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The body within the body: Ian McEwan's creation of a new world in *Nutshell*

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Abstract: This article looks at Ian McEwan's latest novel, *Nutshell*, as a great innovative contribution to narrative art. As far as its basic plot is concerned, it looks like crime fiction with Shakespearean resonances, but the choice of an unborn child as narrator and the consistent perspective from within the body of a heavily pregnant woman result in the disclosure and exploration of an entirely new world. Aspects investigated are the novel's narrative situation, its relation to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a reference text, the use of quotations and allusions and the representation of bodily processes and the relation between the I-narrator and the author. The ethical substance of the work is shown to be generated by its specific narrative form.

Keywords: I-narration, cognition, embodiment, sensory-motor concepts in cognitive science, crime fiction, *Hamlet*, intertextuality, names, ethics, revenge

Introduction

In his narrative works Ian McEwan constantly comes up with new formal and thematic surprises. In this respect his latest novel, *Nutshell* (2016), is a special case since in this text the narrator is a foetus in the last stages before birth. This may not be looked at as an innovation, because unusual narrators are not rare in fiction. There are even cases like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Carlos Fuentes' *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987) in which the narrator describes his own begetting, but the specific linguistic form of these narratives is not really shaped by the circumstances of his prenatal existence. Fuentes' novel begins like a traditional narrative, although the use of the first person is in this constellation remarkable: "Mexico is a country of sad men and happy children," said my father, Angel (twenty-four years old), at the instance of my creation." (Fuentes 2005: 3) The Mexican author proceeds similarly to McEwan in that he equips his narrator with

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an extraordinary gift of speech: “This afternoon of my creation, my genes and chromosomes begin to talk as if my life depended on language more than on the fortuitous meeting of semen and egg” (Fuentes 2005: 101). Yet in spite of this and other correspondences between the two works McEwan’s novel is absolutely unique in the way he makes his narrator speak out of the very essence of his¹ location within the body of his mother, while the Mexican embryo/foetus seems to have free access to the world during the nine months of his fictional existence. The novel’s singular narrative situation and a number of other aspects like its relation to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* require a multidimensional approach, which includes the application of the theory of intertextuality and the cognitive concept of embodiment as well as a narratological discussion (concentrating on McEwan’s use of I-narration) and the methodology of ethical criticism.

1 Intertextuality

On the novel’s fourth page already two of the main characters are introduced, the pregnant mother, Trudy, and her lover, Claude, who are planning a conspiracy to murder Trudy’s husband in order to get possession of the latter’s valuable house property in London. Together with the novel’s epigraph – “Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space – were it not that I have bad dreams” (McEwan 2016) – from which its title is taken, it seems obvious that the book is a rewrite of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. But things are more difficult, as a look at the theory of intertextuality shows. In this context terminological clarifications are necessary, which to some extent follow Gérard Genette’s work on intertextuality (Genette 1982) and research of the present writer. (Müller 1991) A first distinction to be made is that between quotations and allusions, which involve specific segments or individual aspects of the works related intertextually, and a more comprehensive relatedness, in which a text as a whole refers to an anterior text in its entirety. The latter is the case in translations, imitations, adaptations, rewrites, sequels, parodies, travesties, and continuations. The artistic characteristic of a rewrite is, first, an overall reference to a previous text as a thematic and structural entity, which it never loses sight of, and, second, a greater or lesser deviation from the original, which results in a new creation with an identity of its own. The aesthetic principle of a rewrites is the tension between conforming with and deviating from the pre-text. Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* promotes the two minor characters mentioned in the

1 Only towards the end of the novel there are signs that the child is male.

title to the rank of central characters, but does not lose sight of the plot of *Hamlet*. A rewrite usually presents a new version and a new interpretation of the anterior text. McEwan's novel cannot be regarded as a new interpretation of *Hamlet*, although Shakespeare's work is constantly referred to. First, the time pattern of *Hamlet* is changed considerably.² The plot is shifted back over twenty years to the time, when the protagonist is still a foetus, and as distinct from Shakespeare's play the two plotting lovers are in McEwan's novel flat characters. McEwan's Claude possesses nothing of the Machiavellian villainy of Shakespeare's Claudius, and, as his dangling sentences (aposiopeses) show, conspicuously, lacks the rhetorical expertise of his predecessor. The sex-obsessed Trudy lacks the ambiguity of Shakespeare's Gertrude, who is never clearly accused of having had an affair with her brother-in-law before the death of her first husband let alone suspected of having been an accomplice in murder. Moreover there is no doubt that in Shakespeare's play the mother loves her son, while in the novel the pregnant mother hardly ever applies terms of endearment to her baby³ let alone makes provisions for the birth. So if we regard Claude and Trudy as new interpretations of Shakespeare's corresponding figures, they would come off poorly. If we regarded McEwan's book as a rewrite of Shakespeare's drama, we would not do it justice. Also the name Hamlet does not emerge in the novel and only shortly before its end does the issue of the foetus's sex emerge.⁴ There are two reasons for the fact that, as distinct from Fuentes' *Christopher Unborn*,⁵ the issue of the child's name does never emerge in McEwan's novel, first the simple truth that the two fornicators are in no way interested in the baby, whom they want to "place somewhere" after birth, and second that the author does not burden his protago-

² This holds true for John Updike's novel *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), too, which is derived from Shakespeare's play. It tells the pre-history of the story of the tragedy, without once presenting Prince Hamlet in person. See Wolfgang G. Müller, "Modern *Hamlet* Derivatives: Terminological Reflections and Observations on John Updike, *Gertrude and Claudius*." Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, György E. Szönyi, eds. 2004. "Not of an Age but for All Time". *Shakespeare across Lands and Ages*. Wien: Braumüller, 229-241.

