

The Writer's Atonement

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In Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, literature and the act of writing cannot be reduced to escapism since they are, rather, inescapable. Literature is seldom isolated from reality in this way, but frequently inserts itself into the world with what are often life-altering consequences. At the same time, although it is not *unreality*, literature possesses no absolute authority since it is always the product of, at minimum, two fallible minds: the writer's and the reader's. Writing, therefore, cannot be taken as objectively true since it is always filtered through perception, though, if this is the case, neither can experience. Briony Tallis writes first as a reader, in order to understand, and later in order to be understood *by* her readers.

Even as Briony completes her life's work, she cannot ensure the success of her atonement in life, nor does she write it into her story. Robbie and Cecilia are dead and cannot grant her absolution:

There is no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.¹

Briony is mistaken in her belief that the novelist cannot be judged, or that he occupies a position of omnipotence; actually it is the reader who must be equated with the divine. In childhood, Briony as interpreter (or *reader*) of events controls the situation around her; she is not a liar² but merely *mis-reads* the scenes she witnesses, a mis-reading that dominates three lives and impacts countless others. Briony's analysis is not the result of mere fabrication but of misguided perception. She desires to be a writer but initially she is simply the recipient of images she does not understand:

For her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong.³

The writer is divine only insofar as he has access to the "truth" of a story. However, if there is no ultimate truth outside of interpretation, then it is the reader who has power over the story's implications and who must issue the final judgment.

As a writer, Briony yearns to occupy a position of objectivity but is unable to do so; her stories still contain heroes and villains. Even her final work, the novel *Atonement*,

insofar as it is her work, does not demonstrate an objective ground. Briony still depicts herself, along with Lola Quincey and Paul Marshall, as guilty of the crime⁴ that inspires the novel. Her ideal, however, is a transcendence of reductive categorization of characters:

But wasn't she – that was, Briony the writer – supposed to be so worldly now as to be above such nursery-tale ideas as good and evil. There must be some lofty, god-like place from which all people could be judged alike, not pitted against each other, as in some lifelong hockey match, but seen noisily jostling together in all their glorious imperfection.⁵

In McEwan's story, this transcendent position is occupied by the reader. Briony's novel still attributes blame; it is still a form of self-flagellation. Briony portrays her own character as having undergone years of torturous guilt and attempts to atone that have culminated in frustration; she is unable to make a career of writing, renounces her upper-class roots to become a nurse who must witness horrific images daily, and is incapable of reconciling with her sister. Though she allows herself the liberty of re-imagining a better conclusion to Robbie and Cecilia's romance, she does not allow herself to feel satisfied. Instead, she depicts these fictionalized lovers and traumatized by their experiences. Briony's adult life is one of constant self-inflicted torture. In her final act of atonement, an elderly Briony Tallis leaves the novel to her posthumous readers who are then given the opportunity to experience these characters, in all of their nuances from an unbiased position. Whether Briony remains the villain or becomes an object of sympathy, she is now eligible for forgiveness, condemnation, or, ideally, for understanding from an objective observer. By giving her own story over to be judged, Briony places herself in a position similar to that previously occupied by Cecilia. Briony's readers will interpret her story just as Briony has interpreted her sister's, and they are liable to mis-read it just as wildly.

In "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes argues that the reader is ultimately responsible for the creation of a story, and that the author is irrelevant. Barthes writes,

There is [...] someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him – this someone being precisely the reader [...] Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, pared, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.⁶

He argues that, unlike the characters who occupy limited perspectives in a story, the reader exists outside of it and has access to a multiplicity of frames-of-reference. This is

true in relation to the story and characters; the reader is able to view the story through the perspectives of multiple characters, and may interpret from it a wide range of meanings. Just as events in her childhood perplex Briony and lead her to incorrect conclusions, writing, for Barthes, does not supply the reader with one underlying truth but with a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities that may be held simultaneously. As a result, it becomes difficult for the reader to pass judgment since he occupies so many positions at once. If there is no definitive interpretation, then judgment has no legitimate value. Barthes writes,

Literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.⁷

When Barthes abandons the notion of absolute truth in writing and in the world, he consequently does away with the notion of God, whose existence implies absolute truth in creation; the death of the author is paralleled by death of God. This indicates that the reader has access to endless interpretive possibilities relative to a story and, equally, that the interpreter does relative to live. It follows from this undermining of authority that the author has no control over the consequences that result from his work; his intentions become irrelevant.

