



**‘In every century, the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality’ (Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 13). In light of this view, demonstrate the ways in which the structures of two twentieth-century realist texts help shape their depictions of the realities of human experience.**

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Like all artistic forms, novels carry no intrinsic obligation to be transparent. Their meanings are responsive to environment; to the historical, sociological and scientific culture in which they are received. As one of many branches of artistic expression, literary realism may be thought particularly responsive to these issues for its continued dedication to the expression of ‘observed detail’<sup>1</sup>, and the realities of the time that produces it. This is significant for the forces to which it runs parallel: history and science are similarly concerned with the communication of reality, albeit reality distinguished by the premise of ‘fact’. Regardless of this ‘fact-versus-fiction’ dichotomy, artistic forms, as Umberto Eco suggests, have continually reflected through structure what their counterparts have perceived as reality; something demonstrated no better than in the endurance of the realist text. Endurance is, in fact, at the heart of these issues; less in the sense of formal persistence, and more in how it captures the method behind realist structuring. That is, realism looks to an ending, and it does so regardless of how that ending is accomplished. To assert the validity of these claims, I will focus my argument on two later twentieth-century realist novels that are particularly demonstrative of the structural scope to be found within the bounds of literary realism: Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* by Julian Barnes.

Since I have alluded to the technical relationship that exists between literary realism and history and science, it is firstly important to note the dialogue that each of the novels enters into with these subjects. McEwan’s preoccupation is with physics: the continual relativity at work in human experience that influences one’s perception of time and space. Barnes, by contrast, focuses on history and the narrative from which it is built. The effect of these authorial interests is evident most predominantly in the way each text is structured, not as something continual or linear, but kaleidoscopic and relative. These architectural traits also mark a general trend for the fiction of the past thirty years:

[...] what runs as a common thread through the enormous diversity of contemporary novels from 1980 to the present is a preoccupation with the crossing of boundaries or borders, of space, time, histories, ontologies, races, genders, class, species, persons.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Realism and the Contemporary Novel’ in *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1980), p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Waugh, ‘Contemporary British Fiction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 131.

Evidently, these wider artistic directions have had tremendous consequences in how texts, including those of literary realism, are structurally arranged. Dominic Head notes that, ‘for McEwan, the problem with dominant ideas is that they prevent the novel from being an exploration’, and cause it to become ‘an illustration of conclusions already reached’.<sup>3</sup> *The Child in Time* is a novel that merges the contemporary creative desires to explore and investigate with traditional codes of realism, and the union produces some remarkable results on formal structure and its underlying communication of human reality.

A significant feature of the novel is that its architectural method holds a close semantic relationship with the experience of its protagonist. Speaking about *The Child in Time* in 2001, McEwan described how ‘it [is] impossible to plan the architecture of something unless you know its content, so the structure gets worked out along the way’<sup>4</sup>; a fact that permeates the lives of his characters who have as little power to plan for events that they cannot predict. Having lived through the abduction of his three-year-old daughter, Stephen Lewis is presented to us as someone essentially trapped outside of the present through his fixation on the past. His day-to-day is led primarily by distraction; in his weekly meetings for the Commission on Childcare, in his inability to write, and especially in his continued search for the child he has lost:

It was more than a habit, for a habit could be broken. This was a deep disposition, the outline experience had stencilled on character [...] There was a biological clock, dispassionate in its unstoppable which let his daughter go on growing, extended and complicated her simple vocabulary, made her stronger, her movements surer.<sup>5</sup>

These early lines signal both the structural and thematic content of what follows. Stephen’s life is dictated by time, but a form of which is ‘biological’ and outlined not by clocks, but by experience. Kate is able to exist as fully for him as if her abduction had not taken place, provided that she is susceptible to the same aging process in the mind as she was in life; indicative of the cruel paradox that with every strengthening of the Kate of Stephen’s imagination comes the increasing likelihood she will never be found. Like Stephen’s relationship with time, the novel’s structure is very quickly shown to be non-linear. Key moments like the abduction itself take place out of sight and outside of the notional present through analepsis. Furthermore, the length of description for those moments reflects the relative sense of the time they take in the minds characters and not their length of duration in real-time. Thus, McEwan identifies and utilises ‘... the connections between the speculative understanding of time in contemporary physics and the ways in which narrative fiction can productively cheat a strict chronology’.<sup>6</sup>

