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"Whither is fled the visionary gleam?" Revisiting the Child's Poet(h)ical Presence in the Fiction of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan

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In the heyday of British Romanticism, Wordsworth famously contributed to the shaping of childhood as a prelapsarian poetical haven, and, perhaps more importantly, introduced a sharp distinction between a "common," unimaginative adult, and the visionary, sensuous child:

> It is not now as it hath been of yore—[…]
> The things which I have seen I now can see no more. […]
> Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
> Where is it now, the glory and the dream? […]
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy
> But he
> Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy; […]
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day. (Wordsworth 797-798)

To 20th- and 21st-century readers however, the Immortality Ode and its enduring portrait of the child are best known through their stark contemporary rewritings, as in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* for instance, where the author writes of young Pinkie Brown, "He trailed the clouds of his own glory after him: hell lay about him in his infancy. He was ready for more deaths" (Greene 70). The iconoclastic distortion of the ode suggests that the child-as-poet myth and its Rousseauian variation of the child-as-prophet[1] remains a fascinating challenge

[1] For an analysis of the perennial Rousseauian influence on the figure of the child, see for instance Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Rose characterizes the Romantic movement in which the child originated as a literary figure as "a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language." Subsequent fiction writers, she explains, "took from Rousseau the idea that it is sexuality which most totally sabotages the child's correct use of language and its exact knowledge of the world […] a conception which places the innocence of the child and a primary state of language and/or culture in a close and mutually dependent relation" (Rose 8-9).

for contemporary writers of childhood as they struggle with an overbearing Romantic influence.[2]

When reading some of today's best child-focused fiction—Ian McEwan's or Martin Amis's for instance—one comes to realize what a key poet(h)ical figure the child has become. Instead of the somewhat gimmicky, freshness-of-approach, eye-of-innocence trick of olden days, these contemporary novelists are questioning the Romantic certainties which still pervade our understanding of fiction, in ways that affect both the child's narratological role, and are reminiscent of questions asked by cultural studies[3] regarding the various Others of Western literature. In other words, they seem to be asking whether poetical instrumentalization does not lead to ethical alienation, whether setting the child up as a locus of vision and truth does not contaminate the text with the underlying violence of adult desire.[4]

And indeed the child as tool, as that tantalizing alternative to traditional viewpoints and voices that was first conceived in the Romantic era, is now recognized by cultural study theorists and novelists alike as deeply suspicious because always already mediated by the adult—an artificially constructed image of what they are not and what they wish they were. We thus propose to explore the child as privileged voice and gaze in a sample of contemporary fiction, showing how the above-mentioned novelists tackle the poetically and ethically problematic inclusion of the little figure in their work.

"Through a glass, darkly"—deconstructing traditional poetics

The child-as-poet/child-as-prophet inheritance translates as a dual fictional child which is clearly an impossibility. On the one hand, it is expected to act as the perfect witness—to reproduce, through the accuracy of its senses, an unmediated world to the unknowing adult,[5] while the other side of the Romantic coin would have it adding to this drab reality, altering it poetically through the rich prism of those very same senses.[6] The fictional child must then

[2] "the Romantic child is our foundational fiction, our originary myth, and just how hard it is to distance ourselves from the 'always already' saidness of the Romantic discourse on childhood almost any critical analysis or historical overview [...] testifies" (Myers 45).

[3] In her extensive study of the difficulties of representing the child in fiction, Susan Honeyman traces the origin of literary childhood studies back to the combined influences of traditional children's literature criticism and "the identity politics of cultural studies" (Honeyman 7).

[4] The idea features prominently in the work of Jacqueline Rose and James Kincaid.

[5] See for instance Pattison's *The Child Figure in English Literature*. "The child's ability to perceive the true nature of the world around him is conceded both in Christian dogma and the Romanticism of Rousseau and Wordsworth, though for very different reasons" (Pattison 118).

[6] In her extensive survey of the child-as-poet myth in both literary history and contemporary classrooms, Myra Cohn Livingston also traces the enduring idea of what she terms "the child as natural poet" to the Romanticism of Rousseau and Wordsworth. She quotes the latter's preface to the Immortality Ode on the supposed poetic translation that common objects undergo when seized by the child's imagination: "that dream-like vividness and splendour which invests objects of sight in childhood" (Cohn Livingston 2-3).

add both nothing and everything to the world it allegedly so perfectly comprehends or transcends for the benefit of the adult, serve both as a mirror and a filter, be see-through yet imbue the picture it paints with its own creative touch.

