Contending Narratives in Ian McEwan's Fiction

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My study examines an abiding theme in Ian McEwan's fiction–the sciences vs. the humanities–within the context of the "two cultures" debate and the extent to which McEwan's novels can be seen as participating in the debate. One needs to refrain from the impulse of situating McEwan's fiction as complacently resting within a "two cultures" framework, as a careful examination of his texts, which attest to their author's refusal to take for granted scientific or any kind of doctrines, demolishes such a view. Nevertheless, this refusal is not readily apparent since it is camouflaged by the main characters' rationalistic and scientific interpretations of events. By creating characters who are proven wrong for exclusively endorsing one side of the conflict, McEwan engages in the "two cultures" debate and challenges the significance of science in a dehumanised, globalised world. Determining whether the epistemological models of the sciences and the humanities as thematised in McEwan's fiction can be reconciled and can converge into a "third culture" so as to offer a comprehensive and moral outlook is the chief aim of my investigation.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, science, the humanities, morality, the "third culture."

It can hardly be disputed that Ian McEwan has been significantly influenced in his work by scientific theories, and this influence has become even more prominent since the publication of *The Child in Time* (1987), a novel concerned with quantum physics and the theory of relativity. A number of his subsequent novels, including *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Saturday* (2005), prove that the novelist's penchant for science was more than just a whim and reveal further points of convergence for science and literature. Science, McEwan notes, "parallels literature as a means by which the world can be understood,"[1] since they both aspire to explore human nature. Nonetheless, even though his novels portray a complex society imbued with the effects of technology and science, McEwan does not merely appropriate scientific concepts and ideas, but adopts science on an epistemological level, questioning the nature, extent, and validity of its presuppositions. Science and reason are set in opposition to art and spirituality, many of his characters being scientists or individuals with a rationalistic frame of mind, who hold literature in contempt.

Central to *The Child in Time* is the analysis of the extent to which concepts from the new physics are relevant for everyday reality at both private and political levels. The scientific underpinning of the novel, particularly its concern with Einstein's theories of time malleability and relativity and with quantum physics, applied for the purposes of a literary experiment, has made Dominic Head consider the novel to be McEwan's "most striking recent example in fiction of the influence of the new physics."[2]

The "two cultures" debate revolves here around the clash between Stephen Lewis's artistic creativity and modern scientific time theories, articulated by Stephen's friend, Thelma Darke, a retired quantum physicist, who believes that "the common-sense, everyday version of [time] as linear, regular, absolute, marching from left to

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right, from the past through the present to the future, is either nonsense or a tiny fraction of the truth."[3] The objectivity of modern scientific research can no longer be vouched for by its proponents, as Thelma makes clear. She contends that the new science has drifted away from the "masculine" old science, which she regards as detached, uncompromising, and overconfident in its claims to knowledge, and is becoming more feminine, co-operative, all-encompassing, dissociated from the restrictive old Newtonian concepts, and ready to acknowledge that "matter, time, space, forces [are] all beautiful and intricate illusions."[4] Thus, in her opinion, quantum physics will "feminise all science, make it softer, less arrogantly detached, more receptive to participating in the world it wanted to describe."[5]

As an advocate of science in the "two cultures" debate, Thelma criticises artists for paying no heed to quantum mechanics, which she credits as being a "scientific [...] intellectual revolution, an emotional, sensual explosion, a fabulous story just beginning to unfold."[6] She complains that the enormous potentiality of the theories of quantum physics did not have a major impact on contemporary literature and argues that the writers of the past would have been moved by them: "Shakespeare would have grasped wave functions, Donne would have understood complementarity and relative time. They would have been excited [...] They would have plundered this new science for their imagery. And they would have educated their audiences too. But you 'arts' people, you're not only ignorant of these magnificent things, you're rather proud of knowing nothing."[7] Yet Thelma's theories are not free from bias. Denouncing the failure of the humanities to make use of scientific progress, she does not make provision for the fact that modernist literature did work towards the assimilation of modern scientific breakthroughs, from Einstein's relativity theory to Heisenberg's indeterminacy.

