow superior way to any other discourse" (2019: 167) is therefore untenable in the light of his narrator's assessment of how "[e]very proposition [of science] is matched or cancelled by another" (McEwan 2016b: 29). Indeed, I would venture to describe McEwan's method in the novel as phenomenological: by "bracketing" out the world through the use of the central conceit of the unborn foetus in the womb who evaluates impressions about it, McEwan focuses the reader's attention on how consciousness attends to the 'essential' facts of biology. It is here that McEwan seizes upon Shakespeare's play at its most pressing, for what science 'demonstrates' is that "[b]iology is destiny" (2016b: 144). Transposed from the dramatic tradition of revenge tragedy to the "helical twists of fate" (2016b: 10) which delineate the biological burden of inheritance, McEwan's narrator ironically emphasises that the "impulse" towards vengeance "is instinctive, powerful" (2016b: 134), as much a compelling dramatic trope as it is an inheritance from our less civilised ancestors. This understanding is also a political one: given the awareness that "[r]evenge unstitches a civilisation" (McEwan 2016b: 135), the narrator ironically subscribes to the Hobbesian view of a social contract where the state ultimately has the ultimate "monopoly of violence" (McEwan 2016b: 181) in order to prevent private retribution. Adapting Shakespeare for McEwan thereby reveals the narrative force behind the source drama; the "condition of the modern foetus" (2016b: 74) is determined by archaic energies which both create and destroy society.

However, to adapt does not only mean to blindly inherit and be determined by that inheritance; it also signifies a manifestation of an altered relationship between an organism and its environment. I argue that it is in McEwan's rewriting of the tragic ending to *Hamlet* that the biological and textual dimensions of adaptation coalesce by giving voice to the birth of a political subject. In what is the biggest serve from the source text, McEwan's narrator exacts 'revenge' on his uncle Claude not through killing him, but by delaying his escape through forcing his way out from his mother's womb. In contrast to the bloody denouement of a revenge tragedy where bodies litter the stage and the tragic hero sacrifices himself to carry out his mission, McEwan's retelling focuses on the coming-into-being of the hero whose very birth itself ends the logic of jealousy, revenge and aggression patterning the narrative which precedes him. For McEwan, Hamlet's well-noted dilemma between hesitant thought and mindless action is resolved by an act of intervention which signals the readiness to substitute restorative justice for retributive violence: "Time to join in. To end the endings. Time to begin" (2016b: 192). In this way, McEwan's adaptative strategy feeds into a metatheatrical and metanarrative awareness that both draws the adapted text near to the source text and distances the former from the latter. The various allusions to *Hamlet* as a play with dramatic conventions suitably put the reader at a distance from accepting

the conventions of the drama and (more crucially) the conventions of narrative that dictate revenge as an 'inherited' outcome of a familial feud (whose roots can be traced back to Aeschylus' play *The Oresteia*). This point becomes abundantly clear in a moment towards the end of the novel when the narrator ironically capitalizes on the theatrical power of *Hamlet*'s most arresting image: the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father. In McEwan's retelling, the ghost manifests in all its gory brilliance as a manifestation of inner guilt:

> My father wears the clothes he died in. His face is bloodless, the already rotting lips are greenish-black, the eyes, tiny and penetrating. Now he stands at the foot of the stairs, taller than we remember him. He's come from the mortuary to find us and knows exactly what he wants. [...] This is my corporeal father, John Cairncross, exactly as he is. (2016b: 187)

However, the narrator almost immediately dismisses this apparition as "[a] childish Halloween fantasy" (McEwan 2016b: 188), drawing upon the loss of belief in a supernatural realm in the process. This introjection becomes significant for the novel's purposes not only because it highlights the difference between source and adapted text as a site of productive difference, but also serves to continue and update Shakespeare's thematic concern with revenge as a destructive emotion which we inherit, but which needs to be balanced by modern mechanisms of social and political justice. In this way, McEwan's interest in an "evolutionary literary aesthetics" that enables human beings across generations to engage with "literary representations of character" (Head 2007: 201–202) feed into an investment in adaptation as continuity with difference.

