

Representations of Trees and Covid-19 Pandemic in Ian McEwan's *Lessons*

Costanza Mondo
(Università degli Studi di Torino)

Abstract

In *Lezioni* di Ian McEwan, le rappresentazioni degli alberi e della pandemia di Covid-19 sono temi che possono essere esaminati da una prospettiva ecocritica come ritratti del paesaggio nell'Antropocene. Questo articolo verte su due aspetti: il legame tra alberi ed equilibrio, e la pandemia di Covid-19 che innesca una trasformazione percettiva nel protagonista nella concezione dei suoi ricordi.

Parole chiave: Ian McEwan, *Lezioni*, rappresentazione degli alberi, Covid-19, pandemia

Abstract

In Ian McEwan's latest novel *Lessons*, the representations of trees and the Covid-19 pandemic are themes that can be investigated from an ecocritical perspective as literary portrayals of landscape in the Anthropocene. This article deals with two aspects: the link between trees and balance, and the Covid-19 pandemic which triggers a perceptive shift in the main character's conception of his memories.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *Lessons*, Representation of Trees, Covid-19, Pandemic

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1. Introduction

Looking at Ian McEwan's extensive literary production and at his latest novel *Lessons*, one might be tempted to borrow the annoyed words of one of his characters in that novel and turn them into praise: «[He]'s doing something different – again!» (McEwan 2022, 456). Ranging from librettos and screenplays to novels steeped in psychology, his works include *Nutshell* – a novel redolent of *Hamlet* – and a political satire about Brexit entitled *The Cockroach*, which Shaw included in the genre of Brexlit (2021, 315). This time the novelty in *Lessons* is not only the predominance of autobiographical elements, but also ecocritical hues that can be intensely perceived.

However, it would be reductive to limit McEwan's ecocritical concerns to *Lessons* only. In 2009, Garrard was already looking at McEwan's fiction through an ecocritical lens; he highlighted ecofeminist traits in *The Child in Time* and the treatment of science in *Saturday* (2009, 695; 713). The critic added that in many of his works, McEwan has critiqued major ethical assumptions in ecocriticism (Garrard 2009, 696). In his more recent production, *Machines Like Me* tackles the theme of artificial intelligence and the fluid boundary between humans and nonhumans by presenting «the opposed emotional and instinctual responses of *cupio dissolvi*, [...] and almost tribal defensiveness» as human reactions to AI (Colombino and Childs 2022, 360, italics in the original). Interestingly, in that novel the outside environment is made conspicuous by its near absence. One of the most important scenes that takes place outside the main character's house is a crowded march in Hyde Park replete with «trombones, tambourines and a bass drum» (McEwan 2020b, 222), which heightens, rather than diminishes, the claustrophobic atmosphere of the novel.

In an essay from 2009, Garrard discussed McEwan's next novel, *Solar*, before it was published. On that occasion, the critic underlined that the «global environmental crisis is also a crisis of representation» and stated that none of the traditional forms in literature and other media are

suites to capture the scale and complexity of climate change (Garrard 2009, 709). In this opinion, he seems to have anticipated Amitav Ghosh's words: «the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination» (Ghosh 2017, 9). In the same essay, Garrard hoped that McEwan's next novel would represent the environmental crisis as a «“background hum”» (2009, 718). Although the critic was later disappointed by *Solar* partly because of the distracting human parables that spoiled the allegorical quality of the main plot (Garrard 2013, 133), his prophecy might still be fulfilled by *Lessons*, McEwan's latest novel, published in 2022. As for climate change and ecocritical themes, in his latest novel they do seem to be a 'background hum' – to borrow Garrard's expression – and are much more heightened because of their quiet presence.