Faced with contradictory expectations whose only similarity is their tendency to other the child subject through instrumentalization and *a priori* definitions, Ian McEwan and Martin Amis deconstruct the assumptions behind the workings of child-focused texts by giving a new twist to its traditional poetical uses. In *Atonement* for instance, the child retains its role as a witness, but is now deeply unreliable, demanding that the reader distance himself from all its sensory experiences–the 2001 novel stages a series of scenes glimpsed "through a glass, darkly"[7] by the child protagonist, from the initial fountain incident, to Lola's rape, or Cecilia and Robbie's library tryst. In the first of these instances, it becomes clear that the contamination of the child's gaze by that very literary-minded quality that should, according to Romantic lore, illuminate its vision, insures that it simply cannot be a reliable focalizer. Indeed, by projecting the tradition of romance upon what unfolds, thirteen-year-old Briony completely misses one of the scene's most meaningful visual elements, the vase, which would have invalidated her fanciful interpretation:

> It was a scene that could easily have accommodated, in the distance at least, a medieval castle. [...] A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. What was presented here fitted well. (McEwan, *Atonement* 38)

> [Cecilia] turned abruptly and picked up from the deep shade of the fountain's wall a vase of flowers Briony had not noticed before (*Atonement* 39)

In the rape scene, her senses are mislaid by her very innocence, that other quality of childhood purportedly essential to its proverbial truthfulness[8] but which, McEwan seems to suggest, also makes the child an inherently incapable witness. Unable to conceive sexual assault, Briony can only recognize what her immature mind is painting for her—a harmless clump of bushes instead of ominous human shapes: the sound of a duck instead of Lola's muffled cry.

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[7] "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but then I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known." 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 (King James Version).

[8] "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings" (Psalms 8:2, King James Version), comes forth the truth—a popular saying much illustrated in Victorian literature for instance, where one of the child's key *raison d'être* was to serve as unquestionable witness of social dysfunction.

> […] a duck startled her with a high, unpleasant call, almost human in its breathy downward note. […] the bush that lay directly in her path—the one she thought should be closer to the shore—began to break up in front of her, or double itself, or waver, and then fork. […] She would have stopped immediately, had she not still been so completely bound to the notion that this was a bush, and that she was witnessing some trick of darkness and perspective. (*Atonement* 164)

Optical and auditory illusions are rife when the child serves as a focalizer, inviting the reader to reconsider the child's testimony, and see its gaze for what it is—a fascinating narrative filter because of the very qualities that, from a Romantic perspective, should have warranted a peerless restitution. We have come a long way since E.M. Forster's definition of the child in fiction as "a single point […] which, when rightly focused, may perhaps make all the surrounding landscape intelligible" (Forster 78). In *Atonement*, McEwan offers instead a Lyotardian experience[9] to the reader, whose traditional meaning-making mechanisms are thwarted by the introduction of this wobbly gaze—seeing no longer means understanding, as Western culture likes to believe it does (Jay 67 and *passim*).

Interestingly, Amis's treatment of the child's voice in *London Fields* favours a similar displacement, with Rousseau's infant soothsayer being recast as a way to ironize and deconstruct adult voices, rather than to articulate some universal truth, to which postmodern novels no longer subscribe.

> Several types of whining were going on: the giant's dentistry in the street below, Mr Frost above who was mad and dying, Keith's fridge […] someone somewhere was actually shouting, "Whine! … Whine! … *Whine*!" […] That would be little Sue down below and to the left, calling to her son Wayne. […]
> "Idea," said the baby.
> "Lager," said Keith.
> "Here," said Kath.
> "Adore," said the baby.
> "What's that?" said Keith, meaning the TV.
> "Ordure," said the baby.
> "News. Nothing on the Crisis," said Kath.
> "I'll give you a crisis in a minute," said Keith.
> "Adieu," said the baby. (Amis, *London Fields* 256)

In this excerpt, baby Kim's little voice acts as what Nathalie Sarraute calls *sous-conversation*, hinting at the underlying currents of meaning behind normal adult speech—without however making clear sense of them. The parallel inarticulacy of baby, parents and neighbours, whose voices are equally reduced to the parataxis of isolated words, also transforms all instances of direct speech into a kind of babytalk, as if the child's true prophetic gift was now to reveal,