³ As Martin Riedelsheimer (University of Augsburg), to whom I am indebted for a careful reading of the manuscript of this article, points out, the specific form of I-narration excludes inside views of Trudy, so that comments on her inner life are problematical.

⁴ The masculine pronoun "he" is usually applied to the foetus in the following, although the question of his/her sex comes up late in the book and is not resolved entirely unambiguously. For aesthetic reasons the word "foetus" is sometimes replaced by "embryo", which is, however, hardly more euphonious. Occasionally the word "baby" is used or "protagonist" or "narrator".

⁵ The issue of the child's name emerges in *Christopher Unborn* already at the moment of his creation: "What shall we name the baby?" (Fuentes 2005: 5)

nist with a name, particularly that of Hamlet, because that name would make him a successor to Shakespeare's protagonist.

Nevertheless *Hamlet* is constantly present, and the frequent quotations from and allusions to the play require comment. Without the above-quoted epigraph from *Hamlet* – “bounded in a nutshell” – the novel would certainly not have its title. The metaphor of a nutshell is singularly well suited to be related to the notion of an embryo enclosed in its amniotic sac, as figured in the illustration on the book cover. What is the function of the allusions to *Hamlet* which abound in McEwan's novel? Let us look at a few examples. When the foetus has his first headache as a consequence of his mother's drinking too much wine, he admonishes himself: “Don't let your incestuous uncle and mother poison your father.” (McEwan 2016: 46) The self-admonishment of the foetus to prevent the murder of his father by his mother and uncle evokes and simultaneously misrepresents the plot of *Hamlet*. Of course, there is a murder plot in *Hamlet*, but there is no evidence at all that Shakespeare's Gertrude is involved in her husband's murder. Also the adjective “incestuous” from *Hamlet* appears misplaced in the context of a crime in a modern city. Such references to *Hamlet* from the mouth of a foetus have a comic effect. McEwan obviously enjoys playing intertextual games, and the reader, who knows *Hamlet*, derives a lot of pleasure from them. Another – arbitrarily chosen – comic example is the mother's reaction to the foetus' kicking within her body: “‘Oh, oh, little mole', my mother calls out in a sweet, maternal voice. ‘He's waking up.’” (McEwan 2016: 99) Trudy does obviously not know *Hamlet*, but the allusion to Hamlet's calling his father's ghost moving under the stage “old mole” decidedly creates comic incongruity.⁶ A character who has a predilection for quotations is the foetus's father, the poet and editor John Cairncross. When referring to a quarrel with his new girlfriend, the mushroom poet, who believes that he is still in love with Trudy, he says to her [Trudy], “She thinks I protest too much” (McEwan 2016: 89), which alludes to a remark of Gertrude during the play-within-the-play. This loose relation of contexts of adultery in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Nutshell* creates a comic effect again. Finally a lengthier passage is quoted, in which the foetus is in a dejected mood:

But lately, don't ask why, I've no taste for comedy, no inclination for exercise, even if I had the space, no delight in fire or earth, in words that once revealed a golden world of majestical stars, the beauty of poetic apprehension, the infinite joy of reason. These admirable radio talks and bulletins, the excellent podcast that moved me, seem at best hot air, at

⁶ These are for once terms of endearment applied to the baby, which are however undercut by the intertextual reference to Hamlet's father making a noise under the stage.

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 2016: 91)

It would require too much space to identify in detail all the intertextual references in this passage, which also include allusions to other poets like Keats. The main point of reference is Hamlet's great speech on the nobility of man (II.2), which at its end collapses into the realization that to him all is dust. The passage from *Nutshell* looks partly like a paraphrase from Shakespeare's text and partly like a travesty. Travesty is to be seen in the fact that Hamlet's great rhetorical climax and anti-climax is mirrored in the words of a foetus. There is irony in the application of Hamlet's high-flown words, which refer to ideas from Pico della Mirandola's Renaissance speech on the *Dignity of Man* (*De hominis dignitate*), to modern media: "These admirable radio talks and bulletins, the excellent podcasts that moved me, seem at best hot air, at worst a vaporous stench." There is delightful irony in the speaker's wish "to declaim alone somewhere" (like Hamlet's speeches) these "high-flown thoughts" (McEwan 2016: 91). If McEwan's embryonic protagonist is a descendent from Hamlet, it would be absurd for him to know about his stage ancestor, although the author makes him quote his ancestor. In an otherwise brilliant review of the novel in the *London Review of Books*, Adam Mars-Jones dismisses passages like these as only aspiring "to the level of the paraphrases used in some parallel-text editions to fillet reduced meanings out of magnificence" (Mars-Jones 2016). I believe McEwan's dealing with *Hamlet* in *Nutshell* is an intertextual game with a high entertainment value. His novel is not a rewrite of Shakespeare's drama, but *Hamlet* is a subtext which is constantly present. To measure *Nutshell* against *Hamlet* would be unfair, because the novel is not presented as a rewrite.

