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Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Brian Finney

For a long time Ian McEwan found himself trapped in the role of a sensational writer caricatured by the British press as Ian Macabre and the Clapham Shocker. The stories he wrote at the beginning of his writing career — *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets, and Other Stories* (1978) — as well as his first two novels — *The Cement Garden* (1979) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) — described in clinical detail the sexual and social aberrations of adolescent mentalities whose voices then offered him “a certain kind of rhetorical freedom.”¹ It is extraordinary to consider the distance McEwan has traveled in the intervening quarter century. *Atonement* (2001) employs the narrative voice of a 77-year-old English woman and focuses on a crucial period of British history between 1935 and 1940. Instead of the closed claustrophobic inner world of his early protagonists, *Atonement* ranges from an upper-class household in pre-War southern England, to the retreat of the British army to Dunkirk, to a wartime London hospital, ending with a coda in 1999.

McEwan first effected his escape from an exclusively subjective narrative perspective in his third novel, *The Child in Time* (1987), in which the lost child of the title represents an outer as well as inner world. This novel came after a gap of six years during which McEwan had turned to drama as his principal outlet. In particular, *The Imitation Game* (1981), a play for television, *Or Shall We Die?* (1983), an oratorio, and *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983), a film, reveal his awakened interest in the world of politics and social action, in the nuclear threat, environmental pollution, and the oppression of women. As he confessed to John Haffenden in 1983, “England under Mrs. Thatcher leaves me with a nasty taste.”² Since he returned to fiction in 1987, every subsequent novel has had not just a private and psychological component, but a public and historical one as well: the government commission on which Stephen sits in *The Child in Time* (1987), the Cold War in *The Innocent* (1990), the ongoing influence of racism and fascism in *Black Dogs* (1992), the short-sightedness

1. Ian McEwan, “Adolescence and After,” interview with Christopher Ricks, *Listener*, 12 April 1979, p. 526.

2. Ian McEwan, interview. In John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (Methuen, 1985), p. 187.

of the exclusively scientific, rational mentality in *Enduring Love* (1997), and the corrupt world of political journalism and publicly commissioned art in *Amsterdam* (1998).

At the same time certain continuities persist in his work. He remains fascinated with the forbidden and the taboo, which he continues to describe with non-judgmental precision. Further, he entices the reader into sharing his voyeuristic obsession with this material. As Kiernan Ryan observes, "The writer's and the reader's deepest pleasure consists less in their sense of ironic superiority to the benighted narrator than in the vicarious delight of identification, which is rooted in finding the scandalous secretly seductive and its apologists convincing."³ McEwan has explained his fascination with evil or illicit behavior by arguing that this "projected sense of evil in [his] stories . . . is of the kind whereby one tries to imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good."⁴ *Atonement* still embodies this premise, but it employs a degree of self-consciousness which far exceeds that found in any of his previous novels.

I want to concentrate on the self-conscious use of narrative in *Atonement*, as this aspect has been seized on by a minority of reviewers to criticize what they understand to be an essentially realist novel that at the end inappropriately resorts to a modish self-referentiality. But I read this novel as a work of fiction that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction. When we first meet its female protagonist, Briony, at the age of thirteen, she is already committed to the life of a writer. She ruthlessly subordinates everything the world throws at her to her need to make it serve the demands of her own world of fiction. Brought up on a diet of imaginative literature, she is too young to understand the dangers that can ensue from modeling one's conduct on such an artificial world. When she acts out her confusion between life and the life of fiction, the consequences are tragic and irreversible — except in the realm of fiction. She attempts to use fiction to correct the errors that fiction caused her to commit. But the chasm that separates the world of the living from that of fictional invention ensures that at best her fictional reparation will act as an attempt at atoning for a past that she cannot reverse. *Atonement*, then, is concerned with the dangers of entering a fictional world and the compensations and limitations which that world can offer its readers and writers.

Atonement has been greeted by most book critics as a masterpiece that unexpectedly stayed at the top of the best seller lists of the *New York Times* for many weeks. Almost all American reviewers of the book have given it the highest praise possible.⁵ The few reviewers (largely British) who have voiced major reservations about the novel invariably focus on the concluding section in which it is revealed that Briony, who became a successful novelist, has been the author of the entire novel and has taken a novelist's license to alter the facts to suit her artistic purposes. Despite the description Briony gives in Part Three of Robbie and Cecilia living together after his return from Dunkirk, we learn on the penultimate page that Robbie died before he could be evacuated from Dunkirk and

3. Kiernan Ryan, "Sex, Violence and Complicity: Martin Amis and Ian McEwan." In Rod Mengham, ed. *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970* (Polity, 1999), p. 207.

4. Ian McEwan, "Points of Departure," interview with Ian Hamilton, *New Review*, 5, no. 2 (1978), p. 20.

5. Jonathan Yardley's response in the *Washington Post* can be taken as representative: *Atonement* "is the finest book yet by a writer of prodigious skills . . . there is no one now writing fiction in the English language who surpasses McEwan, and perhaps no one who equals him" ("The Wounds of Love," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Washington Post*, 17 March 2002, p. BW01). This is an extraordinary claim that is echoed by other reviewers' consistent references to *Atonement* as "masterly" (Henry Hitchings, "Once Upon a Time Before the War," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Financial Times* 15 September 2001, Books p. 4), "magisterial" (Gail Caldwell, review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Boston Globe*, 17 March 2002, p. E3), "the Great British Novel" (Daphne Merkin, "The End of Innocence," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 10 March 2002, p. R3), a "flat-out brilliant new novel" (David Wiegand, "Stumbling into Fate," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 March 2002, Sunday Review, p. 1), and so on.

that Cecilia was killed by a bomb three months later. Lulled by the long Part One (which occupies half the book) into the security associated with the classic realist novel, this minority of reviewers dismisses the final coda as an instance of postmodern gimmickry.⁶