Not being capable to give up on Kate, his abducted daughter, Stephen entertains the possibilities offered by the scientific assumptions about temporal non-linearity and parallel universes where present and past co-exist. Thus, Thelma's views act strongly on him, as the captivating universe of quantum physics, with its range of possible time warping experiences, secures him the needed shelter from life's irreversible transformations. His friend's explanations of backward flowing time make him believe that these may compensate for the bereavement caused by his daughter's absence by prompting him to relate to the concepts of identity, time, and reality. Hence, Stephen resorts to Thelma's ideas by shaping substitute stories to stand "against the weight of time"[8] and retrieve that moment just before Kate's abduction, glimpse the kidnapper, and thus save his daughter. Furthermore, he relies on the manifold alternatives offered by the quantum theory in order to find consolation in the idea that Kate, while no longer part of his universe, will co-exist and grow up in a different spiritual and temporal reality. As he learns from Thelma, "there is no absolute time [...] no independent entity," there is "only our particular and weak understanding;"[9] time is subject to contractions and expansions contingent on the intensity of the lived event and particular frames of mind, and this ensures the continued existence of his "invisible child" in his mind. Time and Kate are inseparable from each other: "Kate's growing up," the narrator states, "had become the essence of time itself."[10]

There are further instances when Stephen tests the availability of Thelma's theses on the physics of time on his own skin. In fact, the novel is replete with illustrations of relativity and temporal anomalies. For instance, "the steady forward press of the pavement crowds" passing by the London drivers caught in traffic jams every morning "conveyed to them a sense of relative motion, of drifting slowly backwards."[11] In moments of utmost anxiety, time practically stands still. Leaving the supermarket after his daughter's abduction, Stephen, paralysed with horror, automatically records the details of the street, which are just as he left them earlier, and feels as if time had come to a halt. In another instance of Bergsonian *durée*, after making a narrow escape from death by avoiding a crash with an upturned lorry, Stephen reflects: "The whole experience had lasted no more than five seconds. Julie would have appreciated what had happened to time, how duration shaped itself round the intensity of the event."[12] Stephen's understanding of this near-fatal event, focalised through the narrator, is that everyday reality and its implacable physical laws are being held in abeyance, making room for a novel existence. Time gains an almost mythical value through this unusual perception, enabling him to record events with unnatural clarity and reframe reality: "Now, in this slowing of time, there was a sense of a fresh beginning. He had entered a much later period in which all the terms and conditions had changed. So these were the new rules, and he experienced something like awe, as though he were walking alone into a great city on a newly discovered planet. There was space too for a little touch of regret, genuine nostalgia for the old days of spectacle, back then when a lorry used to catapult so impressively before the impassive witness. Now was a more demanding time of effort and concentration."[13]

Referring to the multiple facets of time as reflected in the novel, Jack Slay, Jr., comments: "McEwan creates a sense of time that is malleable, wondrous, infinitely complex. Time is a vandal: it is the essence that can make one forget the child, the youthful joy of life. Simultaneously, time is also vandalised: characters experience periods that stall in slow motion, that pass in a blur of quickness, that are even altered, with the

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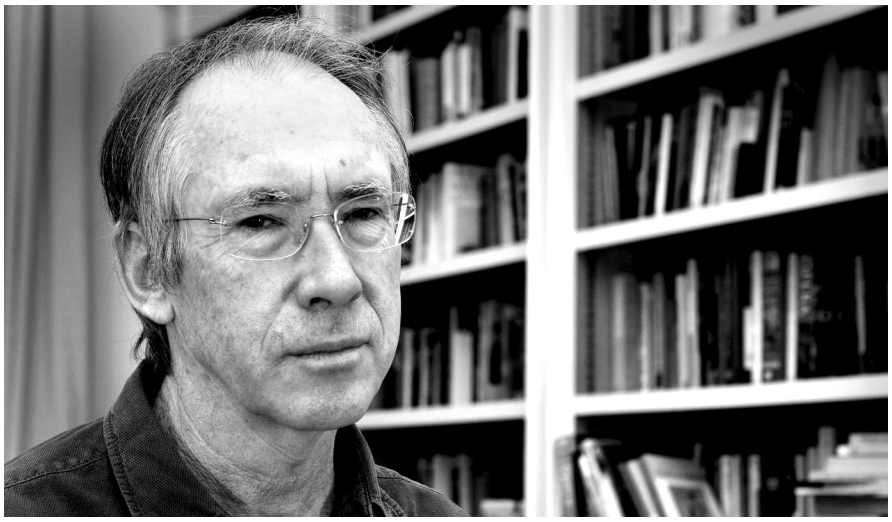