2 Embodiment

Ian McEwan's greatest innovative achievement in *Nutshell* is the creation of the imaginary world of a foetus in the interaction with the body of his mother, a world that is inaccessible in real life and that is in the way chosen by the novelist only presentable by an effort of the imagination. McEwan represents the sensory-motor activities of the foetus, equipping him with the capacity for thought and speech, which are intensely related to his physical existence. Though constantly abreast with science, McEwan may not be aware of recent research on sensory-motor concepts in the cognitive sciences, which culturally has to be seen in the context

of notions of embodiment, i.e. modern views of the interconnectedness of body and mind, for instance in Antonio Damasio's reference to the "embodied mind" (Damasio 1999) or Matthew Ratcliffe's understanding of feelings as "bodily states" (Ratcliffe 2008). But, as far as embodiment is concerned, McEwan's *Nutshell* is one of the most fascinating representations of the relation between body and mind in literature. Embodiment is in his novel represented almost in a literal sense in that the body of the foetus is represented in its interconnectedness with the body of the mother. With its focus on the physical conditions of the foetus McEwan transcends other embryonic narrators in literature, for instance in Carlos Fuentes' *Christopher Unborn*, or in Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. As is usual in McEwan's works, he goes deeply into the scientific contexts of his subject matter, when it is necessary. So his new novel gives evidence of an intense occupation with biology and embryo science. As far as the interdependence between body and emotions is concerned, his representation of the foetus is innovative on an imaginative level.⁷ An example of the intense sensory-motor processes linking mother and child is the description of Trudy's anger which has an immediate physiological effect on the baby: "I know it [her anger] in her altered blood as it washes through me, in the granular discomfort where cells are bothered and compressed, the platelets cracked and chipped. My heart is struggling with my mother's angry blood." (McEwan 2016: 77) Such a fictional description of body processes, initiated by emotions, is absolutely new in literature. In one of the many sex-and-crime scenes, when having sex and planning murder coincide, the baby is not only affected by the lust of the lovers, but also has to bear the shock that after the murder the criminals will give the baby – him – away "somewhere": "Her blood beats through me in thuds like distant artillery fire", "I'm an organ in her body, not separate from her thoughts. I'm party to what she's about to do" (McEwan 2016: 42). Feelings, bodily states, and moral issues go together in this scene.

I will not go into the much-quoted grotesque situation of Claude's penis being "inches from [the embryo's] nose" during the sexual act with his sister-in-law, but refer to what the victim fears in this scene, namely "that he'll break through and shaft my soft-boned skull and seed my thoughts with his essence. Then, brain-damaged, I'll think and speak like him. I'll be the son of Claude." He is afraid of brain-damage and as a result of an assimilation of his brain to the brain of his despised uncle: "I'll be the son of Claude." (McEwan 2016: 21) This is again a

⁷ The first attempt to relate sensory motor concepts to literature is Wolfgang G. Müller, 2016. "Motion and Emotion: The Application of Sensory-Motor Concepts to the Representation of Emotion in Literature". In Liane Ströbel (ed.), *Sensory Motor Concepts in Language & Literature*, 63–81. Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf university press.

reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, whose uncle wants the prince to accept him as father for political reasons, because as such *Hamlet* would follow in the line of succession after Claudius. Such aspects are irrelevant in McEwan's novel, but the reference to *Hamlet*, belongs to the intertextual game which McEwan plays in his novel. There is no room for a more extensive discussion of the many sensory-motor events represented in the novel. The sense of touch is, for instance, involved during a dinner of the lovers, when the foetus feels "the bottom edge of Trudy's [menu] across the small of my back" and "when a slight tilt in my vertical orientation tells me that my mother is leaning forwards to place a restraining finger in his [Claude's] wrist and say, sweetly, divertingly, 'Choose the wine darling. Something splendid.'" (McEwan 2016: 6) This quotation also shows the sense of hearing participating. When Claude is served by the waiter a sequence of sounds is registered, "Claude's irritated gasp, an imperious snapping of dry fingers, the kind of obsequious murmur that emanates, so I would guess, from a waiter bent at the waist, the rasp of a lighter." (McEwan 2016: 6) Also hearing stimulates the foetus to draw conclusions and get a kind of spatial orientation:

When I hear the friendly drone of passing cars and a slight breeze stirs what I believe are horse chestnut leaves, when a portable radio below me tinnily rasps and a penumbral coral glow, a prolonged tropical dusk, dully illuminates my inland sea and its trillion drifting fragments, then I know my mother is sunbathing on the balcony outside my father's library (McEwan 2016: 31).