In other words, all these reviewers read Part One as a strictly realist narration and fault McEwan for failing to live up to the realist expectations that he has aroused during the first half of the book. But this entails a radical misreading of the novel. The novel's epigraph, a quotation from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, serves as both a warning and a guide to how the reader should view this narrative. Austen's protagonist, Catherine Morland, who is reprimanded by Henry Tilney in the quoted extract for her naïve response to events around her, is the victim of reading fiction — the Gothic romances of her day — and failing to make a distinction between the fictive and the real. McEwan ironically has the Tallis country house renamed Tilney's Hotel as a sly tribute to this fictional precedent. McEwan sees *Northanger Abbey* as a novel "about someone's wild imagination causing havoc to people around them."⁷ Tilney's question to Catherine ("what ideas have you been admitting?") can be applied equally fittingly to Briony, whose equally over-active imagination leads her to tell the crucial lie. The difference is that Briony (who we are told at the end of section 3 of Part One will become a successful novelist over the next fifty years) sets out to use fiction to attempt to make amends for the damage fiction has induced her to cause in the first place.

The book proper opens with an ironic description, not of Briony, but of the play she has written at the age of thirteen. It is a crude melodrama with which Briony quickly becomes disenchanted. The point is that we meet an instance of Briony's literary imagination before we get to know her as a personality. She is an author first and a girl on the verge of entering adolescence second. The literary self-consciousness about which these British reviewers complain is present from the opening page of the novel and serves throughout the book to undermine the classic realist mode of narration. McEwan has said, "I sometimes feel that every sentence contains a ghostly commentary on its own processes."⁸

Catherine Belsey refers to Emile Benveniste's distinction between "discourse" and "histoire" in *Problems in General Linguistics*⁹ to illustrate how in classic realist fiction "the events seem to

6. "[A] frustrating ending," concludes Caroline Moore in the *Sunday Telegraph* ("A Crime of the Imagination," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Sunday Telegraph*, 16 September 2001, p. 12). Fellow novelist Anita Brookner wrote in the *Spectator* that she found the ending too lenient: "Elderly and celebrated, Briony expunges the guilt from which she has always suffered, whereas she might have fared better to have told the truth in the first instance . . ." ("A Morbid Procedure," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Spectator*, 15 September 2001, p. 44). Writing for the *Weekly Standard*, Margaret Boerner is more strident: "In a kind of lunacy that one supposes he imagined was like Ionesco's absurdity, McEwan destroys the structure he has set up and tells us it was all fiction. But we *knew* it was fiction" ("A Bad End," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Weekly Standard*, 7, no. 32 [2002], p. 43). It is that supposition about the nature of the structure that betrays the source of most of this criticism. Writing for *The Times*, Jason Cowley is most explicit about what kind of structure these dissenting voices take it to be: ". . . too many of the dilemmas and tensions that are established in the first half of the book are left unresolved. We are told briefly about Turner's prison years and about Cecilia's break from her family, but never shown them" ("Telling Tale," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Times* (London), 22 September 2001, Play, p. 17).

7. Omer Ali, "The Ages of Sin," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, and interview, *Time Out*, 26 September 2001, p. 59.

8. Ian McEwan, "The Art of Fiction CLXXIII," interview with Adam Begley, *Paris Review* 162 (2002), p. 59.

9. To distinguish the narrating subject from the subject of narration, Emile Benveniste posited in *Problems in General Linguistics* that narration falls along "two planes of utterance." When narration calls attention to its act of narration as an "utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer," with the speaker attempting to influence the hearer in some fashion, it functions as *discourse*. When, however, events that took place at a certain moment of time are presented without any intervention of the speaker, the narration functions as *histoire*. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Elizabeth Meek (University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 206–09.

narrate themselves,"¹⁰ whereas discourse assumes a speaker and a hearer. Accordingly, the "authority of [the classic realist novel's] impersonal narration springs from its effacement of its own status as discourse."¹¹ From his earliest collections of short stories Ian McEwan has consistently drawn attention to the status of his fiction as discourse by alluding to or parodying traditional literary genres, thereby forcing the reader to take note of the presence of a self-conscious narrator. He has described each of his early stories as "a kind of pastiche of a certain style . . . its origins were always slightly parodic."¹² Similarly, most of his novels, according to him, allude in some way to existing genres — *The Cement Garden* is "an urban *Lord of the Flies*,"¹³ *The Innocent* added to and subverted the spy genre;¹⁴ *The Comfort of Strangers* draws on the sinister setting of Venice established by Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*; his play for television, *The Imitation Game*, was indebted to Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*,¹⁵ and "*Amsterdam* is an Evelyn Waugh tribute novel," McEwan told Ambrose Clancy.¹⁶

So it is no surprise to learn that McEwan modeled *Atonement* on the work of "Elizabeth Bowen of *The Heat of the Day*, with a dash of Rosamund Lehmann of *Dusty Answer*, and, in [Briony's] first attempts, a sprinkling of Virginia Woolf."¹⁷ At least one reviewer has seen a parallel between *Atonement* and Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), "with its restive teenage girl in the big house."¹⁸ Elizabeth Bowen also directly influences the form the final novel takes. After reading Briony's first neo-modernist attempt to give fictional shape to the events of 1935 submitted to Cyril Connolly at *Horizon*, Bowen reacts by first thinking the prose "too full, too cloying," but with "redeeming shades of *Dusty Answer*" (Rosamund Lehmann's first novel of 1927 about a young girl's growing up). Cyril Connolly voices Bowen's final criticism of the modernist obsession with consciousness at the expense of plot by reminding Briony that even her most sophisticated readers "retain a child-like desire to be told a story."¹⁹ Briony's rewritten Part One owes its mounting tension to Bowen's criticism passed on to Cyril Connolly and the example offered by Bowen's earlier novel.

Virginia Woolf acts as both a positive and a negative influence on this novel. McEwan says that in *Atonement* he "was wanting to enter into a conversation with modernism and its dereliction of duty in relation to what I have Cyril Connolly call the backbone of the plot."²⁰ Comparisons

10. Benveniste, p. 208.

11. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (Methuen, 1980), p. 72.