This paper aims to tease out the representation of trees and Covid-19 Pandemic in *Lessons*. The choice of these two subjects goes from the micro to the macro, in line with Clark's statement that scale is becoming a new focus of critical debate in green criticism (2019, 38). Rooted in the dimensions of locality and globality, respectively, the tree and the pandemic might even dovetail with the ecocritical distinction between bioregional and cosmopolitan solutions to the climate crisis. The first section will explore the representation of trees in *Lessons* and highlight how these landscape features often call attention to and re-establish balance in numerous situations in the novel. In addition, the second section will briefly investigate the Covid-19 pandemic – which Ghosh called «not unrelated» to climate change (Ghosh 2021, 133) – and bring to the fore a change in the memory paradigm and perspective on the past in the main character's mind.

2. The Balance and Resilience of Trees

It has been pointed out that current times have encouraged the resurgence of mythmaking (Colombino and Childs 2022, 358); however, it should be also underlined that established myths are being rethought and reforged

into emblems that embody current ecocritical concerns. Good examples thereof are the two petrol pumps in Derek Mahon's "A Garage in Co. Cork" that evocatively allude to the Ovidian myth of Philemon and Baucis (De Angelis 2018, 153) or the combination of classical and Indian legends as myths of the clash between human progress and nature in Ghosh's *Gun Island*, where the Bengali legend of the Gun Merchant has an «appeal [...] not unlike that of the Odyssey» (Alam 2019). To illustrate an example from McEwan's work, the belief in deliverance through scientific advancement is lampooned in *Solar* as a form of human hubris (Berndt 2017, 92), which appears much more arrogant than the classic hubris of Prometheus or even that of Polycrates's, recounted by Herodotus (2003, book three, 187-189).

In Greek mythology, trees are often at the centre of metamorphoses, epitomised by Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree. In *Lessons*, trees are devoid of mythological connotations; they appear in their plain arboreality and are immersed in the surrounding environment. Rather than undermining trees, this perspective leaves their awe-inspiring traits intact and possibly heightened. Precisely because of the absorption of trees in the main character's mindscape, investigating their representation in *Lessons* is important so as to derive fresh insights into current portrayals of landscape in the Anthropocene.

Oftentimes, the relationship between nature and the urban landscape has been depicted as inevitably undercut by obnoxious imbalance: the city usually gobbles up whatever green it can lay its tarmac on. This is the situation depicted by Philip Larkin in his poem "Going, Going", which has been «considered by many critics to be a harbinger of the gloomy fate the earth might suffer» (Idrus and Mukahal 2021, 50). In this poem, trees are evoked in reference to the «village louts» (Larkin 2003, 133) who can freely climb them in the countryside, neatly separated from the urban landscape. In addition, "The Trees" presents arboreal life as yearly blossoming and marking the passing of time, its message to humans being: "Begin afresh,

afresh, afresh” (Larkin 2003, 24). More interestingly, in his other poem “Going”, Larkin lamented the disappearance of the tree «that locked/Earth to the sky» (Larkin 2003, 51) – a conception of trees as ties between two elemental spheres which differs from others, for example the Aotearoa New Zealand indigenous one, according to which trees firmly separate sky and land (Della Valle 2019, 128). In *Lessons*, trees are still ties, inasmuch as they often readjust balance both literally and symbolically, thereby linking together the human and natural dimensions.

Furthermore, trees give birth to associations between different countries, namely England and Libya:

He was well used to high eucalyptus with their dusty dry rustling leaves and flaking barks, trees that seemed to live on the edge of death from thirst. He loved the high palms leaning into deep blue skies. But London’s trees were rich and grand like the Queen, as permanent as the postboxes (McEwan 2022, 36).

Roland – the main character – compares the luxuriant English trees with the ones in Libya, where his father was posted while he served in the army. Not coincidentally, trees are often mentioned when Roland is staying at his boarding school, located in Suffolk. In McEwan’s words, Suffolk is «a giant garden» (McEwan 2006, 105). More recently, the image of the garden as an expression of the unbalanced relationship between humans and nature has been picked up again by the expression ‘Anthropocene garden’:

a residual and resilient nature to show to schoolkids and with which they can experiment, something to protect and set free before it gets strangled by the smog and reinforced concrete of the city’s embrace (Iovino and Thiel 2019, 3).