It is interesting that also light does penetrate from the outside into the amniotic sac of the baby and makes him conclude that his mother is sunbathing. Thus the novel opens up a whole world of sensuous experiences from an entirely unusual perspective.

Also eating is a sensuous experience mother and child share. The narrator says, "she and I and hunger are one system (McEwan 2016: 155). The description of the physical effect on the baby of Trudy's devouring one herring sandwich after another develops into a magnificent evocation of the salty sea air and shoals of herring and he being exposed to the wind on a ship:

Pickled herring, gherkin, a slice of lemon on pumpernickel bread. They don't take long to reach me. Soon I'm whipped into alertness by a keen essence saltier than blood, by the tang of sea spray off the wide, open ocean road where lonely herring shoals skim northwards through the black icy water. It keeps coming, a chilling Arctic breeze pouring over my face, as though I stood boldly in the prow of a fearless ship heading into glacial freedom. (McEwan 2016: 156)

The intense experience of a sensuous event is here imaginatively raised to a vision of a seascape and a journey into freedom.

A great topic is the consumption of alcohol, by which the sense of taste is involved. Although the mother is in the late stages of pregnancy, she drinks wine, of which the unborn baby partakes. To characterize the community of mother and child in this respect, McEwan frequently uses the plural pronoun “we”: “We’re getting drunk” (McEwan 2016: 35). It is an ingenious idea of the novelist to describe the effect of wine on his little protagonist, who likes “to share a glass with his mother” and unabashedly addresses the reader: “You may never have experienced, or you will have forgotten, a good Burgundy (her favourite) or a good Sancerre (also her favourite) decanted through a healthy placenta.” (McEwan 2016: 6) He is aware that “wine will lower my intelligence”, but with allusions to Keats he describes the effect of “a joyous, blushful Pinot Noir or a gooseberried Sauvignon” on his physical condition, setting “me turning and tumbling across my secret sea, reeling off the walls of my castle”. (McEwan 2016: 7) He also has a sense of the history of his unborn self. Now that he has grown and has less space for moving around, he “takes my pleasure more sedately, and by the second glass my speculations bloom with that licence whose name is poetry.” He even goes into metrical details like “well-sprung pentameters, end-stopped and run-on lines” (McEwan 2016: 7). It is indeed funny to have an unborn baby raving on an age-old idea such as the poetic effects of wine, wine that is in this case assimilated via the placenta of his mother.

As has been observed above, he foetus also looks at the whole development of his body from its beginning, “that moment of creation”, to the formation of the brain and “conscious life” (McEwan 2016: 2) and from moving freely in the amniotic sac like in an ocean to a cramped position as a consequence of his growth. In the description of his painful situation before birth – with “the limbs folded hard against my chest” and the head “wedged into my only exit” – a surrealist metaphor stands out, which reminds of the painting technique of Salvador Dali: “I wear my mother like a tight-fitting cap.” (McEwan 2016: 156) Although he has heard of the terrors of contemporary life – “slaughters in pursuit of dreams of the life beyond” – he believes, as is stated in a wonderful paradox, “in life after birth” (McEwan 2016: 160).

3 First-Person narration and the author

First-person narration written in the present tense with a foetus as a narrator, who by definition is incapable of speaking let alone telling a story, represents a narratological problem. If the author lends a voice to this unusual protagonist, we might argue that the narrating voice is sustained by the author. But it is a well-known fact that an author has the power and legitimacy to create a novel as a

fiction and that the narrator chosen by him is part of the fiction and therefore cannot be equated with the author. This has to be accepted by the reader, when he (or she) lets himself in for a work of fiction. Quoting Henry James in an interview with Zadie Smith, McEwan said “that in the contract between writer and reader one thing we must accept as given is the subject matter: I accept that wholly. It’s a great contract. There’s nowhere you’ll not let your imagination go.” (Smith 2005) However, I-narration is an extremely diversified narrative mode and has, as scholars like Adam Zachary Newton (1995), James Phelan (2005) and others have shown, produced many texts, which are much more complex than an autobiographical first-person novel like Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* or the story of a ‘bad boy’ like Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. In recent narratological research the author, who had been banished from narratology for a long time, has entered the debate again. Richard Walsh suggests to eradicate extra- and heterodiegetic narrators in narrative fiction: “Extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrators (that is, ‘impersonal’ and ‘authorial’ narrators), who cannot be represented without thereby being rendered homodiegetic or intradiegetic, are in no way distinguishable from authors.” He therefore concludes that “the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author” (Walsh 2007: 84, 78; Dawson: 2013). While I think that this is not the last word on the narrator/author problem in heterodiegetic fiction, I will show that a homodiegetic (first-person) novel like *Nutshell* raises this problem, too.