12. Ian McEwan, interview with Ian Hamilton, p. 17.

13. Amanda Smith, "Ian McEwan," *Publishers Weekly* 232, no.11 (1987), p. 69.

14. Ian McEwan, "Blood and Aphorisms," interview with Adam Hunt, *Ariel* 21 (1996), p. 47.

15. Haffenden, p. 175.

16. Ian McEwan, "He Triumphed Outside of the Mainstream," interview with Ambrose Clancy, *Los Angeles Times*, 17 May 1999, p. E4.

17. Ian McEwan, interview with Adam Begley, p. 56. In his interview with Adam Begley, pp. 56–7, McEwan said that in an earlier draft he wrote a biographical note for inclusion at the end of the book, which read as follows: "About the author: Briony Tallis was born in Surrey in 1922, the daughter of a senior civil servant. She attended Roedean School, and in 1940 trained to become a nurse. Her wartime nursing experience provided the material for her first novel, *Alice Riding*, published in 1948 and winner of that year's Fitzrovia Prize for fiction. Her second novel, *Soho Solstice*, was praised by Elizabeth Bowen as 'a dark gem of psychological acuity,' while Graham Greene described her as 'one of the more interesting talents to have emerged since the war.' Other novels and short-story collections consolidated her reputation during the fifties. In 1962 she published *A Barn in Steventon*, a study of domestic theatricals in Jane Austen's childhood. Tallis's sixth novel, *The Ducking Stool*, was a best-seller in 1965 and was made into a successful film starring Julie Christie. Thereafter, Briony Tallis's reputation went into a decline, until the Virago imprint made her work available to a younger generation in the late seventies. She died in July 2001."

18. Hermione Lee, review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Observer* (London), 23 Sep. 2001, Review, p. 16.

19. Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (Doubleday, 2002), p. 296. All subsequent references are to this edition.

20. Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*. KCRW, Santa Monica, California, 11 July 2002.

have been made between this book and Woolf's *Between the Acts*, "in which a group of well-bred characters gathers for a family pageant against the backdrop of impending war,"²¹ and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, whose dinner scene is parodied by "a disastrous roast meat dinner fed to sweltering guests" in Part One.²² As was the case with his use of Bowen, McEwan offers his reader internal evidence of Woolf's influence (this time deleterious) on the young Briony's narrative style when she is pictured reading Woolf's *The Waves* between nursing shifts. Under Woolf's modernist spell, Briony decides that characters "were quaint devices that belonged to the nineteenth century" and that plots "too were like rusted machinery whose wheels would no longer turn" (p. 265). McEwan has said that in Briony's first piece of fiction that reflects this modernist bias, "Two Figures by a Fountain," "she is burying her conscience beneath her stream of consciousness,"²³ indicating how for him the ideology of modernism (especially its prioritization of stylistic innovation) has hidden moral consequences. Compare Briony's critique of her early draft of the novel: "Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream — three streams — of consciousness?" (p. 302). Style, she discovers, really does have ethical implications.

In interviews, McEwan has cited at least two other literary connections. Talking of his school-days, he recalled "reading [L. P. Hartley's] *The Go-Between* and being very struck by that novel of a child moving between the two lovers carrying notes back and forth. This novel [*Atonement*] owes something to that."²⁴ Other similarities between the two books include the hot summer setting, the dividing issue of class, and the confusion of a child confronted with adult sexuality. In another interview, McEwan talked about his use of an adult narrative voice in *Atonement*: "I didn't want to write about a child's mind with the limitations of a child's vocabulary or a child's point of view. I wanted to be more like [Henry] James in *What Maisie Knew*: to use the full resources of an adult mentality remembering herself."²⁵ In other words, McEwan wanted to give as much prominence to the discourse as to the *histoire* or story. Like Leo in *The Go-Between* and Maisie in *What Maisie Knew*, Briony is a child who becomes involved in an adult sexual relationship that she is ill equipped to understand. The narrator, however, has all the experience and understanding of a lifetime. By referring within the text to an earlier literary genre or movement, McEwan draws attention to a continuous tension between the narrative and its narration.

McEwan's enduring concern with the act of narration in *Atonement* surfaces equally in his frequent use of intertextuality.²⁶ Robbie, for instance, quotes Malvolio's lines from *Twelfth Night*: "'Nothing that can be can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes'" (p. 123). The

21. Jason Cowley, "Telling Tale," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Times* (London), 22 Sep. 2001, Play, p. 17.

22. Peter Kemp, "A Masterly Achievement," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Sunday Times* (London), 16 September 2001, section 9, p. 46.

23. Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt.

24. Ian McEwan, interview with Omer Ali, p. 59.

25. Ian McEwan, "A Novelist on the Edge," interview with Dan Cryer, *Newsday*, 24 Apr. 2002: p. B6.

26. Intertextuality is a term Julia Kristeva coined from her reading of Mikhail Bakhtin. As she argues in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (Columbia University Press, 1984), quoted in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 111, "If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality), one then understands that its 'place' of enunciation and its denoted 'object' are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered. . . ." Kristeva claims that all texts are composites of other signifying systems, not the end product of a number of discernible sources. Roland Barthes explains in "From Work to Text" in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 160: "to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas."

quotation acts in an anticipatory fashion, warning the reader that Robbie is likely to prove similarly deluded. During his trek to Dunkirk, Robbie quotes with similar aptness from Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats": "*In the nightmare of the dark, / All the dogs of Europe bark*" (p. 190). In this instance, intertextuality is employed to establish a connection between the microcosm of the lives that Briony has disrupted and the macrocosm of a world at war. *Atonement* is replete with numerous allusions to other writers and books. For instance, Robbie's collection of literary works is listed in some detail, ironically reflecting the ideology of F. R. Leavis that he had absorbed in Cambridge. He reflects smugly, in a highly stylized passage, that "he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering . . . Rise and fall — this was the doctor's business, and it was literature's too." The narrator adds tellingly: "He was thinking of the nineteenth-century novel" (p. 87) — that is, of a mode of fiction that ignores its own status as discourse. Ironically, the reader is simultaneously being alerted to what that mode omits in this instance — the reality of sudden death and haphazard suffering that Robbie encounters in the retreat to Dunkirk.