It is not only the absolute authority of the writer that is eliminated by this dubious approach to the notion of truth, but that of the characters as well; in "Rewritings in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," Richard Pedot argues that McEwan's novel serves as a critique or "rewriting" of literary modernism. When Briony's novel, the original rewriting, is rejected by the publishing company, she has employed a modernist, subjective style.⁸ She has emulated Virginia Woolf and criticized the notion of plot and character. Pedot argues that Briony's ultimate story is a rejection of this style, a move away from

the terrain of [the author's] morally equivocal self-centered fictions [...] If "the only moral a narrative need have" (40) is to enter the separate minds of characters and value them equally, self-enclosedness is the very dereliction of duty that the author's youthful narratives may be said to share with modernism.⁹

For Pedot, McEwan's novel is a rewriting or atonement for the crime of modernism: an over-valuation of the subject. Read in this manner, Briony's novel fulfills the author's ethical obligation of atoning for youthful literary selfishness. Her novel makes up for her crimes against literature but cannot repair the real-world damage she has caused, except insofar as it relays to its reader the value of empathy over selfish subjectivism – the

lesson that Briony herself has learned. McEwan's novel depicts this lesson when it describes how Briony comes to learn it, while the work itself exists as an exercise in understanding, by providing the reader with direct access to Briony's mind.

Thirteen-year-old Briony's interpretations of the various sexual scenes she witnesses on that fateful summer day are objectively wrong. Robbie is not a maniac; he writes to Cecilia because he loves her. This is the truth underlying his note. When Briony witnesses his sexual encounter with Cecilia in the library, she incorrectly interprets it as an attack, an understanding that contains no truth. Furthermore, Robbie is absolutely not Lola's rapist. These facts, once closed to interpretation, are simply *misunderstood* by Briony. Barthes' annihilation of absolute truth does not eliminate the possibility for factual error, and in these encounters Briony does not occupy the position of reader. She has restricted access to her experiences and holds an inherently subjective viewpoint instead of an objective one. At this time, Briony still attempts to be the writer; she fills in the blanks where she cannot see what is happening and, as such, she fabricates rather than interprets. In "To Make a Novel," Kathleen D'Angelo writes,

For if *Atonement* is a novel concerned with the "making of fiction," it is also a novel concerned with the reading of fiction, as well as the reading of experience. Briony's crime has been widely read as one of literary imagination, but it is also one of poor reading comprehension. Nevertheless, the adult Briony has learned the value of reading, and she constructs a narrative that continually reminds the reader of this crucial role.¹⁰

Atonement does serve as a mediation on the art of reading well but there is equally another element at work; although the young Briony is certainly a poor reader, it is the liberty she takes with this reading, as well as the fantasy she produces from it, that causes her trouble. It is Briony's poor *writing*, or recounting, of these events which leads her astray; she is not the only bad reader in this novel but she *is* the writer and the criminal. The task of the reader, for Barthes, is to receive and filter information, not to run ahead with, or try to write it. In addition to Briony's insufficient perspective, the fountain scene has at least two possible and utterly divergent interpretations, neither of which are incorrect: Cecilia thinks that her decision to jump into the fountain is a punishment for Robbie,¹¹ with whom she has convinced herself that she is annoyed, while Robbie interprets her behaviour as "too theatrical" to be authentic,¹² and guesses she may have acted out of romantic inclinations similar to his own. In a sense, both views are correct; Cecilia did feel irritated with Robbie but, as she discovers later, she also harbored a subconscious attraction to him. Her intention was to punish him, though her intention is irrelevant and, in the end, does not play out as planned. Similarly, Briony does not *intend* to persecute an innocent man when she accuses Robbie of rape, nor does she purposely lie; however, she quickly loses control of her actions and must live with the consequences of having given the story to the public. Robbie and Cecilia are able to overcome their poor reading of the event by recognizing their feelings for each other, while Briony's writing of it yields permanent repercussions.

Briony challenges her readers to judge her actions, but the situation is too complicated. The reader cannot judge since, as Barthes argues, his role is to hold together too many perspectives. Readers can interpret, analyze, and criticize, but ultimately, judgment relies on the existence of an absolute truth that actions may be measured against. The question of classifying Briony is futile since there are so many relevant, non-definitive perspectives from which to understand her. It must not be forgotten that the crime for which Briony spends her life in torment is committed by a child; though she may have been too old to be excused for her acts on the basis of innocence, Briony suffers deeply for the remainder of her life for something that can be seen as the mere foolishness of a bored child. It may be that Briony's fate is the result of little more than unfortunate circumstances. The reader cannot condemn her, though, without the authority of absolute truth, judgment and forgiveness are impossible.