In contrast to this concept, McEwan considers the landscape of Suffolk as an incredible achievement, inasmuch as food production and biodiversity coexisted alongside each other:

It seemed like a balance had been reached by accident, with the maximum amount of wildlife in an area that's growing food [...] Yes, man-made landscapes can be truly beautiful (McEwan 2006, 106).

The image of this splendid balance brings us back to a quote from *Enduring Love* which Garrard highlighted when discussing *Solar* (2009, 707): «This is our mammalian conflict – what to give to the others, and what to keep for yourself» (McEwan 2004, 14) – where ‘others’ could and should also mean nature and other creatures, in the Anthropocene.

A thought-provoking and symbolical scene in the novel seems to suggest how this balance between humans and other creatures is to be achieved through the recognition of a tree. As a young boy, Roland is short-sighted but nonetheless refuses to tell his parents out of unwarranted and childish fear of their disappointment. As his short-sightedness worsens, things become blurred to Roland's eyes: «Every horse chestnut was a cliff of undifferentiated green» (McEwan 2022, 36). The fact that he is unable to distinguish trees and indiscriminately reduces them to an undifferentiated mass of green might literally hint at the concept of ‘plant blindness’, namely «the inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment» (Ro 2019). The concept of ‘tree blindness’ addresses the passage in question more specifically. Drawing on his own experience of tree blindness, Popkin stated that, after an ecology course in which he was taught to distinguish trees species, «Suddenly the largest, most conspicuous living beings in my environment were no longer strangers» (2017).

Lessons seems to make reference to this very experience of awakening when Roland's short-sightedness is recognised by the doctor at his boarding school and he is finally made to wear glasses. Interestingly and perhaps not coincidentally, the first element he decides to experimentally gaze at is an oak tree which provides him with an epiphany, which is justly termed

A revelation. He called out in joy. The great shape of the oak leaped as though through an Alice in Wonderland mirror. Suddenly every separate

leaf of the many thousands that covered the tree resolved into a brilliant singularity of colour and form and glittering movement in the slight breeze, each leaf a subtle variation of red, orange, gold, pale yellow and lingering green against a deep blue sky (McEwan 2022, 60).

This passage shows a poignant moment of awareness of the arboreal otherness and its awe-inspiring variety, as the giant oak steps out of undifferentiation and is progressively zoomed in on. At the same time, Roland perceives affinity between the oak and other sentient beings:

The oak was an intricate giant being that *knew* itself. It was performing for him, showing off, delighting in its own existence (McEwan 2022, 60, italics in the original).

This two-pronged representation of a tree – simultaneously different and familiar – might even hark back to the symbolism of the tree in the evolutionary representation of species. Unlike the image of the Aristotelian ladder used to order and systematise nature in evolutionary theories, the tree of life «turns the ladder’s stagelike image of life into a genealogical one» (Hejnl 2017, G90) – thus highlighting common roots. Like the image of the ladder, eventually the use of the biological tree proved an ineffective and incomplete way of representing genealogies. Still, the trees were a «kinship metaphor» that «posited that organisms were both historical and related to each other» (Hejnl 2017, G90). Thus, they alluded to the similarities between different branches, while visually showing their differences. In this perspective, the biological tree was a step forward if compared to the rigid ladder-like structure that exuded criteria of superiority. Back to Roland, he is now alerted to the variety and uniqueness of a being that before appeared just a trunk with a plain green halo. It could even be that McEwan is inviting his readers to open their eyes to the richness of nature, avoid tree blindness and acknowledge arboreal otherness without losing sight of its affinities with the other creatures on earth. If a

balance is to be found between humans and nature, this is certainly the first step, if not the panacea.

As a matter of fact, no tree blindness is present in the novel. The author is extremely precise when it comes to trees; he mentions plane trees, eucalyptus trees, pine trees, chestnuts, fir trees, an oak tree, a Victoria plum tree and many others. Even a small smog-choking robinia tree is tenderly paid attention to and portrayed in its resilience – an arboreal never-ending attempt to reach an ever-disruptive balance with the surrounding urban environment:

By the front gate was a spindly sapling tied to a bamboo stick. It was a robinia tree. The garden-centre assistant told him [Roland] it would flourish in traffic fumes (McEwan 2022, 22).