That irony, like the irony present in the references to Malvolio and Auden, is one feature that distinguishes McEwan's citations as intertexts rather than sources. The numerous allusions to other texts warn the reader not to treat *Atonement* as a classic realist text. Both Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida argue that any text seen as intertext entails productivity.²⁷ What they mean by that is that once a text establishes its interdependence on other texts, its signification proliferates. *Atonement* offers particularly clear instances of what Kristeva claims are some of the different ways in which a text, in relating to other texts, becomes productive of further meanings, ways such as rereading and displacement. McEwan's novel is most obviously a rereading of the classic realist novel of the nineteenth century, just as it is a displacement of the modernist novel, particularly as instanced in the fiction of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. It is no coincidence that Robbie, seeking to excuse his sexually explicit note, sent by mistake to Cecilia, thinks of appealing to "a passing impatience with convention" that he associates with "a memory of reading the Orioli edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*" which had been banned in England in 1928 (p. 124). Like Mellors, Robbie comes from a lower class than Cecilia (cf. *Lady Chatterley*). In fact, this Freudian slip of Robbie's is indebted to another book as well. Because he had left the innocent version of his note to Cecilia on an illustration of the vagina in *Gray's Anatomy*, he had associated the handwritten polite note with the "bold spread and rakish crown of pubic hair" in the book, while his obscene typewritten draft lay clear of any intertextual contamination on his table (p. 89).

Atonement makes another ironic literary allusion to an even earlier English novel, Richardson's *Clarissa*. Arabella, the melodramatic heroine of the thirteen-year-old Briony's playlet, shares Clarissa's sister's name, which places "The Trials of Arabella" within a literary tradition of sentimentality and sensationalism, while inevitably lacking the psychological complexity of the original. Cecilia is spending the vacation after graduating from Cambridge reading *Clarissa*, which Robbie considers psychologically subtle and she finds boring. Their disagreement over this text helps determine the reader's response to the rape that takes place later the same day, which is sprung on the reader with

27. Jacques Derrida argues in "Signature Event Context," *Glyph*, 1 (1977), p. 180: "To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn." Kristeva in "Problèmes de la structuration du texte," quoted in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (University of Toronto Press, 1993) p. 569, explains the implications of this concept when she writes that a text constitutes the "junction of several texts of which it is simultaneously the rereading, accentuation, condensation, displacement and depth."

none of the lengthy preparation that Richardson provides. This instance of intertextuality appears to incorporate both terms that Kristeva uses to define intertextual productivity — rereading and displacement. Seen in the perspective of the novel as a whole, Lola's rape, unlike that of Clarissa, which leads to her death and Lovelace's damnation, is the prelude to a long and socially successful marriage cemented by Lola's and Marshall's determination to keep the identity of the rapist a secret so long as either of them is alive. Lola's worldly manipulation of the advantage the rape has given her over her rapist acts as a form of social intertextuality, anticipating the laxer sexual morality of the later twentieth century. Additionally, such ironic references to other literary texts in McEwan's novel act as a continuous reminder that the entire book is the final literary artifact of Briony, a professional author.

In the case of the novel, intertextuality relates an individual work to others that constitute the genre of fiction and that have contributed to the conventions that produce meaning in fictional narrative. It is significant just how many other works of literature *Atonement* has suggested to its numerous reviewers. The rape reminds one reviewer of the incident in the Marabar caves in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, but without the retraction.²⁸ The cracked and mended Meissen vase of Part One reminds another reviewer of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*.²⁹ Yet another reviewer discerns McEwan making a nod to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*,³⁰ and a fellow reviewer describes McEwan's mixture of allusions to the genteel country house pastoral and the brutalities of sex and war by suggesting that "It is as if . . . the contents of McEwan's stories had been explicitly daubed on the walls of *Brideshead*."³¹ The novel has also been compared to an Agatha Christie country house thriller;³² Nabokov's *Lolita*, with its sly allusion to Humbert's use of Lola as one name for the raped nymphet;³³ and Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, which uses a similar metanarrative device of an elderly female narrator revealed as such near the end.³⁴

In addition to intertextuality, McEwan makes use of other narrative devices to alert his reader to the status of his text as a literary artifact. For instance, there is his modulation of prose styles. In the long Part One, McEwan chose to write in "a slightly mannered prose, slightly held in, a little formal, a tiny bit archaic" with which he "could evoke the period best."³⁵ In Part Two, writing about Dunkirk, he chose "to write in a choppy prose with shorter, simpler sentences,"³⁶ a style that is reminiscent of Hemingway. As he explained, "on the battlefield the subordinate clause has no place."³⁷ In the final coda, he employs a contemporary voice, one that is acutely self-conscious and aware of its own act of narration. For instance: "I've always liked to make a tidy finish," says the elderly Briony, simultaneously referring to her life and her life's work (p. 334).

Although there is only one narrative voice, which turns out to be that of Briony, the aging novelist, McEwan employs what Gérard Genette calls "variable internal focalization" in Part One, that is, narrative where the focal character changes (whether the narrative voice changes or not — it does

28. Geoff Dyer, "Who's Afraid of Influence," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Guardian*, 22 September 2001, Saturday Pages, p. 8.

29. Lee, p. 16.

30. Gail Caldwell, review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Boston Globe*, 17 March 2002, p. E3.

31. Dyer, p. 8.

32. Tom Adair, "The Follies of Youth," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Scotsman*, 22 September 2001, p. 10.

33. Phil Baker, "A Note of Apology," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 September 2001, p. 5.

34. John Updike, "Flesh on Flesh," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *New Yorker*, 4 March 2002, p. 80.

35. Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt.