The narrator's willingness to participate in life is an affirmation of the cruel conditions of existence, and a negation of the Hegelian 'Beautiful Soul' who stands apart from the world at the risk of nullifying its own concrete subjectivity. The narrator has crucially moved from abstract criticism to determined action; this effectively opens the future up as *difference from* the burdens of the past. For McEwan, adaptation has a political meaning when it signals the birth of the politically-committed subject whose action is informed by a historical perspective. The narrator looks upon the atrocities of the world with pity and regret, but this tragic awareness does not prevent him from rendering up "justice" (McEwan 2016b: 199) and ensuring that Claude and Trudy atone for their crimes. Significantly, it is out of this attempt at justice that "meaning" (McEwan 2016b: 199) can arise. For McEwan, this restorative justice cannot arise without empathy. Once again, it is the issue of inheritance which serves to focus the theme of connectivity: the narrator is constantly aware that (like Hamlet to Gertrude, or even Prospero to Caliban) he shares a bodily connection to Trudy, his father and even to Claude: "[i]t bothers me that what she swallows will find its way to me as nutrient, and make me just a little like him" (McEwan 2016b: 116). If, like our genes,

language forms an indispensable part of our humanistic inheritance, then engagement with imaginative literature becomes crucial towards understanding other people. Indeed, McEwan demonstrates that his novel attempts what *Hamlet* is unable to do: bring us into the perspective of Trudy-Gertrude, thereby complicating moral boundaries in an ethical fashion. In the end, McEwan emphasises that decisive political intervention must not attempt to 'bring back' the old world – John Cairncross' fuzzy idealism and overreliance on aesthetic solipsism naturally 'die out' in response to a more complex reality. Instead, an adaptive political conscience is as equally sensitive to the moral and political consequences of the narratives we pursue as it is wary of the soulless manoeuvring which Claude represents. By reading *Nutshell* in this way, I hope to present a stronger picture behind the politics of McEwan's writing than that provided by Jennifer Fleissner, who notes that McEwan "acknowledge[s] [...] the horror and attraction of an abysmal Beyond [...] while nonetheless recognizing the need to patch together a life that holds it at bay" (2017: 118); while his novels deal with characters beset by physical and psychological trauma, his latest fiction suggests they certainly do more than "patching together" temporary bulwarks against trauma. If McEwan's use of the motif of (child)birth hearkens back to the reintegrative potential of parturition in *The Child in Time* (1987), he also extends the significance of that moment in *Nutshell* to emphasise the eruption of a consciousness directed towards the future.

Li(n)es of Flow, Li(n)es of Escape: *The Cockroach* and Adapting to the End Times

McEwan's most recent novel finds a satirical dimension to metamorphosis as adaptation. It presents a nightmarish vision of political community based on "[t]he collective pheromonal unconscious" (2019: 7) which locks its members in a deceptive oceanic depth of feeling. McEwan's rewriting of Kafka's story does more than to plumb the absurdist conceit of the source text; indeed, it offers up an analysis of political power as a postmodern updating of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The Italian philosopher's exhortation to the ideal ruler to master the cunning nature of beasts in order to consolidate political rule is inflected with the notion of devolution as ironic progress. Jim Sams' metamorphosis into an insect gifts him with an "unhelpfully narrowed" (McEwan 2019: 2) vision which he turns to his advantage in his role as British Prime Minister determined on squashing his political enemies while pursuing an extremely controversial economy policy of 'Reversalism' wherein the logic of trickle-down economics is turned wildly on its

head. Biological adaptation correlates perfectly with the complete lack of empathy required for Sams to crush his opponent, the foreign secretary, as he writes an incriminating article about his opponent's sexual immorality without "the trick, entirely alien to him, of inhabiting another's mind" (McEwan 2019: 70–71). McEwan stands his own publicly-stated thoughts about imaginative writing as an important form of empathy on its head, satirizing the political uses of writing whose capacity for spreading ideology is infinitely multiplied by technological dissemination. *The Cockroach* thus plugs into the contemporary debates surrounding technocratic governance through imagining how human nature would be indelibly shaped by the functioning of machinal regimes. The novel's gloomy diagnosis of adaptation as devolution is emphasized when Sams declares that "[t] here was nothing more liberating than a closely knit sequence of lies" (McEwan 2019: 71): only a creature attuned to and affected by the deterritorialized flows of informational networks can negotiate its way in the political sphere made possible by late capitalism.