This flashback-flash-forward technique endures throughout the novel alongside its unplanned, investigative method because it still maintains a wider structure. McEwan is, in fact, acutely aware of structure’s aesthetic and semantic importance:

I don’t use or accept the term architecture merely as a metaphor; I think, again, it’s operable, it’s something that works on the reader. You’re asking the reader to step inside a mental space that has a shape.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 70-1.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ian McEwan, Oxford: 21 September 2001. Margaret Reynolds and Jonathon Noakes, *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage, 2002) p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Head, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ian McEwan, Margaret Reynolds, p. 15.

What this indicates, therefore, is that McEwan is not simply trying to experiment by interweaving the two potentially incongruous disciplines of literary realism and post-Einsteinian physics, but rather, to use structure as a means of illuminating how each relates to the other. There is an awareness on his part that Stephen's experiences of familial and temporal loss must be seen in order to be understood, but that the reader's objective distance should never be compromised in the process. Thus, Stephen remains set on a course that it later emerges has, unknown to him, followed his wife Julie's full cycle of pregnancy to lead him into a new phase of parenthood. Indeed, Stephen may be thought to endure his experiences for the same reasons as the structure that encases them, for some of the most significant moments in the novel to the making of choices place him, like the reader, in the position of observer.

One of the most remarkable examples of this is the episode at The Bell, where Stephen inadvertently witnesses (and impacts upon) the conversation between his newly-courting parents as they discuss his potential abortion. Incredible, and unlikely within the boundaries of an otherwise 'realist, near-future dystopia'<sup>8</sup>, the apparent time-slip is particularly interesting for the credulity that it is given, as if it features not simply as a random instance of supernatural interplay, but as a structurally significant component of a whole. Dominic Head describes it as 'the pivotal moment in the book, both in terms of the novel's development', and, of its 'experimental direction'.<sup>9</sup> This can be explained by looking closely at what follows:

He fell back down, dropped helplessly through a void, was swept dumbly through invisible curves and rose above the trees, saw the horizon below him even as he was hurled through sinuous tunnels of undergrowth, dank, muscular sluices.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Stephen is quite literally taken back to the womb, only to be re-born two chapters later in a car accident resembling a 'parody of birth'<sup>11</sup>. From this experience he is left with a sense that 'he was hurtling round a fixed point', that his emotions are shared by 'countless others', and most illuminating of all, that nothing, '...not even the sadness' was 'his own'.<sup>12</sup> Stephen, then, has experienced what it is to remain on the outside, to step out of time, out of his emotions and the routine they have imposed on his life, and simply watch; and in doing so, is saved. At the structural point at which Stephen's experiences as literary agent meet the reader's, the distance that he is afforded in the process makes for the clarity with which he goes on to conduct his future self. Thus, the structural shape of the novel and its semantics become clear: Stephen's life, as with all human experience, is felt in terms of relativity and perceived in the mind as much as it is lived in any chronological, linear fashion. By going outside of ourselves and recognising the universality of these facts, we, like Stephen, may be given a chance to understand and endure in even the most terrible of circumstances.