36. Ian McEwan, interview with Omer Ali, p. 59.

37. Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt.

not in *Atonement*).³⁸ In the case of *Atonement*, the focal character is first Briony, then Cecilia, then Robbie, and so on. McEwan employs this particular “modal determination”³⁹ partly to distinguish his narrative from the classic realist novel’s association with an omniscient narrator (Briony’s lie came from positioning herself as such a narrator in her fictionalized scenario of events), and partly to demonstrate the adult Briony’s attempt to project herself into the thoughts and feelings of her characters, an act that is crucial to her search for forgiveness.

McEwan also draws attention to the constructed nature of the narrative by employing parallel or symmetrical motifs. Marshall’s rape of Lola takes place by the eighteenth-century, crumbling, stuccoed Greek temple in the Tallis grounds, with its “row of pillars and the pediment above them” (p. 68). The wedding of Marshall and Lola turns out to be at a London church that looks “like a Greek temple,” especially its “low portico with white columns beneath a clock tower of harmonious proportions” (p. 304). Separated by five years, the rape and marriage are brought into shocking juxtaposition by purely stylistic means. Briony’s encounter with the Marshalls at the end of the book takes place outside the Imperial War Museum, which echoes the other two buildings in being based on Greek temple design, featuring columns and a portico. Behind the neo-classical facades that come to represent the “mausoleum of their marriage” (p. 307) lurk ruin, a joint lie, and the destructive memories of a war from which Marshall made his fortune. Other repetitive motifs include “The Trials of Arabella,” which frames the narrative as well as crudely anticipating the action; Cecilia’s call “*Come back*” when Briony has had a bad dream (p. 72), later used in different though parallel circumstances (pp. 249, 330); and a recurring psychological motif based on Briony’s two competing characteristics — her passion for order and her powerful imagination — which not only cause her to lie but which are responsible for the form taken by her “fifty-nine-year assignment” (p. 349), the narrative she works on between 1940 and 1999.

Part One is also characterized by frequent use of narrative anticipation, or what Genette calls “temporal prolepsis.” Genette claims that Western narrative tradition tends to use this device sparingly because the “concern with narrative suspense that is characteristic of the ‘classical’ conception of the novel . . . does not easily come to terms with such a practice.”⁴⁰ Positioning itself as partly opposed to Western narrative tradition, *Atonement* makes frequent use of anticipation in Part One. For instance, section thirteen opens: “Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime” (p. 146). Anticipations like this of future events in the plot are meant to represent the mature Briony’s response to the criticisms offered by Cyril Connolly. She retains the lyricism of her first draft, “Two Figures by a Fountain,” while reassuring her readers (including Elizabeth Bowen and Connolly) that she is not neglecting the “*underlying pull of simple narrative*” (p. 295). But the narrative in this instance is as much concerned with the business of narrating these events satisfactorily as it is with the unfolding of them. Turn back to the thirteen-year-old Briony’s immediate reaction to witnessing the scene by the fountain and the narrator’s use of temporal prolepsis makes it obvious that Briony

38. In his ground-breaking “Discours du récit” in *Figures III*, (Seuil, 1972), *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E Lewin, (Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 189–90, Gérard Genette distinguishes three major categories for the study of narrative — tense, mood and voice. By distinguishing between narrative perspective or focalization (who sees the story) and narrative voice (who recounts the story), he was able to expose the way the previous use of “point of view” was confusing because it failed to distinguish between focus and voice. He goes on to differentiate narrative with zero focalization (cf. the omniscient narrator), from narrative with internal focalization, which itself can be fixed (one focal character), variable (more than one focal character taking turns), or multiple (the same event focalized from successive characters’ perspectives), and from external focalization (where no character is permitted to know his or her own thoughts).

39. Genette, p. 188.

40. Genette, p. 67.

is going to have to spend much of her life working at the description of this scene before she can achieve the final multiple focalization of it from three characters' perspectives:

This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world in which frogs did not address princesses, and the only messages were the ones that people sent. It was also a temptation to run to Cecilia's room and demand an explanation. Briony resisted because she wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally. The definition would refine itself over the years. She was to concede that she may have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self. At the time there may have been no precise form of words; in fact, she may have experienced nothing more than impatience to begin writing again. (pp. 37–38)

In the center of this passage lies the anticipation of the numerous stages or drafts through which this narrative is destined to pass before it reaches its final form as we read it. At the same time, that prolepsis is sandwiched between two passages preoccupied with the act of narration itself.

To draw attention to the narrative process is not an act of self-indulgence on the part of the metafictional novelist, as suggested by a few of this book's reviewers. It is central to the book's concerns. In the first place, when novelists force us to understand the constructed nature of their characters, they invite us simultaneously to reflect on the way subjectivity is similarly constructed in the non-fictional world we inhabit. McEwan says, "I look on novels as exploratory, forms of investigation, at its broadest and best, into human nature."⁴¹ Further, as Patricia Waugh argues, "Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures."⁴² In this sense, the use of metafiction in the book serves to undermine the naturalization of social and economic inequalities that especially characterized British society in the 1930s.

Take, for instance, Robbie, son of the Tallises' cleaning lady. The difference in social class accounts for the early misunderstanding between Robbie and Cecilia. She mistakes his removing his boots and socks before entering her house for an act of exaggerated deference, "playacting the cleaning lady's son come to the big house on an errand" (p. 26). She has imbibed this sense of social difference from her class-conscious mother, Emily, who resents the fact that her husband has paid for Robbie's education, an act which she characterizes as "a hobby of Jack's . . . which smacked of meddling to her," that is of upsetting the "natural" order of things (p. 142). The result is Emily's encouragement of Briony in her childish lie. As Cecilia writes later to Robbie in France: "I'm beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity. My mother never forgave you your first [class degree]" (p. 196). But tellingly, she goes on in the letter to assume that Danny, the working class son of Hardman, the handyman, must have been the real rapist. Using this text within the larger narrative text, McEwan subtly suggests the invidious nature of a class system that permeates even those seeking to reverse its effects and works to protect the upper-class rapist from exposure throughout his lifetime. Similarly, McEwan denaturalizes the way in which Marshall

41. Ian McEwan, interview with Dan Cryer, p. B6.

42. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (Routledge, 1984), p. 7.

asserts his sexual power over the temporarily orphaned "vain and vulnerable Lola" (p. 306) by the use of a literary motif (the temple) that draws attention to its own construction.