Other than is the case with an unborn narrator like Christopher Palomar in Fuentes’ novel, McEwan attempts to give a kind of explanation for his embryonic protagonist’s eloquence. As is known, sensory systems like touch, movement, smell, taste and hearing and to a lesser extent the visual system develop during the baby’s stay in the uterus and have an effect on the brain’s development. McEwan explicitly refers to all these senses in representing the world of the foetus, but he puts most emphasis on the auditory system. So he asks the question, why being so young and even not born, he “could know so much, and know enough to be wrong about so much”. And he mentions his “sources”, which are auditory, above all the radio and podcasts which his mother likes to hear:

I hear, above the launderette din of stomach and bowels, the news, wellspring of all bad dreams. Driven by a self-harming compulsion, I listen closely to analysis and dissent. Repeats on the hour, regular half-hour summaries don’t bore me. I even tolerate the BBC World Service and its puerile blasts of synthetic trumpets and xylophone to separate the items. In the middle of a long, quiet night I might give my mother a sharp kick. She’ll wake, become insomniac, reach for the radio. Cruel sport, I know, but we are both better informed by the morning. (McEwan 2016: 4)

As holds true for the whole novel, the passage shows McEwan's capacity for metaphor, for instance in "the launderette din of stomach and bowels". The narrator's knowledge and his cognition derive mainly through his sense of hearing. A special item which contributes to his knowledge is the Reith lecture (McEwan 2016: 5). The emphasis on hearing pervades the whole novel. The baby learns the truth about his mother's and uncle's infamous plan through "pillow talk of deadly intent" (McEwan 2016: 1), and he listens to the telephone and the dialogues of Claude and Trudy. The whole story of the planning, the perpetration and the detection of the murder of Trudy's husband is told through the perspective of the baby. This must be considered as one of the great achievements of the novel. In such a way a crime story has, I think, never been told before in the whole history of crime fiction. A highlight is in this context the description of the conflict between the two murderers after the deed from the perspective of the foetus. (McEwan 2016: 123–125)

That the consciousness of the author is behind the words of the protagonist is indicated in many allusions to and quotations from writers and works which the embryo simply cannot know and in the abundance of metaphoric expressions that are derived from McEwan's artistry. Yet he succeeds in pulling all through. There is the above-mentioned story of Trudy, who, while planning the murder of her husband, is in tears over an old cat she killed fifteen years ago. The baby comments internally: "I know, I know. Where did I hear it? – *He kills his mother but he can't wear grey trousers.*" (McEwan 2016: 49–50) This is a quotation from Joyce's *Ulysses*, Chapter I, "Telemachus", presented as remembered from a literature-reading radio programme, while the originator is, of course the author. Thus McEwan succeeds in camouflaging his hand in the quotation. One can only marvel at the art with which McEwan creates his all-knowing protagonist, playing down his own authorial part in it. However, the novelist takes liberties at times. When the baby wonders if his mother is really involved in the plot against his father, he asks, "Seems, Mother?" And answers, "No, it is. You are involved." Of course, this refers to Hamlet's use of the word "seems" in Act I, Scene 2. Such allusions pervade the whole novel. But when a little later the foetus quotes Beethoven in German, referring to the composer's hand-written comment on the manuscript of his last string-quartet – "the spirit of *Es muss sein*" (McEwan 2016: 2) – he goes beyond what the baby may know (unless one assumes he derived it from a radio programme). I would argue that this quotation, again an instance of the author's intertextual game, allows us a glimpse at McEwan's love for music. A word on the above-mentioned topic of wine-consumption may be in place here. The baby's connoisseurship of wine may be attributed to a self-improving audio book – *Know Your Wine* (McEwan 2016: 6) – but the rapt attention and the expertise with which he tastes and enjoys different sorts of wine through the

placenta owes itself to an author, who may not only have acquired knowledge of wine for the purpose of writing the respective parts of the novel, but who seems to have first-hand experience of the matter. It is indeed evidence of superior craftsmanship for McEwan to merge all he says in the novel with the corporeality and the conditions of existence of the unborn baby, but the author's presence is felt unseen.

This may be the adequate place for a comment on one of the longer passages of the protagonist's utterances, the vision of the future life wished by him and the notion that a book is to be made of his life. This passage belongs to those parts of novel, in which the first-person pronoun "I" occurs most frequently. It is consequently one of the most subject-related, the most subjective parts in the book, in which the reader is most distinctly confronted with the narrator's persona. The protagonist declares that he does not dread "Paradiso and Inferno", i.e. what happens in a world beyond, be it heaven or hell:

What I fear is missing out. Healthy desire or greed, I want my life first, my due, my infinitesimal slice of endless time and one reliable chance of consciousness. I'm owed a handful of decades to try my luck on a freewheeling planet. That's the ride for me – the Wall of Life. I want my *go*. I want to *become*. Put another way, there's a book I want to read, not yet published, not yet written, though a start's been made. I want to read to the end of *My History of the Twenty-First Century*. I want to be there, on the last page, in my early eighties, frail but sprightly, dancing a jig on the evening of December 31st, 20099. (McEwan 2016: 129)

The protagonist enthusiastically expresses his hunger for life, the experience of the life-span he desires to have at his disposal, which terminates at the end of the 21st century. Mentioning his life-history – *My History of the Twenty-First Century* – which he wants to read to the last page in his "early eighties", "not yet written, though a start's been made", he refers to the beginning of the book in which he appears as an embryo. This is, of course, a reference to the present book and its author. Thus there is authorial presence in a text which is so much focused on the I-narrator.