[9] Blurring the explicatory and legitimizing function of Western texts is, according to Lyotard, the very essence of postmodernism (Lyotard 7), a process to which the unreliable child-witness of contemporary fiction contributes.

through the contamination of its own failing voice, the impending failure of contemporary communication, the ultimate breakdown of civilized language. What is more, by choosing to focus on an infant's voice (Kim is only a few months old) rather than on a child proper, Amis highlights the artificiality of his own trick, and thus flaunts his own kind of instrumentalization for what it is. In other words, if contemporary fiction stays clear of idealizing labels as far as the child is concerned, it does not offer a straightforward alternative to poetical instrumentalization and stands poised between debunking a number of presupposed ideas on the child's so-called universal nature, and investing its own brand of instrumentalization and its use of the old Romantic definitions with an ethical quality of some kind. We thus transition from the prophetic value of the child's perfect vision to the educational value of its deeply skewed viewpoint; from that of the child's truth-speaking voice to its unwittingly wise and playful deconstructions—a distinctly postmodern take on the Romantic myth.

Beyond linguistic kidnapping–exposing the forged child of adult desire

Underpinning the instrumentalization of the child as poet or prophet is the issue of adult desire—not only is it alienated by its tool-like function, but if the child is set up in the Wordsworthian fashion as a repository of values, a desirable inverted image of adulthood,[10] then it is also less of a subject on that account. Awareness of these issues shines through in a number of contemporary works which use a particular focus on voice to expose the child in fiction as a fake. Baby-talk and assimilated forms of child language, which one critic has described as "the verbal equivalent of carrying a teddy bear or baseball bat instead of a briefcase" (Hurst 9) appear as flatly conventional ways of producing a child-flavoured folklore for the benefit of the adult reader. The contemporary novelist's indictment of such contrived ploys is evidenced in the fact that whenever they appear, they turn out to be really adults masquerading as children, as in *The Child in Time* for instance, where, instead of the expected voice of the protagonist's daughter, Kate, silenced by her pre-diegetic disappearance in a supermarket, the reader is presented with Charles Darke's pathological impersonation of a ten-year-old, after a major breakdown causes him to revert to an infantile state.[11] Below is an example in direct speech of the sort of utterance produced by this would-be Peter Pan:

> "I dunno. Jus' waiting." [...] Charles spoke in breathy, disjointed sentences, without turning his head. Stephen did not catch them all. Charles seemed to be talking to

[10] For Virginia Blum, "the Romantics created the 'child' as a potential space for the adult imagination" (Blum 3).

[11] "[A]n extreme form of a general problem" to quote Charles's wife, Thelma, who alludes to the unwholesome split threatening the grown men and women who similarly yearn for childhood (McEwan, *The Child in Time* 226).

> himself. "It's really good… been building it all summer… by myself… my place…" […] "See this? See this?" […] "Up there!" he shouted. "Look, look!" (McEwan, *The Child in Time* 116-117)

The contracted forms, ellipses, repetitions, and jaunty rhythm all conform to the literary idea of how a child should speak, and are such textbook examples that we could parrot Stephen's comment on the content of Charles's carefully child-like pockets: "It was too correct to be convincing, not quite sufficiently idiosyncratic, perhaps even fraudulent" (*The Child in Time* 123). This clichéd, manufactured example of childspeak confirms Brian Hale's intuition that the voice of the child in adult texts always verges on forgery:

> Baby-talk is the conventionalized register of language used by adults in addressing infants or small children. […] Baby-talk may also be used by children themselves […] to dramatize their own babyishness before adults. […] the baby-talk features in children's speech are those nonstandard (non-adult) features that have been imitated directly from adults, while the genuine children's language features are those anomalies that have been generated by the children themselves on the basis of standard adult usage. (McHale 211-212)

Similarly self-aware, Martin Amis's *London Fields* stages the process through which authentic children's voices give way to adult hermeneutic violence. In the following excerpt, Marmaduke's father systematically translates his son's words so as to remove their disturbing quality, but by maintaining a dialogue between the original and the counterfeit in similar scenes throughout the novel, Amis highlights a fairly common—albeit unwitting—parental linguistic kidnapping, to which the narrator himself pleads guilty[12]:

> "We're in the garden now. What's that? What's that darling?"
> "Dick."
> "Stick. Very good. Sssstick. […]
> Wait, look! Animals. Animals. What's that?"
> "Jeep."
> "Yes, sheep. Very good. […] And what's this squidgy thing here?"
> "Nail."
> "Snail. Excellent! " (223)

Staging the silencing of a potentially upsetting minor voice which fails to correspond to Romantic views of childspeak, Amis's novel reads like the forgotten draft of children's voices in grown-up texts. Marmaduke's utterances are not meaningless babble for his father to turn

[12] "Of course, as babies inch towards speech, and their expressions so intelligently silent, you expect the first words to penetrate, to tell you something you never knew. And what you get is stuff like *floor* or *cat* or *bus*." (Amis, *London Fields* 346) Samson Young, an unreliable (in his own words) narrator, warns the reader against the kind of hermeneutic violence made tempting by the child, which he himself practices. Translating Kim's babble in the same way that Guy frequently neutralizes his son's utterances, he cannot resist projecting adult meaning, as the improbable rewriting of "Nor her choo" into "Not hurt you" attests, with the puzzling choice of pronoun (Kim addressing herself as "you") a clear cause for caution (*London Fields* 410).

into words, but semantic units in their own right, which do not match adult textual desire and must therefore be suppressed.[13] The child's *in-fant*[14] quality is here conveniently called upon to justify normalization and cutification—because it cannot use language as *logos* (reasonable speech) its use of language as *phone* (voice) is systematically disregarded.

Amis actually goes further than exposing this generalized ventriloquism. He insists that there are ways for the child's voice to get through, even if it must accommodate itself to a form of silence.[15] In a very postmodern valorisation of the suspension of *logos* (Hassan 504-505), which also revives the traditional association of the child in literature with nonsense poetry, Amis's infants find ways of expressing themselves which deeply disturb the adult's need for language to make sense. Instead of the depths of adult voices, they choose the surface of body language,[16] the acute quality of insults,[17] grunts,[18] or screams,[19] and the powerful and expressive meaninglessness of echolalia or glossolalia.

> "Milt," said Marmaduke. "Toce. Milt. Toce. Milt! Toce! Milt! Toce! Milt! Toce!" (*London Fields* 83)

> "Enlah," said the baby. "Enlah, Enlah, Enlah, Enlah. Enlah. Enlah Enlah Enlah Enlah Enlah Enlah Enlah Enlah…" (*London Fields* 108)

Marmaduke's rhythmical "milt/toce" and Kim's "Enlah" vocalization demand that the signifier be paid attention to, that the reader experience language in a more essential, horizontal way than in the adult's major, layered, vertical fashion. Interestingly, this work on the child's voice stays clear of the despair of postmodern aporias. [20] Meaninglessness does not lead, when it is the infant's, to an ontological experience of emptiness. Rather, it reads as another enriching suspension of hermeneutical responses, a healthy process through which linguistic clichés and their underlying ideology are systematically questioned, the automatic

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[13] The child's demand for *milt* (fish testis or seminal fluid) immediately rewritten as *milk* by a well-meaning father, is nevertheless allowed to coexist as such in the text, its initial meaning validated by Amis's insistence on the oversexed toddler's repulsive eating habits (*London Fields* 83).
[14] From the Latin *in fari* ("who does not speak").
[15] Both Vanessa Guignery (in a post-colonial context), and Jean-Jacques Lecercle have written about silence as potentially empowering (Lecercle 224 and Guignery 2).
[16] "Halfway through his fifth brick of honey, butter and bronzed wholemeal Marmaduke released a dense mouthful and ground it into the tiles with a booted foot: a sign of temporary satiation" (Amis, *London Fields* 84).
[17] "Want I mind your car?" said a passing four-year-old.
"I haven't got a car."
"Die, bitch." (Amis, *London Fields* 265)
[18] "[Marmaduke] was playing with his toy castle, methodically weakening each ridge of the outer rampart before snapping it off. Doing this caused him to grunt and gasp a good deal. Only the very old grunt and gasp so much as babies" (Amis, *London Fields* 220).
[19] "The baby cries, the baby cries and turns, in its awful struggle to be a baby" (Amis, *London Fields* 434).
[20] According to Fortin-Tournès, this is characteristic of Amis's ironic representation of postmodern crises (Fortin-Tournès 75).

pairing of a signifier with the selfsame signified deconstructed. So much so that the narrator and would-be novelist Samson Young comes to see the infants' surface chant as a deep, salutary way to renew literature in an otherwise post-apocalyptic world: "Kim has stopped saying 'Enlah'! She cries normally, humanly, complicatedly. No longer does she pay homage to the sudden, the savage god of babies: Enlah! [...] 'Milt' I reckon I can live without. But 'Enlah'? Already I miss it" (*London Fields* 239).