Indeed, after numerous pages we are informed that the tree reaches the height of twenty feet and keeps surviving against the odds. Incidentally, the description of the robinia tree is reminiscent of the poem “Municipal Gum” by Oodgeroo Noonuccal; also in that case, the condition of the municipal gumtree «Set in [...] black grass of bitumen» (n.d.) is bemoaned. Although the robinia tree shares the same dire situation as the gumtree, it should be pointed out that it is represented as coping better, almost with admiration on the author’s part.

The growth of the sapling tree which develops alongside Roland’s life might even signal an alternative way of marking the passing of time and be an interesting foregrounding of the concept of «Tree Time» (Roy 2021, 4). The term was coined by Sumana Roy in *How I Became a Tree*; the author noticed that the life of a tree is regulated by a different conception of time: «The trees [...] would grow at their natural pace. It was impossible to rush plants, to tell a tree to ‘hurry up’» (2021, 3). In addition, Clark admitted that the tree is a temporal entity that grows and develops over a

long period of time (2013, 11). Juxtaposed to Roland's everyday life, the tree and its alternative growth rhythms could present readers with a different view of time from the human-centred one represented by the novel, which follows Roland's whole life. Further differences may emerge from the comparison between Roland's and the tree's lives. While Roland's days after the boarding school pass by with few achievements on his part, the sapling robinia tree manages to grow in spite of the unfavourable circumstances it finds itself in and reach a balance which Roland struggles to achieve.

Interestingly, trees are revealing as far as Roland's relationship with different women is concerned, namely Alissa, Miriam and Daphne. As for Alissa and Miriam – Roland's first wife and piano teacher, respectively – trees bring to the fore an intrinsic sense of imbalance which characterises their lives and their relationship with Roland. In Alissa's case, imbalance derives from her rigid life choices, which relegate her to isolation. As a matter of fact, the woman suddenly abandons her husband and little child to pursue her dream of becoming a successful writer, the «greatest novelist of her generation» (McEwan 2022, 159). Once grown up, Lawrence – Roland and Alissa's son – finds out his mother's address in Germany and decides to go to see her. Back from Germany, he relates to Roland the despicable and harsh way she treated him. When recounting his arrival to the village Alissa lives in, Lawrence recalls her neighbourhood and remarks that the houses «were set well apart and he was struck by an absence of trees. Not the sort of place a famous writer would choose to live in» (McEwan 2022, 321).

In the novel, Alissa made radical choices, in that she not only left Roland and her son, but she also devoted herself exclusively to her talent, thereby condemning herself to loneliness and categorically refusing to keep a bond even with Lawrence. The source of imbalance is not her decision to realise her dream, but rather the lack of human contact which she imposed

on herself: in her view, keeping in touch with Lawrence would mean renouncing her art. Since the lack of trees is emphasised and curiously remarked upon, it could be that their unusual absence exemplifies the inner imbalance in her life, as if they embodied a stability that is lacking, but more importantly connections. It is now well known that trees are not isolated entities; they communicate with each other about dangers and protecting their young, as Amitav Ghosh pointed out (2019). To further substantiate this hypothesis, it should be underlined that for Roland trees seem to be related to a subjective balance. Indeed, in his garden there is a «long-dead apple tree he still had not cut down. He was used to it being there» (McEwan 2022, 324). It is as if the dead tree transcended its role of physical landmark and took on the traits of a small certainty, however arbitrary.