The next paragraph takes a look at the "the prequel, the hundred years before", and then comments on the political situation in the "new book" and its unresolved plot lines:

[...] will its nine billion heroes scrape through without a nuclear exchange? Think of it as a contact sport. Line up the teams. India versus Pakistan, Iran versus Saudi Arabia, Israel versus Iran, USA versus China, Russia versus USA and NATO, North Korea versus the rest. To raise the chances of a score, add more teams: the non-state players will arrive. (McEwan 2016: 129–130)

Here the subjective element, the body-based voice of the protagonist, has receded and an essayistic tone intrudes, for which the author seems to be more responsible than the foetus. We might of course argue that the unborn still reproduces radio comments he has heard, but there is no evidence. When the political options for the future world are listed in the next paragraph and statements are made on the outlook on Europe are propounded, the “I” re-emerges, as a short excerpt shows:

Europe’s secular dreams of union may dissolve before the old hatreds, small-scale nationalism, financial disaster, discord. Or she might hold her course. I need to know. (McEwan 2016: 130)

Is the “I” in this quotation still the narrator or is it not rather the author, of whom we know, from his interview in the *Guardian* for instance, how much he is concerned about the fate of Europe, although his novel had probably been completed before the vote for Brexit. McEwan’s personal voice seems to emerge in the context of the issue of the baby’s sex in references to “the matter of blue and pink”, the “validation of chosen *identities*” and “gender options” (McEwan 2016: 145). This is undeniably the foetus speaking, but it is probable that for a moment the author is venting his own opinion. From a narratological viewpoint it is revealing that the author, who generally holds himself back and carefully sustains the first-person narrator’s perspective, may momentarily loom. Generally he remains under the surface and only at times emerges, though never pronominally and not in a way interfering with the first-person voice of the narrator. As a last example a part of the epiphany shortly before the protagonist’s birth is quoted. The coming happiness which overwhelms the baby under the shower with his mother is perfectly integrated into the narration, and yet it can also be read as the author’s projection:

I don’t remember such carefree delight. I’m ready, I’m coming, the world will catch me, tend to me because it can’t resist me. Wine by the glass rather than the placenta, books direct by lamplight, music by Bach, walks along the shore, kissing by moon light. Everything I’ve learned so far says all these delights are inexpensive, achievable, ahead of me. (McEwan 2016: 162)

The vision of life expressed in these lines is clearly the narrator’s, as the reference to what he has “learned” and the enthusiastic tone and the use of seven first-person pronouns in seven [in the edition of the book] lines indicate, but with the words “wine”, “books”, “music by Bach” etc. a way of life looms up which is obviously appreciated by the author. Also the witty expression “wine by the glass rather than the placenta” points to the author’s stylistic accomplishment. Reading such a passage, we are not only confronted with a successfully created narrator,

but also with an author, who has a unique capacity for writing. McEwan manages to produce an entirely convincing I-narrator and simultaneously to make the reader aware of his capacity for writing. The novel is at every moment a testimony of McEwan's writing skill and also of his value system. The novelist's portrait of his narrator is completely compelling, but the author qua artist is constantly present. This not so in Mark Twain's first-person novel *Huckleberry Finn*, in which the perspective of the story-teller does not allow for any kind of authorial presence. The style of the novel is so much adapted to the juvenile narrator's idiom that authorial intrusion would be an unpardonable flaw. The complexity of this novel derives from the unreliability of the narrator, who believes that the good deed he commits intuitively is sinful action, for which he has to go to hell. On the contrary, McEwan's *Nutshell* is a first-person narrative which does not entirely exclude the author. In so far it differs from an earlier first-person narrative by McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (1978). The narrator is in this earlier work one of four unattended orphaned children, who attempt to cope with their lives on their own after the death of their parents. The novel is written in McEwan's early style. With its hypnotic quality the adolescent boy's narration captivates the reader's attention, without assuming an adolescent's idiom. Also the author consistently avoids leaving any traces of manifest authorship. In this respect McEwan's latest novel *Nutshell* marks a new departure in first-person narration. In this work the novelist paradoxically manages to bestow a sense of authorial presence on the text, without ever breaking the illusion that we are confronted from first to last with the distinctive voice of an unusual narrator figure.