Ian McEwan
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past coming round to the present."[14] One of the most notable illustrations of stolen, "vandalised" time in the novel is Stephen's surreal journey through time during which he travels back to the moments before his own birth and glimpses through the window of a pub which he has never seen before his parents as a young couple. Touched by this déjà-vu and by fear at his pre-life nonexistence, he realises "he had nowhere to go, no moment which could embody him, he was not expected, no destination or time could be named."[15] Many years later, his mother confirms the veracity of his epiphanic experience and reveals to him that she had a presentiment in the same pub, when she glimpsed through the window her unborn child and hence decided not to abort him. The episode exemplifies the clash between reductive scientific contentions about time and the complexity of the individuals' experience of it under diverse emotional conditions.

The birth of another baby, itself a being of manifold possibilities, redeems the loss of the child in time and gives Stephen's life a new purpose. After mistaking an older girl on a school playground for Kate and fancying Kate's spirit as a "brilliantly coloured dragonfly, capable of unimaginable speeds, and yet remaining perfectly still as it waited to descend to a playground or street corner to inhabit the body of a young girl, infuse it with its own particular essence to demonstrate to him its enduring existence before moving on,"[16] he grows aware that the impractical adaptation of the ambiguous concepts of quantum to artistic imagination is unreliable and deceptive.

His take on Thelma's theories, on which he relies to lessen his loss, results in a moving story of false hope and delusive solace, since, in the long run, the theories fall through for him, the contentions put forward by the new physics proving their futility when he must come to terms with Kate's loss. Thelma's reflections on the array of current theories on space-time, wave and particle functions, and time reversal, are capable of providing only thorny answers to the numerous questions raised in the novel. Thelma herself admits that science does not hold all the answers to the problem of time: "Niels Bohr was probably right all along when he said that scientists should have nothing to do with reality. Their business is to construct models which account for their observations."[17]

In an essay apparently inspired by Charles Darwin's discovery that human characteristics have animal origins, Ian McEwan tackles the idea that the humanities and the sciences, traditionally considered to be unconnected fields, pool their resources to define human nature. His more particular focus is on emotions, which, as derivatives of evolution, are seen by the novelist as being not culture-specific, but rather human universals, shared across all cultures. McEwan extrapolates the premise that human social behaviour has biological roots to literary themes, which cover both the universal and the specific and are assumed to "encod[e] both our cultural and genetic inheritance." The link between literature and evolutionary theory lies precisely in the "common emotional ground [and] deep reservoir of assumptions," and the human instinct for storytelling enables readers, as they peruse "accounts of the systematic nonintrusive observations of troops of bonobos," to see "rehearsed all the major themes of the English nineteenth-century novel: alliances made and broken, individuals rising while others fall, plots hatched, revenge, gratitude, injured pride, successful and unsuccessful courtship, bereavement and mourning."[18] Both science and literature seek to tell the story of humanity, but whereas science is an accumulation of facts and raw data, literature replicates historical paradigms through infinite alterations. This understanding determines

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the novelist to go as far as to infer that literature is our anthropology, acting as a powerful agent where anthropologists are no longer able to provide first-hand accounts about human nature, since "[t]hat which binds us, our common nature, is what literature has always, knowingly and helplessly, given voice to."[19]

The Neo-Darwinian issues that McEwan addresses in his essay may be seen as the main source for the explanations given by several of his fictional characters, who put forward their own knowledge and interpretation of evolution, such as popular science writer Joe Rose in *Enduring Love*. Waiting to meet his partner Clarissa at Heathrow Airport, a melting pot of cultures, ethnicities, and religions, Joe reacts to the expression of joy that he sees around, a genetically encoded expression that signals a universal human nature and simultaneously points to the hereditary nature of instinct and to the kinship of animals and humans.