A similar sense of imbalance is conveyed by another tree, this time in reference to Miriam Cornell, Roland's piano teacher at the boarding school. It can be said that Roland's romantic relationship with her was not characterised by balance of any kind. Aside from the fact that at the time he was fourteen years old and she twenty-five, their relationship completely absorbed Roland and made him utterly oblivious to his school duties, which eventually made it impossible for him to attend university due to his poor grades. Decades later, Roland finds out that Miriam gives piano lessons at her home, not far from his house. He decides to book a lesson under a false name so as to see her after all those years. When he draws near the door of her house, he notices that «A sapling cherry was the centrepiece of a wide rectangle of closely mown grass. It may have been artificial lawn» (McEwan 2022, 344). In this case, the sight of the natural tree is paired with an evidently artificial element, the fake grass. Unlike Alissa's, Miriam's house is not devoid of trees; yet, the only one that is described is captured in an image that might convey a feeling of precarious balance due to the surrounding fake grass – an environment that is not particularly

congenial for a tree to be placed in. In a similar vein, Miriam's life ostensibly seems to be balanced, insomuch as she is still teaching and hardly anything has changed in her brisk manners. Nonetheless, Roland's unexpected visit could lay bare an intrinsic undercutting imbalance, exemplified by her pangs of guilt for the abuse she committed decades before and the pain she felt when Roland left her. Precisely like the cherry tree surrounded by fake grass, her apparently unchanged life rests on events that are rooted in her youth but still haunt her and can undermine her serenity.

Balance is present in the relationship between Daphne – Roland's second wife – and trees, which becomes almost metamorphic. Daphne is an important presence in Roland's life, in that she had been his close friend for decades before starting a romantic relationship with him and eventually marrying him. In her quiet and supportive presence, she may be redolent of the aforementioned apple tree to whose constant presence Roland is accustomed. Unfortunately, Daphne dies of cancer, leaving Roland distraught by having witnessed her painful and inevitable decline. He informs readers that «Five years ago, he had planted an apple tree on Daphne's lawn to make up for the one he chopped down in Clapham. It had not grown much but it was alive» (McEwan 2022, 438).

Given the previous association between Daphne and the apple tree in terms of quiet presence, it seems reasonable to surmise that Daphne's death and Roland's decision to plant another apple tree are connected. In a way, it is as if he were making up for her absence by planting an arboreal life anew. If one considers that the woman was called Daphne, the arboreal transformation further takes shape and does not seem coincidental. Unlike Daphne and Apollo's myth, though, this time the transformation is prompted by Roland, rather than Daphne. In line with Concilio's reflections on arboreal transformations as a «way to cry out one's trauma» (2021b, 34), his association of the woman with the tree may be a way for him to escape suffering through the alleviation deriving from the

knowledge that something of Daphne will remain in his memory. This contemporary example of mythologisation of loss could be even more interesting as a way of rethinking myth and applying it to current times, which not only shows the enduring power of myths in the human imagination, but more importantly affirms the connection between human and nonhuman beings in the Anthropocene.

The conflation between a loved one and trees finds full expression in Seamus Heaney's poetry – which in *Lessons* is interestingly evoked more than once: «Lowell was [...] the last poet writing in English to speak for a nation until Seamus Heaney was established» (McEwan 2022, 362). The poet wrote a sonnet sequence, “Clearances”, which he dedicated to his deceased mother. In the eighth sonnet, his mother's death is associated with the felling of an old chestnut tree:

I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above the wallflowers.
The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high
I heard the hatchet's differentiated
Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
And collapse of what luxuriated
Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all
(Heaney 2006, 34).

According to Adames, the soul of the tree is also the soul of his mother (1997, 285), in a human-arboreal transformation and complementarity. Heaney's mother is not the only woman who is connected to the chestnut, though. Indeed, the poet recounted that the tree was planted by an aunt soon after his birth:

And over the years I came to identify my own life with the life of the chestnut tree. This was because everybody remembered and constantly repeated the fact that it had been planted the year I was born; also because

I was something of a favourite with my green-fingered aunt, so her affection came to be symbolized in the tree (Heaney 1987, 371).

This aunt might be the same he mentioned, during an interview, in relation to his poem “Mossbawn Sunlight” and his sense of safety: «When I imagined [...] what my security was like I imagined myself in the cradle [...] in that kitchen where my aunt who lived with us was baking bread» (Heaney 2014).