All fiction draws attention to its fictionality by insisting on the particularity of the story it is relating while at the same time implying a connection between the private world it is evoking and the public world inhabited by its readers. But metafiction tends to display rather than to hide the inherent contradiction in the writer's attempt to persuade us of both the particularity and the universality of the characters and events described. One instance is McEwan's use of the Meissen vase to imply connections between the specific incident of its breakage and a number of wider fractures in the narrative and the world it depicts. At the most intimate level the vase suggests the fragility of Cecilia's virginity, which is about to be as abruptly destroyed by a struggle between herself and Robbie. The vase next enters Briony's first attempt at fiction, "Two Figures by a Fountain," and becomes associated with her incorrect interpretation of the events leading to its breaking. Briony's testimony both in court and in her first narrative draft is as fragile as the mended vase, as McEwan not so subtly suggests when describing her initial determination of the identity of Lola's attacker: "the glazed surface of her conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks" (p. 158). Both the vase and the novel as a whole represent a fragile aesthetic form that can easily fall apart. During the War it is finally shattered, just as the Tallis family's way of life is shattered by historical events. This takes one back to the first description of the vase: it was a gift awarded during the First World War to Jack Tallis's brother Clem that, despite wartime conditions, survived and was brought back to the Tallis family after his death in action. Valuable as it is, Jack Tallis wants it to be used: "If it had survived the war, the reasoning went, then it could survive the Tallises" (p. 23). In other words, the vase is a fragile object that has miraculously survived two centuries of use (as has the society that the Tallises represent), one that is directly identified with the family through Uncle Clem. Its fracturing and eventual destruction imagistically anticipate those of the family and the pre-War society to which both the vase and family belong.

In *Atonement*, the narrative forces the reader from the start to recognize that this is not simply the story of one pre-Second World War family in southern England, but of a cross section of British society at that critical moment before the War changed everything. At the beginning of section two of Part One, Cecilia looks from their house to the view it affords, "giving an impression of timeless, unchanging calm which made her more certain than ever that she must soon be moving on" (p. 18). That paradox is extended as the narrative unfolds to cover every aspect of the Tallis family's existence. As one reviewer expresses the oxymoron at the center of this book, "The atmosphere is one of innocence oppressed by knowledge."⁴³ Briony teeters at the brink of adolescence, just as Lola "longed to throw off the last restraints of childhood" (p. 306). The novel invites us to see these two girls as symptomatic of the state of England and the West at this period of history. Lola and her twin brothers are "refugees from a bitter domestic civil war" (p. 8), which makes them avoid even the mention of the dreaded word divorce, "[I]ike rearmament and the Abyssinia Question" (p. 9). The private is linked to the public by the figurative use of the word "war" that calls attention to its polysemous usage.

In 1935 the West was suffering from a collective myopia in the face of the rise of fascism, which only a minority on the political left seemed prepared to confront. Robbie is typical of the collective

43. Henry Hitchings, "Once Upon a Time Before the War." Rev. of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan. *Financial Times* 15 Sep. 2001, Books 4.

delusion at that time with his fantasies of a future life spent as a family doctor and casual reader. The West is about to be hurled into a war that will usher in a radically different, postmodern era to which this narrative, completed in 1999, belongs. Robbie's fall is caused by another's lie, reminding readers that Europe's fall into war followed lies of a far more serious order made by Hitler. Robbie's old life is brought to a sudden and traumatic end. As he reflects during the fallback to Dunkirk, "A dead civilization. First his own life ruined, then everybody else's" (p. 204). Part Two (the Dunkirk segment) retrospectively casts the private family relationships of Part One in a quite different social and historical light. The cozy isolation typified by the Tallises' country estate could be thought to parallel Britain's deluded feeling of invulnerability under Chamberlain in the face of Hitler's escalating aggression across the Channel. As McEwan told one interviewer, "private deceptions and national deceptions are not entirely disconnected."⁴⁴ The final coda with its additional revelations about the worldly success of the Marshalls and the conversion of the privileged Tallis country home into a hotel suggests the way fiction can make visible the inequalities in society that ideology works to conceal.

McEwan has said that he is "interested in relationships not only for what they do in themselves, but how they absorb outside pressure, influence politics and, again, history."⁴⁵ He would appear to share with Edward Said the belief that works of literature are not just texts but participate in "worldliness." What Said means by worldliness is "the restoration to . . . works and interpretations of their place in the global setting."⁴⁶ While McEwan certainly subscribes to this position, in *Atonement*, life also often imitates fiction, giving recognition to the central role that narrative plays in all our lives. Briony and Robbie both shape and are shaped by narratives. When he first realizes that he has fallen in love with Cecilia, Robbie reflects: "He had spent three years drily studying the symptoms, which had seemed no more than literary conventions, and now, in solitude, . . . he was worshipping her traces . . . while he languished in his lady's scorn" (p. 79). His change in circumstances and outlook is described as that from a critic of literature to a Petrarchan lover in a sonnet. One does not have to be an aspiring author like Briony to find oneself imitating the world of art. Robbie expresses his decision to train for the medical profession in wholly fictional terms: "There was a story he was plotting with himself as the hero . . ." (p. 85). When Robbie is in prison, his correspondence with Cecilia is restrained because the prison authorities have diagnosed him as morbidly over-sexed and therefore not to be overstimulated. "So they wrote about literature, and used characters as codes" (p. 192). Literature has here entered deeply into the fabric of Robbie's and Cecilia's lives.