Inverting the Romantic formula: child(ish) poets and new-found maturity

If these contemporary texts distance themselves poetically from the traditional voice and gaze built for the child upon a number of Romantic assumptions,[21] the little figure's narrative renewal also brings about an ethical change. The formulaic child=poet is inverted into the less flattering poet=child, while the child's moralizing quality is traded for an opportunity to set off on an ethical journey. *Atonement* is a fitting example of the first kind of revision, which allows McEwan to turn the assimilation of the child to the creative imagination[22] into something more productive than a blind worshipping of infantile metaphors,[23] a possibility for the writer to look critically at himself and his responsibility through the mediating distance of its traditional double, the child. When Briony chances upon Robbie's explicit letter to her older sister, McEwan resists the Rousseauian temptation of showing how the child is corrupted by adult language. Instead, Briony's Proustian reverie on the c-word suggests that the real threat lies in that particular kind of innocence which sees language as a purely aesthetic medium—in the child's mind, "cunt" is unbearable, not because of its ethical context, but because of its evocative power, which makes her see too much:

> The word: she tried to prevent it sounding in her thoughts, and yet it danced through them obscenely, a typographical demon, juggling vague, insinuating anagrams—an uncle and a nut, the Latin for next, an Old English king attempting to turn back the tide. Rhyming words took their form from children's books—the smallest pig in the litter, the hounds pursuing the fox, the flat-bottomed boats on the Cam by Grantchester

[21] Of course this "Romantic child" differs from the child figures of Romantic poetry. It has reached us in an altered, condensed, and somewhat simplified fashion, after being read and written by Victorians and Modernists who refashioned it according to their own understanding of the originary myths, projecting back a unified figure (Myers 47).

[22] See Judith Plotz's *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* for an in-depth analysis of the role played by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and several of their contemporaries, in establishing the child as a key figure of the creative imagination.

[23] Testing the reality behind the myth, Cohn Livingston looked at a pool of texts produced in contemporary American classrooms and, analyzing their imagery, concludes that, contrary to popular expectation, and in spite of the teachers' best efforts, it hardly qualifies as poetry. "Synesthesia is not a device which children use spontaneously. [...] they do not deal in abstract thought; they do not normally associate color or sound with feelings. Prodded by teachers [...], children produce either the most obvious and pedestrian comparisons [...] or asked by teachers to make 'weird' comparisons, they may write [...] forced synesthesia masquerading as poetry" (Cohn Livingston 288).

> meadow. [...] the word was at one with its meaning, and was almost onomatopoeic. (*Atonement* 114)

In these few lines, the little girl gradually destroys referent and signified, leaving only an empty shell of a word, stripped of its real-world implications on those involved in the utterance. The fall-out of this attitude to language, which is clearly a covert examination of the poet's responsibilities, is that it allows Briony to use words poetically rather than ethically, and thus wreak havoc on the lives of the adult protagonists. Because the four-letter word has been reduced to a mere pleasing sound conjuring a network of related signifiers, it can be uttered again and again, and just as easily lead to other, more serious words, such as "maniac" which the child eventually uses against Robbie, causing him to be wrongfully imprisoned:

> A maniac. The word had refinement, and the weight of medical diagnosis. All these years she had known him and that was what he had been. (*Atonement* 119)
>
> Briony wanted [Lola] to say his name. To seal the crime, frame it with the victim's curse, close his fate with the magic of naming. (*Atonement* 165)

In both excerpts, the child brings to mind an ivory tower poet, fascinated with a power of language she tragically fails to understand as having consequences beyond the fictional or sensual pleasure she derives from them. Briony experiences the magical pleasure of naming, and plays recklessly with the richness of the signified while indulging in the aesthetic joy provided by the signifier—all in all a rather cunningly ironical use of the child-as-poet equation, which, when read backwards, becomes a clear indictment of a poetical approach to language which would bypass the ethical.