In *Lessons*, too, Daphne’s absence is emphasised by the presence of the apple tree, which compensates her loss, thus being a way to re-establish emotional balance. Although the chestnut was felled by the new owners of the house after Heaney’s family moved (Heaney 1987, 371), it did not disappear from his memory but rather became «Utterly empty, utterly a source» (Heaney 2006, 34) and a «luminous emptiness» (Heaney 1987, 371) that opened up an «imagined realm» for him (Heaney 1987, 372). In a similar vein, trees are metaphorically used by Roland to describe a window on the past created by Alissa’s abandonment: «Alissa’s vanishing had left open ground to the past. Like trees felled to clear the view» (McEwan 2022, 210): the reference to felled trees might evoke the «Clearances that suddenly stood open» (Heaney 2006, 33) in Heaney’s sonnet sequence.

3. From Verbal to a Visual Recollection of the Past: The Covid-19 Pandemic as a Portal

people everywhere have always imagined themselves to be heading towards apocalypse... that’s because every generation likes to think that it’s special and everything will come to an end when they’re gone.

(Ghosh 2020, 137)

The temptation of the old, born into the middle of things, was to see in their deaths the end of everything, the end of times.

(McEwan 2022, 475)

Referring to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the Indian author Arundhati Roy stated that «Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next» (2020, 191).

Since Amitav Ghosh considers the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change events as «cognate phenomena» (2021, 133), analysing how Roland comes to terms with the lockdown and the restrictions is intriguing not only to offer insights into the literary representation of a health crisis that is still fresh in our memory, but also to explore how natural catastrophes can lead to a rewiring of memory and view of one's past, in keeping with Roy's thoughts. This section will argue that the pandemic triggers a shift of perception from the written to the visual sphere in Roland's mind, which could be conducive to reflections on the representation of memory and the past during natural catastrophes in the Anthropocene. Furthermore, showing the changes triggered by the pandemic and the ways of reckoning with it may shed light on similar transformations that could lead humans to successfully face climate change.

In the novel, the arrival of the pandemic not only entails lockdowns, face-masks and isolation, but it also coincides with Roland's decision to abandon a lifelong habit. As a matter of fact, for most of his life he had been used to keeping journals, so that he had filled many of them year after year until he had forty of them. During the first lockdown, Roland re-reads his journals and notices that the last entry is an account of some emails he had exchanged with Alissa: «There, he had decided, it must end» (McEwan 2022, 472). Therefore, he takes the dramatic decision to burn his forty journals and feed «the poorly rendered second half of his life to the flames, one volume at a time» (McEwan 2022, 473).

This transformation is only apparent, though. What changes is not really his desire to keep track of events and impressions, but rather the way he does so. Indeed, Roland rejects verbal accounts in favour of visual

annotations. Before dying, Daphne had started to select photos and annotate their backs with dates and names of the people figuring in them, so that her children would be able to know who they were. Inspired by Daphne, before burning his journals Roland decides to do something similar: «one of his lockdown projects was to annotate and arrange the random heaps by date» (McEwan 2022, 435). Although he lacks Daphne's discipline and doubts he will be able to finish, during the first lockdown Roland marks fifty-eight photos and then goes on until he annotates a hundred of them:

Occasionally he went into the front room, picked up a photograph off the floor, gazed into it and faded into a reverie. When he came out of it he jotted down a few lines on the reverse (McEwan 2022, 436).

This favoured reliance on sight might dovetail with negative connotations with which words are imbued during the pandemic. As a matter of fact, Roland informs readers that

everyone [...] who was interested had already learned the pandemic lexicon, 'R', the fomites, viral loads, the furin cleavage site, heterologous prime-boost trials, vaccine escape variants (McEwan 2022, 472).

Although knowledge of specific terms was paramount for people to keep informed about the pandemic, those words kept pointing to the danger surrounding them and changing their lifestyles.