Of course, Briony is the prime example of the way art shapes her life as much as she shapes that life into her art. From the start, her powerful imagination works to confuse the real with the fictive. Her observation of life around her is conditioned by the fictive world that holds her in its grip. She understands that "the imagination itself was a source of secrets" (p. 6). Writing literally intrudes on her life when she rips open Robbie's shocking love letter; but her interpretation involves exchanging one literary genre for another: "No more princesses," she concludes; "she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" (pp. 106–07). When she stumbles upon Robbie and Cecilia making love in the darkened library, the "scene was so entirely a realization of her worst fears that she sensed that her overanxious imagination had projected the figures onto the

44. Haffenden, p. 186.

45. Ian McEwan, interview with Adam Hunt, p. 48.

46. Edward Said, "The Politics of Knowledge." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 4th edition, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (Longman, 1998), p. 164.

packed spines of books" (p. 116). Appropriately, it is from books (of the lurid, gothic kind) that her "reading" of the scene originates. Briony is shaped by a melodramatic imagination that originates in the books she has read. Thinking of her mother's impending funeral, she indulges in a typical literary fantasy in which "the scale of her tragedy" would awe her friends (p. 151). The young Briony suffers from an inability to disentangle life from the literature that has shaped her life. She imposes the patterns of fiction on the facts of life. To complain about the metafictional element in the book is to fail to understand that we all are narrated, entering at birth into a preexisting narrative which provides the palimpsest on which we inscribe our own narratives/lives. McEwan's foregrounding of the metafictional element compels the reader to face the extent to which narration determines human life.

Narration is an act of interpretation. Interpretation opens the possibility of misinterpretation, of what Jacques Lacan terms *méconnaissance* or mis-recognition on the part of the ego, "the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself."⁴⁷ Briony at thirteen suffers from just such an illusion, a certainty in her own judgment that brings tragedy to some of those closest to her. As a novice writer, she might even be thought of as belonging to Lacan's imaginary order. Her misinterpretation of the adult symbolic world is the product of her childhood reading habits in which she read herself as "Her Majesty the Ego," to misquote Freud.⁴⁸ Her first crucial misreading is of the scene between Cecilia and Robbie at the pond. When she first observes them, she decides from their formal posture that Robbie must be proposing marriage to her sister. Briony reflects: "She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her" (p. 36). But when Cecilia jumps into the pond, Briony is perplexed at this disordered narrative sequence: "the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (pp. 36–7). When she returns to the window after the two figures have left the scene, she feels liberated from the impenetrable facts: "The truth had become as ghostly as invention" (p. 39). She is free to interpret the scene as she pleases.

Once she opens Robbie's explicit note to Cecilia, which she is too young to understand, she is forced to reconsider her interpretation of the whole scene. "With the letter," she reflects, "something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness" (pp. 106–07). Like Poe's purloined letter, this letter that Briony has purloined acts as the signifier that determines her subjectivity. Like the Queen, as seen by Lacan in the first scene of Poe's story, the letter places her willy-nilly in the imaginary order. She convinces herself that Robbie is what Lola calls a "maniac" (p. 112) and what she calls "the incarnation of evil" (p. 108), and that her sister is threatened and in need of her help, a scenario which places the mirror image of her ego at the center of the story. So when she convinces herself that Robbie is the figure glimpsed running away from Lola in the dark, it is her novelist's need for order that clinches it: "The truth was in the symmetry . . . The truth instructed her eyes" (p. 159). Fiction determines fact for her.

But she is far from alone in misinterpreting human behavior. Cecilia misinterprets Robbie's removing his shoes and socks as an attempt to distance her (pp. 26, 79), just as Robbie misinterprets Cecilia's undressing at the pond, taking it to be a deliberate effort to humiliate him (p. 75). (Both misinterpretations are caused by the class system). Cecilia also mistakenly assumes that her brother

47. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Norton, 1977), p. 6.

48. See Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," 1908, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (Hogarth, 1953–74), Vol. 9, p. 143, where he claims to recognize in every hero in the fictional work of imaginative writers "His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and every story."

Leon will want a hot roast for dinner. Even Jackson unjustifiably accuses Briony of hating the twins (p. 93). Is not this succession of misinterpretations of the facts aimed at McEwan's implied reader?⁴⁹ Is it not intended to prevent the reader from misinterpreting the long Part One as a classic realist text? To do so would be to replicate the childlike thoughts and actions of a Jackson or a Briony, or to show the same lack of experience that Cecilia and Robbie show at this early stage of their adult lives. The alternative is to assume that Briony's naïveté is an invention of her older authorial self, but the effect would still be to discourage the reader from participating in her misinterpretations of events, while simultaneously questioning the veracity of the older narrator's account offered in Part One.

Every time a character misinterprets the situation it proves to be the consequence of a faulty projection on his or her part onto another character. It is particularly ironic that Briony understands for the first time the need to grant others their own unique feelings and thoughts when she first witnesses the scene by the pond. "It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (p. 38). Later that evening, shocked by the contents of Robbie's note, Briony forgets her new insight and tells her lie, which at the time is less a lie than a misconstruction of the adult world she has been observing with the predatory eye of an aspiring novelist. For the novelist, "Order must be imposed" (p. 108), and order requires the elimination of "the confusion of feeling contradictory things" (p. 109); it requires the aspiring writer in her to turn Robbie into "a villain in the form of an old family friend" (p. 148). It is the writer in her that induces her to identify Robbie as Lola's attacker. "All she had to do now was discover the stories, not just the subjects, but a way of unfolding them, that would do justice to her new knowledge" (p. 150). Forcing life to conform to the aesthetic orderliness of art can have actual tragic consequences.