Does Briony ultimately atone for her actions? It is doubtful because she cannot repair what has been broken, because forgiveness would be meaningful are dead. What Briony offers instead is a defense of writing as an opportunity for understanding, and the suggestion that readers should seek this instead of passing judgment. Briony makes her initial mistake when she judges too quickly. Furthermore, by depicting empathetic characters, her novel problematizes the reader's ability to judge as well. Near the end of *Atonement*, Briony as the writer asks,

How could that constitute an ending? What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?¹³

Though this passage appears to critique realism, it actually resists doing so because, while Briony's novel may fictionalize and improve events in order to produce a more satisfying conclusion for the reader, by acknowledging this fact, McEwan's novel does not. Though *Atonement* can ultimately be read on multiple levels, readers are nonetheless caught up in the romance of Robbie and Cecilia for which McEwan's readers, unlike *Briony's* are deprived of a happy ending. Here, Briony does not serve as mouthpiece for the novel's philosophy, but as a character among her own. She never completely escapes her fantasy world; her novel re-writes history but does not change it. If Briony's novel can be read as atonement, then it is only for the benefit of the reader, and not of the wronged who she has made into characters; she writes a relatively happy ending for her lovers, and asserts that earlier drafts, which were more true to life, were "pitiless."¹⁴ But who is really deprived of pity? Does reality render Robbie and Cecilia pitiless? Hardly. If anything, their reality is significantly *more* pitiful. Briony, perhaps? Since her end seems to be a form of self-punishment and confession, this seems an unlikely motive. Her final draft, in fact, shows pity for the reader, who is distraught over the ending of the characters in whom he is so invested. If the novel can be considered a successful atonement, it is only so insofar as it reconciles itself with a readership that may develop empathy, and that can be appeased by a story more pleasing than reality. Briony uses her novel to fix a world

that she has destroyed, to give her readers hope that they live in a place in which love can triumph. She atones to the world for depriving it of Robbie and Cecilia's story by giving the story back to it. However, when these figures are dead, Briony cannot right the wrongs that she has caused them in her own reality.

Atonement charges literature with the task of producing understanding in its readers. McEwan's novel does not settle into easy conclusions, or perhaps does not conclude at all; Briony probably fails to achieve her ends, Cecilia and Robbie do not reunite, the responsible are not punished, and everyone dies without reconciliation. D'Angelo writes,

Readers hold the final power of interpretation, judgment, and atonement; to meet these aims, they must maintain a stance toward the text that involves both critical assessment and empathetic identification... both tasks prove necessary for readers of *Atonement*.¹⁵

Atonement does not end neatly, but just like his characters, McEwan's readers must contend with messiness in fiction. Briony mistakenly thinks she can fictionalize reality but life is not always clear and controllable. Sometimes there is no absolute truth, no hero and villain, and no atonement. In this novel, there are only *superior* readings. Through literature, readers are given insight into the actions and motivations of others; though the reader is the only one who can judge, literature produces empathy, which often problematizes his ability. *Atonement* asks readers to read unlike Briony, without imposing themselves into the narrative. When characters are confronted with situations that demand response they can either observe and attempt to understand, or they can infer. It is when Briony does the latter that she becomes a writer and takes control of the lives around her. Readers, too, are asked to make this choice; in *Atonement*, they can fill in the blanks and compose an ending, or can understand and accept that sometimes events do not contain neat explanations. When the writer no longer holds sway, the story seizes control; the reader, the last who can do so, is implored *not* to judge.

Notes

¹ Ian McEwan. *Atonement*. (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002), 371.

² *Ibid.*, 336.

³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶ Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author". *Image – Music – Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath (Noonday Press, 1988), 148.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸ McEwan, 312.

⁹ Richard Perdot. "Rewriting(s) in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Etudes Anglaises*. 60.2. (April 2007) 148.

¹⁰ Kathleen D'Angelo. "To Make a Novel: The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Studies in the Novel*. 41.1 (Spring 2009): 88-106, 101.

¹¹ McEwan, 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 371.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹⁵ D'Angelo, 89.