The apparent dichotomy between the two fields, science and the humanities, embodied by rationalist Joe Rose and his foils, literary scholar Clarissa Melon and religious fanatic Jed Perry, forms the crux of the novel. The narrative also includes two appendices whose contents (one consisting of an article on de Clérambault's syndrome and the other comprising a case-study on a patient closely resembling Jed Parry) have prompted Timothy Bewes to assert that the end of the novel, with its "overwhelming endorsement of Joe's scientific rationalism against both Jed's fanaticism and Clarissa's sympathetic literary sensitivity," offers too easily a resolution for the opposition between the sciences and the humanities that it stages and leaves Joe's scientific authority "almost entirely unquestioned, unimpaired by the narrative."[20]

I believe this claim does no justice to McEwan's novel since the writer does not clarify the tensions that he creates in his novel so quickly and effectively as Bewes contends. Despite his accurate assessment of Jed Parry as a de Clérambault's sufferer and potentially violent individual, Joe's stance as a champion of scientific rationalism is frustrated in the novel. Nor does the narrative depend merely on the differences between the scientific, literary, and religious worldviews it elicits from its protagonists, as Bewes seems to imply. By placing characters with clashing ways of thinking in the grip of intense crisis, McEwan questions the authority of their dissimilar beliefs. The novel is revealed to be a significantly more comprehensive and elaborate portrayal of the interconnection between scientific accounts and artistic creativity than its sterile exploration of science versus literature could inspire. Read in this light, *Enduring Love* offers proper ground for exploring how a more effective "third culture" might be conceived of as a point of convergence for science and the humanities.

The opposition between Joe's rationality and Clarissa's and Jed's artistic and religious insights is exemplified along different lines of approach, several descriptive fragments interspersed throughout the novel guiding the reader into scientific debates. One of McEwan's dominant "third culture" themes—the problem of selflessness/selfishness and ethical behaviour as being biologically determined—is introduced in the novel's famous opening scene, depicting a ballooning accident. This episode, enacting the clash between the urge towards selfishness and the willingness to help other people, unveils, as Joe muses looking back to it, a primeval social impulse, that of co-operation, which he sees as a biologically driven strategy: "Co-operation—the basis of our earliest hunting successes, the force behind our evolving capacity for language, the glue of our social cohesion. Our misery in the aftermath was proof that we knew we had failed ourselves. But letting go was in our nature too. Selfishness is also written on our hearts. This is our mammalian conflict—what to give to the others, and what to keep for yourself. Treading that line, keeping the others in check, and being kept in check by them, is what we call morality."[21]

Like Thelma Darke in *The Child in Time*, Joe complains about supposition "the world could be efficiently understood through fictions, histories and biographies. Did the scientific illiterates who ran this place, and who dared called themselves educated people, really believe that literature was the greatest intellectual achievement of our civilisation?"[22] His castigation of the role of the humanities in improving and disseminating knowledge clearly indicates his position as a defender of science, which he thinks should be placed on the same foothold as the humanities. This view is not far from that expressed by McEwan in an interview: "I do think that the discovery of scientific method and the achievements of inquiring scientific minds do rank with the highest artistic achievements. They rank with the work of Shakespeare, or the painting of the Sistine Chapel. It bothers me that so many people I know who value the life of the mind, and live by it, seem to live by it with one eye shut to that great triumph."[23]

Yet Joe confesses that it is his emotional condition that unnerves him and makes demands on him. Even though his scientific mind enables him to formulate such analytical descriptions suggestive of a laboratory test in Newton's laws of motion as that of the ballooning accident, it is in his endeavours to make sense of himself and other people that the significance of storytelling for the humanities as well as for science is best evinced in the novel, deconstructing his critique of humanistic disciplines and complicating the "two cultures" debate by encouraging readers to reconsider the reductive rationality/spirituality dichotomy.