The gradual desertion of words in favour of other means of expression is not new and was already implicitly remarked upon by the poet Louis MacNeice, who addressed future generations in "To Posterity" with these words: «we wonder if you / Will find in flowers and fruit the same colour and taste / They held for us for whom they were framed in words» (2007, 125). As MacNeice suggests, shrift was the major means of expression for most of human history. Therefore, Roland's change of means of

recording is extremely interesting and might be a way of coping with natural catastrophes that dovetails with recent ecocritical observations. The reliance on sight is a paramount theme for both blue and green ecocriticism.¹ As far as blue ecocriticism is concerned, Dobrin underlined ocular-centrism in representations of the ocean and stated that the renowned photo of the plastic bag captured at the bottom of the Mariana Trench raised awareness of plastic pollution and the totality of human impact on parts of the planet that were deemed inaccessible (2021, 170; 138). Discussing climate change in the works of Amitav Ghosh, Concilio reflected on images and the fact that they may prove an ally to represent the climate crisis:

So a new language must be sought: perhaps a language made of images, no longer a language based on logocentrism. That is why cinema and tv are more successful in dealing with climate change than fiction (2017, 270).

For Roland, the catastrophe of the pandemic is inextricably interwoven with the elements of his past and his memories. He himself states that «The virus had brought his past to life» (McEwan 2022, 469-470). In line with this, we cannot miss the fact that he comes to terms with two painful problems in his life precisely while Covid-19 runs rampant in the whole world. Indeed, he confesses that

Confined to quarters by a pandemic, grounded by fear of dying on a ventilator while fighting for air, sitting through the winter's late afternoons in the rocking chair [...] he thought back often to his confrontation with Miriam Cornell in her Balham house, in her bare music room (McEwan 2022, 438).

¹ While green ecocriticism is a field of study which mainly examines terrestrial landscapes and land-based viewpoints, blue ecocriticism explores bodies of water, water-related perspectives and human approaches towards water. To be more precise, in Sidney Dobrin's words blue ecocriticism encompasses «critical, ethical, cultural, and political positions that emerge from oceanic or aquatic frames of mind rather than traditional land-based approaches» (2021, i).

He thinks back to the encounter which sealed his decision not to denounce Miriam for abusing him, because it was clear to him that that would only bind him more firmly to her. As for Alissa, she unexpectedly invites him to join her in Germany through the intercession of her ex-publisher. On a plane where he risks getting infected with Covid, Roland reaches Germany and the two amiably meet again at her home and go through their past, probably for the last time: Alissa has terminal lung cancer and will die very soon. On these two occasions taking place during the pandemic, he is forced to face his memories, which could lead to their re-laboration through a visual, rather than verbal, frame.

It should be stated that the shift from the written to the visual dimension might correspond to the materialisation of Roland's fragments of memory, made vivid and material by the photos he collects. By Roland's own admission, he «held more in memory and reflection than he could have found in his journals» (McEwan 2022, 474). Most importantly, the decision to mark photos seems to be a clear way of leaving a trace for posterity.

In Roland's desire to leave a trace for future generations and convey his past to others, McEwan's fiction easily pairs with reality and, to be more precise, with a project that involved writing workshops where texts written by elderly people from Turin and Montreal during and about the pandemic were collected, shared and published, together with their 'memory maps'. As Concilio underlines, the aim of the project was to let

elderly people feel important for the rest of the community or the entire society, to turn them into protagonists (after a period of isolation) at least of their stories, in order for them to leave a tangible trace of their testimony to future generations (2021a, viii).