Ultimately, then, Stephen as character survives the trials of his experience where Stephen as literary agent, including the ideology that encompasses him, survives structurally because he is shown to fit into an overarching design. In part, this is what categorises the novel as 'realist', but viewed alongside McEwan's continued dialogue with relativity theory it also indicates that there is, in Dominic Head's words, a 'higher order of theory'<sup>13</sup> underlying the narrative structure. To some extent this can be explained in terms of fluidity:

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<sup>8</sup> Head, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ian McEwan, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> David Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> McEwan, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Head, p. 78.

the seamless transition between timeframes and the representation of human consciousness as being linked to mental temporal perception. But more than this, the novel's continual hints to possibilities beyond its structure, to the fact that there is no one single experience ('...nothing was nothing's own')<sup>14</sup>, characterises it as what Umberto Eco terms a 'work in movement':

As in the Einsteinian universe, in the "work in movement" we may well deny that there is a single prescribed point of view. But this does not mean complete chaos in its internal relations. What it does imply is an organising rule which governs these relations.<sup>15</sup>

Eco's description for this type of novel is important in its recognition of an 'organising rule' – the same 'higher order of theory' that Head identifies in *The Child in Time*, but the explanation behind such a rule lies in the novel's one open loan from another literary text:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.<sup>16</sup>

McEwan is likely to have invoked this passage from T. S. Eliot for a variety of reasons; circumstantially as a defence of the arts in Stephen's conversation with Thelma, artistically as another 'crossing of borders' between genres, and, not least, for the semantically apt way it summarises the experience of his characters. Structurally, though, these lines are significant for what they echo. Taken from the first of the *Four Quartets*, their now canonical status recalls a sister poem starting: 'In my beginning is my end'<sup>17</sup>; for it is Stephen's trajectory toward an ending, a new future, which organises the fabric of experiences past.

The same is true of Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. Here, a patchwork of separate, but intrinsically linked narratives find cohesion in a similarly covert, but nevertheless powerful, course towards a distant future point. Where critics of the novel dwell on the disconnected nature of its individual 'chapters', others, like Daniel Bedggood, have insisted that '...there is an order here, postmodern in nature: the kind of order that links the book's material into a bricolage'.<sup>18</sup> He continues by noting that 'the proliferation of historical reference in the work stems from a few pivotal features in content [...] and plays on different modes of discourse', that '...effectively deconstruct the novel's articulation of the past'.<sup>19</sup> Structurally, however, there is quite a bit more to be said. Bedggood is correct to identify certain overlapping threads of content, as he is in the recognition that formal presentation is significant (citing among its varieties, short story, essay, art criticism and historical abstract). Nevertheless, the full method behind *A History's* arrangement is lost without considering in detail the connectivity of its structural antipodes: how its beginning projects its end.

The critic, Merritt Moseley takes the view that the novel's entire order is dictated by this one dominant link: 'There is, it is true, a loosely chronological progression, in that the

<sup>14</sup> McEwan, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* trans. by Anna Cancogni (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> McEwan's loan is taken from the first of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, 'Burnt Norton' (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2001), p. 3 [McEwan, p. 128]. All four of the poems in this collection enter into an exploration of the human relationship with time.

<sup>17</sup> The opening line and repeated motif of 'East Coker': *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Bedggood, '(Re)Constituted Pasts: Postmodern Historicism in the novels of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes', in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 203-216 (p. 213).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

first chapter retells the most remote events, those connected with the Flood, and the last chapter is about Heaven. In between, though, chronological order is jumbled'.<sup>20</sup> This analysis does not, however, take into proper consideration Barnes's description of the novel, which would suggest otherwise: 'an extended piece of prose, largely fictional, which is planned and executed as a whole piece'.<sup>21</sup> This very firmly indicates a higher structural order to the text, however obfuscated, for the fact that its organisation matches the way in which it was conceived. This is not, then, a randomly-placed series of disconnected stories, but a single narrative of interweaving base units, or 'chapters'. It is both a history, and a novel, a fact adumbrated as much by its title as by its opening lines:

THEY PUT THE BEHEMOTHS in the hold along with the rhinos, the hippos and the elephants. It was a sensible thing to use them as ballast; you can imagine the stench. And there was no-one to muck out.<sup>22</sup>

As a beginning for a chapter, and indeed, as a beginning for a narrative whole, these lines are striking for their familiarity of address. The use of the suspended personal pronoun, 'they', whose subject is, at this point, covert, creates a sense that Barnes has not in fact started with a beginning at all, but with a point half way through a pre-existing narrative. That narrative reveals itself to be the biblical story of the Ark, retold through the eyes of a stowaway woodworm. For all its circumstantial comedy, this choice of subject nevertheless draws attention to the perspectives that 'history' tends to leave behind. Thus, the novel does not strictly start with a 'beginning' in the sense of 'genesis'. Indeed, the very concept of a 'retelling' holds implications of mistrust in singular perspectives: this is not *the* history, but *a* history, and must be recognised as such.