4 Crime and ethics

In the above-quoted interview with Zadie Smith McEwan says with regard to a scene from his novel *Saturday*, "All the narrative decisions you make in a scene like that are ethical decisions, and also aesthetic, and you have to make them, they're serious. And someone who can't write makes them very badly." Referring to the narratologist Shang Biwu, who is a specialist on McEwan,⁸ we can generalize this statement: McEwan's art is ethical from first to last. All his aesthetic decisions have ethical implications. In *Nutshell*, however, the central plot seems to be at first sight free of ethical considerations. For analytical purposes, this plot will first be looked

⁸ An excellently documented theory-based and deep-searching article on McEwan's *Nutshell* from the pen of Shang Biwu is "Ethical Literary Criticism and Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*". *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 59.2 (2018): 142–153.

at in isolation. Borrowing from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and to lesser extent from *Macbeth*, the novel deals with the murder of a husband and a brother. A young woman in the later stages of her pregnancy plans and perpetrates, together with her brother-in-law, the murder of her husband, in order to inherit the latter's £7m London property. The murderers are governed by their sex drive, greed for money and their addiction to wine and food. As such they are not capable of making ethical choices, i.e. of choosing between right and wrong or good and evil. There is, however, a distinction to be made between the man and the woman. Claude is the initiator of the crime, Trudy is not quite as degenerate. He puts pressure on Trudy, and, though her bowels are revolting, as the baby perceives, she agrees. Significantly the words "choice" and "decision" occur in a sex scene, when Trudy, entirely drunk, decides for poison as the way of killing her husband. The baby feels "her struggling with a choice", which concerns the way of killing her husband: "As they kiss again she says it [the word poison] into her lover's mouth" (McEwan 2016: 42). Also the almost total absence of motherly feelings in Trudy and the decision to "place the baby somewhere" after birth give evidence of a completely non-empathic attitude. There is one scene in which she cries, which the foetus interprets as a reaction to the "new duties" she has taken on, "kill John Cairncross, sell his birthright, share the money, dump the kid" (McEwan 2016: 48). But this moment of sorrow is superimposed by her tearful show of despair on account of remembering her killing a cat fifteen years ago (McEwan 2016: 49). The few signs of remorse for the murder of her husband, when detection is threatening, come belatedly and are hardly convincing. A kind of change is indicated in her towards the novel's end, an alienation from her lover, though her sexual subjection remains as strong as ever, and a kind of sorrow for her husband's death. The foetus speaks of "my mother's shifting relation to her crime" (McEwan 2016: 145). The tale of the murder of Trudy's husband is, taken on its own, crime fiction. McEwan, who is a superior writer in whatever he attempts to do, proves to be capable of writing high-level crime fiction. The topic of sex and crime, which determines a whole genre of popular fiction, has never been treated in such an original way. And the story of the investigation and detection of the murder is written with great skill and with an intriguing sense of humour, particularly in the dialogues. Looking at the crime-fiction aspect of *Nutshell*, makes it obvious that a comparison of McEwan's novel with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* let alone reading it as a rewrite of *Hamlet*, does not do justice to it. There are lots of borrowings from *Hamlet* in *Nutshell*, but the novel definitely does not provide a new version of the tragedy. To read it as a rewrite of *Hamlet*, as some reviewers have done, inevitably leads to a negative verdict, which it has not deserved.

The experimental laying bare of the novel's plot structure has led to two results. The first is that its underlying story is a not very complex crime action

acted out by characters of no depth. The second result, which is to be stated now, is that the novel as an artistic creation is nothing without its narrator and that its ethical substance is completely generated in the process of narration. In so far the novel provides evidence for what I demonstrated elsewhere, namely that narration as such can have an ethical impact (Müller 2015: 9–36). The ethical dimension is in McEwan's novel an inalienable constituent of the work as a consequence of its perspective, the viewpoint of the narrator, the presentation of the story in his own voice. Already on the novel's first page we are confronted with the narrator anxiously listening to "pillow talk of deadly intent", "terrified by what awaits me, by what might draw me in." There are basically two aspects of the protagonist's attitude towards the crime, first, his moral outrage and the love he feels for his mother and still hopes from her, though she obviously does not care for him, second, the challenge he feels that somehow he must intervene in the crime or revenge it after its perpetration.

As far as his attitude towards his mother is concerned, the protagonist's inner turmoil pervades the whole novel. So he accuses her of "being selfish, devious, cruel", but immediately takes back his verdict: "But wait, I love her, she's my divinity and I need her. I take it back! I spoke in anguish." (McEwan 2016: 15) A little later he levels charges against his mother and uncle and refers to his father and himself as victims, all with echoes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

My mother has preferred my father's brother, cheated her husband, ruined her son. My uncle has stolen his brother's wife, deceived his nephew's father, grossly insulted his sister-in-law's son. My father by nature is defenceless, as I am by circumstance. [...] My affair with Trudy isn't going well. I thought I could take her love for granted." (McEwan 2016: 33)