In the same interview, McEwan declares that his "own particular intellectual hero is E. O. Wilson,"[24] the

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sociobiologist who sought a unity ("consilience") between the sciences and the humanities to create a singular explanatory mode and whom Joe Rose mentions in his reflections on evolutionary psychology. According to Wilson, not only will integrating knowledge from the sciences with knowledge from the humanities solve most of the crucial current problems, but it will also smooth the way for educational and professional success: "If the natural sciences can be successfully united with the social sciences and humanities, the liberal arts in higher education will be revitalised [...] Profession-bent students should be helped to understand that in the twenty-first century the world will not be run by those who possess mere information alone [...] We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesisers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely."[25]

McEwan explains his interest in Wilson's work, thus confirming his position as a "third culture" intellectual. He hails Wilson's coherent project, at the core of which lies an understanding of ethics grounded in biology: "A united system of knowledge is the surest means of identifying the unexplored domains of reality; in the pursuit of consilience, ethics is everything. It would be an achievement to get Homo sapiens settled down and happy before we wreck the planet, and for this we need the best decisions based upon the soundest knowledge."[26] As Wilson sees it, the lucidity of science will confer on mankind the morality underpinning meaningful human action, and this view seems to be in line with McEwan's own outlook of moral sense.

The common goal of the sciences and humanities is the pursuit of the universal, and McEwan suggests that literature has an enduring quality, a timeless validity, that helps readers to make sense of literary characters regardless of their peculiarities. In order for this to take effect, as the novelist further explains, "we must bring our own general understanding of what it means to be a person. We have, in the terms of cognitive psychology, a theory of mind, a more-or-less automatic understanding of what it means to be someone else. Without this understanding [...], we would find it virtually impossible to form and sustain relationships, read expressions or intentions, or perceive how we ourselves are understood. To the particular instances that are presented to us in a novel we bring this deep and broad understanding."[27]

Enduring Love and McEwan's later novel *Saturday* exhibit close correspondences to each other. In both novels, McEwan turns to the broad contrast evinced in the characters' standpoints and conflicts and, by framing their endeavours to make sense of the human condition, invites his readers to give thought to the complementary functions of the sciences and the humanities. Furthermore, in both narratives, the incompleteness of a science-based ethics is illustrated by its failure to account for the chaos created by highly contingent traumatic events. Yet instead of siding with one mode of thinking or the other, the novelist levels his criticism against the disunity between science and spirituality. Therefore, an understanding of the alleged "two cultures" paradigm needs to consider too that the ways in which the crises foregrounded in both novels are resolved complicate a falsely simplistic dichotomous reading. Without playing down the importance of scientific and technological progress to the contemporary society, McEwan eschews rooting his novel in the antagonism between literature and science that constituted a nineteenth-century bone of contention.

For all their excessive concern with the material fabric of life and their inaptitude in emotional matters, the protagonists of the two novels are by no means identical in their portrayal. McEwan separates Henry Perowne, the protagonist of *Saturday*, from the failed scientist turned journalist in *Enduring Love* by endowing the former with exceptional professionalism and consummate expertise as a neurosurgeon, stressing his success as a scientist, while revealing the devastating consequences of his blind trust in the powers of scientific, exact investigation. This "added-value" renders Perowne's psychological confusion more authentic and enables the novelist to illustrate with more accuracy the divergences between scientific and humanistic paradigms of knowledge that are in dire need of being settled if we want to overcome the ethical conundrums brought about by the presumptuous commitment to one-sided frameworks.

In *Saturday*, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne's regard for science, coupled with his failure to value literature, is set in clear opposition to his children's artistic sensibility, particularly his daughter Daisy's poetic insights. Like in *Enduring Love*, the narrative perspective (the novel is narrated in the third person, limited point of view, with the readers experiencing the story through the thoughts of its practical-minded protagonist) seems to favour the scientific to the artistic, which may have determined Deryn Rees-Jones to state that the novel is "skewed towards, if not totally embracing, scientific rationalism."[28] However, the critic's interpretation fails to take into consideration the narrative subtleties of the novel. The epigraph (a passage from Bellow's *Herzog*), with its evocation of urban chaos precipitated by scientific and technological innovation, is more condemnatory of science than any of the views embraced by Henry Perowne, thus being the first proof that the novel does not merely subscribe to the restricted standpoint of its protagonist. The paratext also intimates the novel's overt and covert concern with the current role and validity of

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science in gaining insight into life-experiences.