While Roland decides to mark the photographs with names and dates, he decides to burn his notebooks precisely because he does not want Lawrence to go through them. On the contrary, written texts were the

means through which the elderly people involved in the initiative voiced their feelings, impressions and experience of a pandemic that relegated them to their homes. Regardless of the form, the participants clearly share with Roland the desire to leave a trace; Canton confessed that their hesitations to participate, such as conviction of incapacity or inability to write, were soon calmed when she told them that through the project they would be able to leave something for their children and grandchildren (Canton 2021, x). It is exactly this longing to leave an inheritance of human feelings to other generations that exudes from many pieces of their writing, especially a moving letter written by a 75-year-old man from Montreal entitled ‘A Gift of Light in Covid Times’ and addressed to his newborn granddaughter. The letter ends with the following words:

I hope that this letter will be enough for you to form your own “memory” of these COVID-19 Times. It was not “the best of times”. It was not “the worst of times”. But for me, it was a very precious time. It was the tiniest instant of time lived with you, Lucia (Angelo 2021, 40).

These tender words powerfully stand in opposition to the epigraphs introducing this section, which place emphasis on an egotistic and petty desire of older generations for the world to end with them. Handing down knowledge and transmitting feelings – both in literature and reality – older generations rather share impressions and recollections of a natural catastrophe which may help the young to cope with similar occurrences, be they health-related or environmental, and thus secure a safe future and the continuity of humankind.

4. Conclusion

Filipova talked about relational spacetime, namely a dimension where space and time mingle together and that enables an understanding of memories with respect to place (2022, 14). The term cannot but come to

mind when considering trees – firmly rooted in a place – and the pandemic – which seems to stretch over considerable distances due to its global reach and fleeting intangibility. Yet, both natural elements have firm connections with memory for Roland and constitute an interesting representation of landscape. In *Lessons*, the trees and the Covid-19 pandemic are natural phenomena that become enmeshed with the main character's life. Trees silently punctuate the narration and could be marginal protagonists in some thought-provoking scenes, which shows McEwan's enduring fondness for them, further testified by the trip he took to Tasmania with the aim of seeing old-growth trees which were about to be logged (Steger and Adelaide 2008). More impactful in its everyday consequences, the pandemic understandably features at the end of the novel, when Roland is an elderly person with a beloved grandchild.

In several circumstances, trees symbolically represent balance, whereas the pandemic shatters a long-lasting balance of habits and certainties but enables a perceptive transformation that bends towards the visual sphere and a visual recollection of one's past. The analysis of these two elements in McEwan's latest novel offers new insights into ecocritical traits in his works and could pave the way for a deeper understanding of the implications of *Lessons*, in which landscape plays a key role and allows readers to access new layers of meaning. Furthermore, this exploration could broaden its horizons and offer new perspectives on McEwan's oeuvre; as a matter of fact, the features of balance and loss of balance could be traced and examined in other novels by him, such as *Enduring Love*, *Saturday* and *Machines Like Me*.

In *Lessons*, the representation of landscape is imbued with ecocritical traits, not only because of the manifold meanings attached to trees, but also for the prominence assigned to the visual sphere in the last part of Roland's life. The representation of two natural phenomena in terms of balance and loss of balance is in line with the generative contradictions of

ecocriticism, which involves the dialogic between bioregionalism and cosmopolitanism, local and global, blue ecology and green ecology.² At a higher level, it shows that ecocritical concerns are present in contemporary British fiction. Interestingly, McEwan's novel chooses to read environmental themes through the viewpoint of a man everyone could be, thus making Roland an 'Everyman' of the Anthropocene.

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²The expression 'generative contradictions' is a personal reflection spurred by Iovino's *Ecologia letteraria* and Dobrin's *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*. Iovino's discussion of bioregionalism and cosmopolitanism – two perspectives on solutions to environmental crisis – in relation to the theme of identity are particularly interesting. While bioregionalism is linked to a sense of identity towards places and underlines the centrality of the sense of place, cosmopolitanism transcends the local dimension and favours an identity springing from the dialectic between local and global, since the sense of place implies a sense of global space (Iovino 2020, 54-56). As for the dialogic between green and blue ecocriticism, Dobrin explains their relationship by highlighting that the latter strives to «unearth ecocriticism» and «free it from its moorings» (2021, 8). Further contextualising this branch within ecocriticism, Dobrin maintains that blue ecocriticism is not material ecocriticism «dressed in blue», although the latter is fundamental for the existence of the former (2021, 151).

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