Yet he immediately excuses his mother again, using scientific arguments heard on the radio: "But I've heard biologists debating at dawn. Pregnant mothers must fight the tenants of their wombs. [...] My health derives from Trudy, but she must preserve herself against me. So why would she worry about my *feelings*?" In his reflections he even passes to self-incrimination: "It's not her love that's failing. It's mine." (McEwan 2016: 34) The protagonist's attempts to exculpate his mother lead him to shift the whole blame on her lover, although she had decided on poison as the method of murder and had declared, with Shakespearean resonances, at the end of a drinking bout with Claude – "I want him dead. And it has to be tomorrow." (McEwan 2016: 72) The protagonist searches for attenuating circumstances for the crime – "She was merely wrong, not bad, and she's no criminal" – and points at "Claude's essential guilt" (McEwan 2016: 121), and yet her sexual addiction to her lover, whom he hates implacably, continues to torment him. As far as his mother is concerned, the protagonist is caught in an ethical dilemma with no way out. One of the most striking aspects of the narra-

tor's role is that he – confined in his mother's womb – views himself as an agent, who has the duty to prevent or to avenge the murder of his father: "My mother is involved in a plot, and therefore I am too, even if my role might be to foil it. Or if I, reluctant fool, come to term too late, then to avenge it." (McEwan 2016: 3) As far as the foetus' actions are concerned, kicking the mother in the belly is what babies do, but McEwan attributes a motivation to his protagonist's kicking, namely to distract his mother from "squabbling with the interesting fact of my existence." He does so with a funny allusion to the bible, "Three times, like Peter's denial of Jesus." (McEwan 2016: 167) There are more extravagant actions on the baby's part which are unrelated to any plausibility in real life, yet within the fiction of the novel evince persuasiveness and comic effects. In one of the copulation scenes the foetus tries to commit suicide by turning the umbilical cord round his neck, pulling "with a bell-ringer's devotion" (McEwan 2016: 128). With himself being stillborn, he hopes that his uncle will be accused of homicide for having run the "the high medical risk, at this stage of pregnancy, of the missionary position": "His arrest, trial, sentence, imprisonment." (McEwan 2016: 127) This is a great scene, enriched by wit, metaphor and descriptive power, verging on the grotesque, only matched by the narrative presentation of his last action, the destruction of his amniotic sac and the consequent release of the waters, designed to prevent the murderers' escape. As far as action and its ethical implications are concerned, one of the most important themes of the novel is revenge. After the protagonist's failure to perform revenge in the last-mentioned scene he reflects on revenge in an essayistic digression which is inserted in the narrative:

Revenge: the impulse is instinctive, powerful – and forgivable. Insulted, duped, maimed, no one can resist the allure of vengeful brooding. And here, far out at this extreme, a loved one murdered, the fantasies are incandescent. We're social, we once kept each other at bay by violence or its threat, like dogs in a pack. We're born to this delectable anticipation. What's an imagination for but to play out and linger on and repeat the bloody possibilities? Revenge may be exacted a hundred times over in one sleepless night. The impulse, the dreaming intention, is human, normal, and we should forgive ourselves.

But the raised hand, the actual violent enactment, is cursed. The maths say so. There'll be no reversion to the status quo ante, no balm, no sweet relief, or none that lasts. Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves, Confucius said. Revenge unstitches a civilisation. It's a reversion to constant, visceral fear. Look at the miserable Albanians, chronically cowed by *kanun*, their idiot cult of blood feuds. (McEwan 2016: 134–135)

This is an essayistic or quasi philosophical passage, in which the narrative mode and the presence of the narrator's "I" has receded entirely, although it is carefully integrated into the narrative: "While we [the mother and the embryo] descend the stairs I have time to reflect further on my fortunate lack of resolve, on the self-strangler's self-defeating loop." (McEwan 2016: 134) McEwan has chosen a prota-

gonist in his novel, who, though an unborn baby, is a talented speaker and has philosophical moments. Just as in some of his earlier novels, for instance *Enduring Love* (1997), he participates in a tendency emerging in a number of recent fictional works, namely to integrate philosophical reflection into the narrative text. A much-quoted example of the novel assuming philosophical and essayistic features is Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [The Man without Qualities] (complete edition 1952). Recently, fascinating hybrids of philosophy and fiction are to be found in J. M. Coetzee's novels, for instance *Elizabeth Costello* (1999). The same writer's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) combines the Baconian essay and the novel in an innovative way. Who is speaking in the passage under discussion? If we believe the text, it is the narrator, but possibly the author is also involved, who feels the need to insert some statements on an important ethical subject. These statements are indeed memorable and converge with the judgment of the social scientist Jan Philipp Reemtsma, who said, "Ich bin sehr für Rache – sie darf nur nicht sein." [I am much for revenge, but it must not be.]"⁹ The reflections in question can be applied to the problem of revenge in *Hamlet*. The "raised hand", which is "cursed" in the passage quoted above, may be related to Hamlet's sheathing his raised sword. There is an analogy between Hamlet's backing away from revenge, when the opportunity for it offers itself to him, and the foetus' lack of resolve to take decisive action against his enemy. It is one of the remarkable qualities of McEwan's work that he enriches a text with an apparently bizarre narrator and an extremely uncommon narrative situation with ethical and philosophical substance.

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⁹ Andreas Lebert and Katrin Zeug. 2016/3. Interview with Jan Philipp Reemtsma. *Zeit Wissen*. 41–46, quote: 44.

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