Henry Perowne's scientifically-biased outlook is the chief focus of the novel. As a virtuoso in aneurysm clipping, Henry values the material world and rational explanations and understands the mind solely in terms of matter. Like Joe Rose, the medical scientist is an apologist of evolution: "What better creation myth? An unimaginable sweep of time, numberless generations spawning by infinitesimal steps complex living beauty out of inert matter, driven on by the blind furies of random mutation, natural selection and environmental change, with the tragedy of forms continually dying, and lately the wonder of minds emerging and with them morality, love, art, cities–and the unprecedented bonus of this story happening to be demonstrably true."[29]

He appreciates Darwin's evolutionary mindset and strongly believes that "over decades, as long as the scientists and the institutions remain in place, the explanations will refine themselves into an irrefutable truth about consciousnessv [...] That's the only kind of faith he has. There's grandeur in this view of life."[30] Dominic Head reads Perowne's conception of "grandeur" as being "rooted in the rapidly advancing scientific understanding of consciousness, which might one day explain 'how matter becomes conscious.'"[31] Henry's conception of consciousness as a physical phenomenon does not appear to be far from that of the novelist, who defines consciousness as "an accidental gift of blind processes" which renders human existence "all the more precious and our responsibilities for it all the more profound," and thus more ethical, since it is the only chance humans get at personal integrity.[32]

Yet, to Henry, the epistemological model offered by literature is worthless if it cannot be couched in the language of evolution, if it makes no contribution to survival whatsoever, and if it does not include an element of perfection, like Einstein's General Theory, classical music, or certain Impressionist paintings. Eventually, it is this ability of literature, of made-up stories, to convey feeling and turn chaotic raw experience into something meaningful that Henry needs in his confrontations with Baxter, his thug. His parochialism and failure to empathise with another human being put his family in danger, with Baxter and his acolytes forcing their way into his house and taking the Perownes hostages, a predicament that could have been avoided had he been more receptive to the truths embraced by literature, such as the complexities of the human consciousness. The existence of a "vast ignorance of the brain, and the mind, and the relationship between the two,"[33] as opposed to the facts provided by the medical science, is a tardy realisation to Henry.

In the culminating scene of the novel (Daisy's reading of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" that subdues Baxter's anger), McEwan turns to poetry in order to stage the benefits of an artistic approach to life. McEwan's choice of Arnold's poem alludes to the public and long-lasting debate between Thomas Henry Huxley and Matthew Arnold, in which the latter makes a cordial apology of a predominantly literary education. In one of his revisited essays based on his lecture entitled "Literature and Science," Arnold states that literature (understood as *belles letters*) offers an explanatory model of human nature and meets the individual's aesthetic and ethical need. He also argues that rather than being a "mainly decorative," yet "slight and ineffectual" epistemological model, as he thinks Huxley would have suggested, humanism is "a help to knowing ourselves and the world," and thus aims at a holistic approach to life.[34]

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson define metaphor as "one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. These endeavours of the imagination are not devoid of rationality; since they use metaphor, they employ an imaginative rationality."[35] In the novel, Arnold's poem becomes "a lifetime's satisfaction" in a thirty-seven lines, "a world in a grain of sand," or "one of those cases of microcosm giving you the whole."[36] It is a conceit that acts as an invitation to see things in a new light and reflect on the power poetry to encapsulate not only the emotional but also the contingent nature of life. Through the cathartic power it exercises over its listener, Daisy's reading of "Dover Beach" allows the suppression, at least temporarily, of science as a preferred discourse and illuminates invisible meanings that help the characters to overcome the physical threat of a critical situation that science is not able to control all by itself.

Instead of favouring one epistemological model, Ian McEwan's novels examined in the present study promote diversity and reinforce the warning that science and humanism cannot join forces before acknowledging the deficiencies of their own and each other's ideologies. The doubts raised by scientific rationalism offset the perils of doctrinism and complacent liberalism; yet scientific thought also stands a chance of turning into dogmatic discourse when it becomes the only authority that steers human action, since it cannot compensate for the subtle understanding of the world that unforeseeable events call for. McEwan's fiction makes a perceptive and creative contribution to the act of challenging scientific discourses that are ineffectual unless validated by a wider cultural narrative, encapsulating the humanistic values that are also part of the contemporary civilisation.

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