In a similar manner, revisiting the child's gaze allows contemporary novelists to achieve a form of artistic maturity through the medium of the infantile. If the poet-as-child equation operates, it is because some of today's texts put the reading and writing adult in a position where it can actually encounter the otherness of childhood. Gone is the moralizing child witness theorized by Leslie Fiedler, who, in his famous essay "The Eye of Innocence," identified decades, centuries even, of literary peeping Toms: "There he is [...] his eye to the keyhole [...] observing in his innocence our lack of it. He is the touchstone, the judge of our world—and a reproach to it in his unfallen freshness of thought" (Fiedler 251). However fashionable in Victorian fiction (Coveney 91-110), and still a competing trend in perhaps more popular contemporary British fiction,[24] several postmodern novels prefer to opt for the unsettling viewpoint of amoral or plainly immoral children, which nonetheless guarantees an ethical experience of otherness to their readers. This is perhaps where childhood poetics have

[24] See for instance Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

matured; instead of attributing an *a priori* moral value to infancy, these texts offer the more difficult and enriching experience of childhood's marginality to their readers—where marginality is a more complex, more uncomfortable notion than the absolute and idealized difference of childhood formerly dreamed up by adult desire. McEwan's *The Cement Garden* is a case in point,[25] with its deeply disturbing incestuous youths and the gradual withdrawal of every grounding adult reference point from the narration. The child no longer serves as a framing moral and visual entity—it is no longer the wise fool, exposing the Emperor's nakedness, but a kind of *eiron*, illuminating our blindness with his/her own, an unpleasant and sobering anti-prophet whose limited, disappointing truth is that neither he nor we can see the Emperor for what he is.

> The main shopping street was empty except for cars. It was Sunday. The only person I could see was a woman in a red coat standing on a footbridge that spanned the road. [...] She was still a long way off, but she looked familiar. [...] fifty yards from the bridge I could not resist glancing up. The woman was my mother and she was looking right at me. I stopped. [...] When I was almost under the footbridge I stopped again and looked up. Great relief and recognition swept through me, and I laughed out loud. It was not Mother of course, it was Julie, wearing a coat I had never seen before. [...] Face to face with her now I saw that it was not Julie either. (*The Cement Garden* 75-76)

No reassuring narrative voice or reliable adult witness counters Jack's hallucinations—as in Amis's short story, "Insight at Flame Lake," the child is his own narrator, and the reader has to learn to both see him and see against him, in texts where one fallacious perception segues into another, blurring the world perhaps but illuminating the blind subject.

"A theme that so obviously lends itself to nostalgia, sentimentality, false idealism and drug-addictive evasion—to diverse forms of sick refusal to recognize unequivocally, not merely the actual, but the real" (Leavis 23). If F.R. Leavis's ruthless assessment of the child figure leaves little hope that child-focused texts may ever address their tendency to indulge in diverse forms of narratological peterpanism, reading McEwan, reading Amis, and several of their contemporaries, it appears that the child's voice and gaze have actually become the writer's way to engage more ethically with his own art and confront his responsibilities to otherness. Steering clear of the two extremes of Rousseauian prophecies and postmodern despair, the child's voice and silence, his gaze and his blindness alike, allow pockets of meaning to emerge in texts which prove educational in a non-didactic way to their authors and readers. Sometimes, as in Amis's otherwise very fin-de-siècle *London Fields*, the crises and reversals brought about by the child actually lead to a form of exultation which has nothing to do with

[25] As are some of his and Amis's short stories, respectively "Homemade" or "Insight at Flame Lake."

the old nostalgia and sentimental kitsch plaguing the figure of the child.[26] The contemporary novel's chosen infantile maturity, its empowering deconstructions brought about by the child, allow its author to interrogate the assumptions behind so-called mimesis, and to ask what poetics owe to ethics. As these texts forego confining definitions of the child, become aware in their individual ways of the traps and pitfalls of writing childhood, its impossibilities and aporias,[27] they put to us, quite simply, a very similar question to that of Briony's mother in *Atonement*: "how could any one presume to know the world through the eyes of an insect?" (149)

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[26] Peter Coveney dedicated a chapter of his literary history of childhood to the acme of these excesses, tellingly entitled "Reduction to Absurdity" and dealing especially with the work of Mrs. Henry Wood and Marie Corelli (Coveney 179-193).

[27] See the very title of two major works of childhood studies: Rose's *The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* and Honeyman's *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction*.

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