The novel then presents a dystopic indictment of power understood through de-centralised flows which cut through both the private and public spheres. This pervasive interpenetration is underscored when Sams turns to Twitter to spin an international fracas to his advantage. In McEwan's satiric words, "Twitter [was] a primitive version [...] of the pheromonal unconscious" (2019: 54): to countenance the corruption of language as politically advantageous is to follow the nightmarish logic of evolution gone rogue. Whereas Kafka's story confines Gregor Samsa's tragedy largely in the familial sphere, McEwan relocates the notion of the family in order to emphasise the instantiation of an insidious political community who not only "share[]" the same "origins" (2019: 20), but also are primed for survival because of their willingness to embrace "poverty, filth [and] squalor" (2019: 98). McEwan's pointed reference to Sams' cabinet being like "[a] band of brothers and sisters" (2019: 21) drives home the point concerning the perverted vision of commonality at the heart of the novel. At the same time, the novel's main economic conceit demonstrates the pertinence of flows and their linkages to power. Sams tries to effect a policy called 'Reversalism', wherein the flow of money and wealth goes in the opposite direction from that of the capitalist machinery. In effect, the consumer is "generously compensated at retail rates" (McEwan 2019: 25) for every item he or she buys in exchange for the money handed over to the company wherein the individual works. This fantasia of economic functioning appeals to the working classes who "had no stake in the status quo and nothing to lose" (McEwan 2019: 29), and this 'revolutionary' way of reversing the flow of commodity culture is presented as the economic panacea for unemployment, social inequality and political disenfranchisement. However, McEwan cannily demonstrates why a critical analysis of power as the multiplicity of flows is nec-

essary to unmask the ideology behind such a scheme. As flow, power is a decentralising force which proliferates and produces, much like the spread of cockroaches. To substitute one form of flow for another does nothing to change the fundamental workings of systemic inequality. As Sams points out in a cabinet meeting, government revenue will have to be increased "by employing another twenty thousand policemen, fifty thousand nurses, fifteen thousand doctors and two hundred thousand dustmen to ensure daily collections" (McEwan 2019: 34) of money – the sheer number of civil servants indicating the extent of governmental reach. As Foucault argues, power does not primarily work through the hierarchical force of a repressive governmental agency which censors and inflicts violence upon its citizens. Instead, power multiplies itself through social and cultural fields which encode norms of intelligibility. By producing sites of governmental surveillance from "the high-speed rail link to Birmingham" and "[t]en thousand new prison places" (McEwan 2019: 35), Sams' government entrenches the immutability of the new status quo, whilst presenting a façade of openness.

In fact, I argue that McEwan's adaptation of Kafka seeks to revise the German writer's portrayal of power found in other novels such as *The Trial* (1914) and in stories like "In The Penal Colony" (1919). For Kafka, power emanates from the inscrutable presence of a mysterious Law; one can only suffer the violence effects of the exercise of power without understanding the reason why one is condemned under the Law. The unmasking of the workings of power in *The Cockroach* realigns its dynamics away from a hierarchical framework to that of a total immersion in a political field of practice which offers no escape. Indeed, the patently illogical functioning of 'Reversalism' cuts through not only the legal system, but also the laws of science:

> [I]t would have been difficult to define the legal or philosophical principles by which it should be illegal. An appeal to basics would not have helped. Everyone knew that in every single law of physics, except one, there was no logical reason why the phenomena described could not run backwards as well as forwards. The famous exception was the second law of thermodynamics. In that beautiful construct, time was bound to run in one direction only. Then Reversalism was a special case of the second law and therefore in breach of it! Or was it? (McEwan 2019: 81)

Within the dystopic framework of the novel, McEwan offers an ironic counterstatement to the significance of adaptative birth that we see in *Nutshell*. For McEwan here, the totalizing reach of power can only *produce* a dehumanized consciousness soulless enough to respond and adapt to the secular hell instantiated by greed and ambition. It is therefore no wonder that the ending of the novel, wherein Sams' complete political victory is greeted by "[r]ising applause, an earnest susurration of carapaces and vestigial wings" (McEwan 2019: 96) from the

cockroaches which now dominate his party, ironically references Satan's ascent to the throne of Hell in Book I of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667):

> [Y]et faithful how they stood,
> Their glory withered. As when heaven's fire
> Hath scathed the forest oaks or mountain pines,
> With singed top their stately growth though bare
> Stands on the blasted heath. He now prepared
> To speak, whereat their doubled ranks they bend
> From wing to wing and half enclose him round
> With all his peers. Attention held them mute. (1667/2005: I.611–618)

> As she called out the beloved slogans she was overcome with emotion and could not go on, but it did not matter. Rising applause, an earnest susurration of carapaces and vestigial wings greeted her words. (McEwan 2019: 96)

At this point, McEwan's critique of power corrupted by cupidity becomes as trenchant as Milton's was. The becoming-animal of the human does not, as Deleuze and Guattari argue in their text on Kafka, define a line of escape from the abstract functioning of an impersonal bureaucratic regime. Instead, metamorphosis as explicit adaptation betokens a complete penetration of the private body by the political, a remoulding which overturns all humanistic values in order to celebrate the ruthlessness of the 'complete' organism at one with its environment:

> As you have discovered, it is not easy to be *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Their desires are so often in contention with their intelligence. Unlike us who are whole. (McEwan 2019: 99; original emphasis)

Conclusion

Writing about interpretive gaps that occasion the thinking about adaptation, Thomas Leitch points out that "our decisions about which gaps to fill and how to are not merely functions of texts and textual practices, but are constitutive of who we are as audiences and thinkers and actors and performers" (2017: 63). This essay has positioned McEwan's recent turn towards the gaps separating source and adapted text as defining an explicit political focus on the possibilities and limitations of intervention within the discourse of power. By doing so, I wish to suggest a different aesthetic practice undertaken by McEwan than that of the metafictional. To the extent that readings of McEwan's work have followed Brian Finney's often-repeated truism that the novelist employs metafictional methods in order to "force us to understand the constructed nature of [his] characters"

(qtd. in Driscoll 2009: 39), this focus has implicitly disabled a critical orientation which questions the political dimensions of that construction. In other words, criticism which seeks only to unmask the levels of 'constructed-ness' inhering in a work of fiction risks neglecting the crucial link between the act of storytelling and its possibilities for offering a crucial epistemological model to interpret social reality which McEwan often pursues in statements about his work. In essence, McEwan's emphasis on rewriting Shakespeare and Kafka accepts the cliché that all stories are palimpsestic in nature, while adroitly adapting the source texts in order to highlight how texts are born(e) into new forms of life and language games. In this way, adaptation is the instantiation of a writerly difference which allows historical 'meanings' to emerge in the space between source and adapted texts. For McEwan, this space leaves crucial room for the writer to put the aesthetic realm in touch with the political; it signals the debt private aesthetic vision owes to the social constructions of knowledge. To adapt means to call into question the certainties of historical and cultural meaning in the very moment that "Western Enlightenment values, individual agency and responsibility, knowledge, and art and science" (Hoydis 2019: 571) have reached a critical tipping point. If in the final analysis, adaptation cannot be separated from a hearkening back to past artistic forms, it also opens these forms up to new contexts of possibilities. In a word, adapting is giving birth, in the guise of an entrance into the political.

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