To return to the question of linkage and the meanings behind Barnes's structural representation, Frank Kermode offers an illuminating analysis of the ending to the novel's 'original':

The New Testament, as "end", is made up of many small typological completions, little ends in themselves; and this, in some more refined form, would give us the model we seek for dispersal and supplementation of endings.<sup>23</sup>

In many ways, Barnes's narrative follows the same principle: there is certainly a sense that this is not, in fact, a disjointed collection of beginnings, but a structurally bound series of endings. If chronology and order seem 'jumbled', perhaps it is only because the true 'beginnings' to these narratives are not present; implying, among other things, man's eternal ignorance of his origins.

This forms the loop back to Eco's assertion on structure as a mark of perceived reality: where the Bible arranges its history in terms of the prehistoric concept of the chronologically absolute, Barnes, like McEwan, arranges his around the twentieth-century 'reality' that chronology is subjective. There is, of course a beginning, but it is by no means presented as the *only* beginning. Barnes is actually engaging with a far more sobering thought – that the same cannot be said for its opposite. In the one universal fact of all human experience, every beginning has an end in death; so in many ways it is unsurprising that death itself is *A History's* closing chapter: 'I DREAMT THAT I woke up. It's the oldest dream of all,

<sup>20</sup> Merritt Moseley, *Understanding Julian Barnes* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> David Sexton, "Still Parroting on About God", *Sunday Telegraph* 11 Jun 1989, p. 42. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Sensing Endings', in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (University of California Press, 1978), pp. 144-158 (p. 155).

and I've just had it'.<sup>24</sup> Working through the concept of a dream demonstrates an awareness on Barnes's part that he is building a picture of something we can never truly know about, but, nonetheless, a picture that recognises how, as with the ending of a literary text, death's inevitability is not conditional on an explanation. In 'The Dream' this is noted with the displacement of the novel-title's 'A' for the definite article; an orthographic symbol marking the fact that we have finally reached a structural destination: an 'ending' in its purest sense.

As all intertwining threads come together in this recognition of universality, Barnes takes a moment to consider why it is that all human experience seems to demand its end:

'So, what's it all for? Why do we have Heaven? Why do we have these dreams of Heaven?' She didn't seem willing to answer, perhaps she was being professional; but I pressed her. 'Go on, give me some ideas.'

'Perhaps because you need them,' she suggested. 'Because you can't get by without the dream [...]'<sup>25</sup>

Life, then, has very little meaning if one is granted it for eternity. Something can only be meaningful if it is conditional on an ending, and through endings one finds structure. This is as true of novels as it is of life, the meaning of which is shaped primarily by what it is destined towards, even if that ending is imaginary – a dream. For the biblical writers, that ending meant absolution in Judgement, so the content and structure of what they wrote was presented as absolute. For Barnes and McEwan, the very fact that there *is* an ending gives human experience a kind of structure, but one that is far more subjective and conditional of its subject.

Structure, then, is more than the ordering and architecture of material containing meaning; it is part of meaning itself. In the realist tradition of communicating human reality, *The Child in Time* and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* convey their meanings through the structures of courses destined toward an ending, but do so without denying the claims of other stories; other realities. For these novels, the only unequivocal ending is death, but even then the way in which we perceive death is vital to how art or life shapes itself around it. Others, like Stephen Lewis, never reach that ending, but find themselves lost to the future containing all time present and time past: lost in time itself.

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<sup>24</sup> Barnes, p. 283.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

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