Five years later, Briony realizes that what caused her to write Robbie into her story as a villain was both an excess of imagination and a failure of imaginative projection (into the other). Writing about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 for the *Guardian*, McEwan observed, "If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. . . . Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity."⁵⁰ This belief lies at the core of all McEwan's fiction and explains its apparent amoral stance (a stance that the mature writer, Briony, comes to share once she has learned the need to respect the autonomy of others in her work). He has said that for him novels are not about "teaching people how to live but about showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else. . . . Cruelty is a failure of imagination."⁵¹ It is this kind of imagination that Briony spends the rest of her professional life seeking to acquire. The novel that we read and that took her adult lifetime to write is her attempt to project herself into the feelings of the two characters whose lives her failure of imagination destroyed. Having mistakenly cast them in a story that totally misrepresented them,

49. The term "implied reader" was coined by Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), from the term the "implied author," introduced by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (University of Chicago Press, 1961, rev. 1983). Like Booth's implied author, Iser's implied reader is a construct that belongs to both the text and the reader. It combines the pre-structuring of the text to generate meaning and the actualization of potential meaning during the act of reading.

50. Robert Cremins, "Coming to Be at One," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan, *Houston Chronicle*, 21 April 2002, Zest, p. 17.

51. Kate Kellaway, "Review: Interview: At Home with his Worries," review of *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan (and interview with him), *Observer*, 16 September 2001, Review, p. 3.

Briony seeks to retell their story with the compassion and understanding that she lacked as a thirteen-year-old girl. In turning "Two Figures by a Fountain" into *Atonement*, in exchanging the primacy of the authorial ego for an empathetic projection into the feelings of others, Briony is abandoning the imaginary for the symbolic order. The narrative is driven by her unconscious desire to win back the love of a sister who in fact died in 1940. All she can do after Robbie's and Cecilia's deaths is to pursue that desire along the chain of her narrative.

The writing of *Atonement*, which vividly imagines a reunion of Cecilia with Robbie after his return from Dunkirk (where in fact he died), is the form that Briony's atonement takes. It is a fictional and imaginative attempt to do what she failed to do at the time — project herself into the feelings and thoughts of these others, to grant them an authentic existence outside her own life's experiences, to conjure up what it must have felt like for the wounded Robbie to participate in the retreat to Dunkirk, and for Cecilia to be forcibly separated from him and estranged from her family. She recognizes that such an act of atonement "was always an impossible task," that the "attempt was all" (p. 351). Yet, as McEwan said to one interviewer, "When this novel is published [after her death . . .] these two lovers will survive to love, and they will survive — spontaneous, fortuitous Cecilia and her medical prince — right out of the little playlet she was trying to write at the age of thirteen. They will always live."⁵² Briony's novel is her literary attempt at reparation for the damage she inflicted as a child. The only way she can bring Robbie and Cecilia back to life is by using her imagination to imbue them with a fictional life that allows her and her readers to experience their initial hope and the subsequent despair which Briony's earlier ill-imagined fiction had caused.

The status of the coda, "London, 1999," is uncertain. The novel appears to end with the end of Part Three signed by "BT London, 1999" (p. 330). The coda that follows is unsigned and could be taken as a diary confession or extraneous commentary on the novel proper. This concluding section of the book is both open-ended and dark. In the penultimate paragraph, Briony opens up the possibility of a further revision when she plays with the idea of writing a new draft that would finally allow the two lovers to forgive her: "If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration . . . Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible" (p. 351). But the imminent onset of vascular dementia together with her painfully acquired honesty makes this fantasy unlikely to be realized. Then there is the shattering on the next to last page of any suspension of disbelief that may have persisted in the reader's mind to this point of the narrative: Briony's revelation of the two lovers' deaths stands in stark contrast to the orderliness of the story she concocted as a child.

A novel of the late twentieth century cannot subscribe to the simplified wish fulfillments of classic realist fiction. "The development of nuclear weapons," McEwan has said, "shows the dissociation of science from feelings," of the outer and inner worlds we inhabit.⁵³ World War Two, which introduced the world to mass ethnic cleansing, the subsequent Cold War, and the permanent threat of nuclear war appear to have elicited aesthetic structures that reflect the complexity and horror of life in the second half of that century. It is a time in history when the Marshalls, who — equally guilty — lack Briony's conscience, use the War to make their fortune and are then treated as public benefactors. Compared to Briony, they "have no remorse, no need for atonement."⁵⁴ Responding to

52. Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt.

53. Haffenden, p. 182.

54. Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt.

the criticism that his endings are too pessimistic, McEwan has said, "I never did trust those novels where, for all their dark insights, or that they ended in a funeral, there was always someone walking away and bending to pick up a flower."⁵⁵ *Atonement* ends not just with the revelation of the deaths of Robbie and Cecilia, but with the diagnosis of Briony's vascular dementia and her refusal to have the lovers forgive her even in her fictional account of their survival — proof that in her literary act of atonement she has finally learned how to imagine herself into the feelings of others.

Yet, as McEwan admits, Part Three "has about it both an act of cowardice . . . but also it's also her stand against oblivion — she's seventy seven years old, her tide is running out very fast . . . She does not have the courage of her pessimism. . . . She knows that when this novel is finally published . . . she herself will only become a character."⁵⁶ Is Briony's work of fiction an evasion or an act of atonement or both? What exactly does she mean when she says that atonement "was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point" (p. 351)? Is she implicitly recognizing the contradiction at the heart of her narrative — the impossibility of avoiding constructing false fictions around others at the same time as one is required to enter imaginatively into their lives? Or is McEwan suggesting that the attempt is all we can ask for, an attempt that is bound to fail, but that can come closer to or stray further from the reality of others? Robbie and Cecilia's happiness cannot be restored to them by an act of corrective fiction. Nevertheless, the attempt to imagine the feelings of others is perhaps the one corrective that we can make in the face of continuing human suffering. The novel ends on a note of ambiguity. Yet an appreciation of ambiguity is just what would have prevented Briony from indicting Robbie in her first fictionalized narration of these events.⁵⁷

55. Ian McEwan, "I Thought I was Going to Screw it Up," interview with Will Cohu, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 September 2001, p. 8.

56. Ian McEwan, interview with Michael Silverblatt.

57. I would like to thank Michael North at UCLA for his helpful suggestions after reading an earlier draft of this essay.