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“TO MAKE A NOVEL”: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CRITICAL READERSHIP IN IAN McEWAN’S *ATONEMENT*

KATHLEEN D’ANGELO

Much of the critical response to Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement* has focused on the metafictional elements of the work’s narrative structure, as well as Briony Tallis’s revelation in the final pages that she in fact authored the text. Critics have asked whether the novel earns this epilogue or whether it is an abrupt rendering of a straightforward realist narrative into what David Lodge has called a “postmodernist metafiction” (87). Brian Finney counters readers who find that the ending “inappropriately resorts to a modish self-referentiality” (69) by asserting that the text’s narrative structure actually supports Briony’s final admission from the first page. He argues, “I read this novel as a work of fiction that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction” (69). Of Briony’s engagement with fiction, he states:

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. (69)

Briony’s attempts to make amends for her crime through fiction will inevitably fail; in fact, this seems to be the point. Although atonement is only possible through the act of writing, the result of that writing remains limited by the restrictions of fiction. To put it simply, fiction cannot absolve or undo transgressions that have taken place in the real world.

Although I agree with Finney’s observations about these implications of fiction and their application within *Atonement*, his reading does not account for the fact that Briony is herself a fictional construct. The “reality” that she

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renders as fiction is not a material reality; it exists only within the pages of the novel. McEwan's move to reveal Briony as the author makes transparent another narrative aspect that the novel explores: the relationship of the reader to the text. 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. In this sense, McEwan positions *Atonement* against earlier narrative models that were also concerned with the author-reader relationship, specifically the 18th-century novel and the modernist novel. In his critique of the reader's role, McEwan presents an implicit argument about the ethical responsibility for readers of contemporary fiction. 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. As we will see, both tasks prove necessary for readers of *Atonement*.

By emphasizing the reader's role in this novel, and, in particular, the reader's position to grant or withhold the atonement that Briony seeks, my discussion speaks to broader debates within reader response criticism over whether (and how) meaning can be fixed within a text. Since the ascent of deconstructionist criticism asserting that all texts are inherently relative and decentered—a notion embodied in Roland Barthes's radical claim that "The birth of the reader must come at the death of the Author" (150)—reader response critics have had to reconsider certain foundational aspects of their theory. Who is "the reader" of a text in light of postmodern and poststructuralist theory? Do signs embedded within a text point toward a "correct" reading, or do individual readers determine anew their own authoritative meaning?¹ To answer these questions in relation to *Atonement*, it becomes important to consider the novel's intertextual elements. Although several critics have noted the prevalence of textual allusions within the novel, I would like to extend this analysis to explore the way in which McEwan uses allusions to ground the meaning of his novel. The textual allusions provide semiotic markers to guide readers toward a particular fact within the text: the revelation of and (potential) atonement for Briony's crime. In my discussion of the intertextual elements, I would also like to claim two new literary predecessors for *Atonement* that critics have so far overlooked: the eighteenth-century novel *The Female Quixote* by Charlotte Lennox and Virginia Woolf's experimental shift into modernism in *Jacob's Room*. While *The Female Quixote* serves to underscore the imaginative power that texts have upon their readers (as well as the potential dangers of misreading), *Jacob's Room* is a text in which narrative itself becomes the sole means for recovering the dead. Throughout *Atonement*, Briony transitions from a girl overpowered by her romantic imagination to a novelist who uses

modernist technique to fulfill her elegiac impulse. The textual allusions thus reflect Briony's development, but they also offer insight into McEwan's stance on the reader's role within the text, an involvement I suggest is two-fold: Readers must participate in "solving" the crime at the heart of the novel, with McEwan directing them toward particular practices that will produce "good" readers, and readers must feel the impact of Briony's transgressions. It is only through this final act, in which readers are pushed toward empathy and feeling, that they may be positioned to grant or withhold Briony's atonement.

References to the eighteenth-century, and references to specific kinds of reading, appear from the book's earliest chapters, where McEwan presents Cecilia and Robbie as readers of eighteenth-century novels who each favor a particular reading aesthetic. Cecilia, who is dispassionately reading Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, tells Robbie, "I'd rather read Fielding any day" (24). She then considers how Robbie might analyze this preference: "He might be thinking she was talking to him in code, suggestively conveying her taste for the full-blooded and sensual. That was a mistake, of course, and she had no idea how to put him right" (24). Here Cecilia seems aware that marking oneself as a certain kind of reader carries larger cultural, ideological, and even sexual, implications. She also acknowledges Robbie as a potential close reader of such codes. As the characters engage in a debate essentially over reading preferences, the novelist (whether Briony or McEwan, the idea seems applicable to both writers' projects) poses implicit questions about how to evaluate the merits of any novel: should we measure success through a reader's engagement? What are the terms of such engagement? And what, then, are the novelist's responsibilities toward producing this engagement, or in fulfilling readers' expectations?

If Richardson's *Clarissa: The History of a Young Lady* fails to engage Cecilia, readers of *Atonement* must consider why. One explanation rests in the relationship that the earlier novel seeks to develop with its readers. Eighteenth-century scholars recognize a shift between the narrative construction—and the readerly expectations—of Richardson's works when compared to the novels of Henry Fielding. In his seminal work on reader response theory, Wolfgang Iser observes, "Historically speaking, perhaps one of the most important differences between Richardson and Fielding lies in the fact that with *Pamela* the meaning is clearly formulated; in *Joseph Andrews* the meaning is clearly waiting to be formulated" (46). Richardson, then, does not invite his readers to participate in shaping the novel's meaning; instead, his novel about the sexual threats that face even the most virtuous women serves to warn readers. His becomes a didactic fiction posed to a receptive readership. In contrast, by engaging playfully with the artifice of fiction—often by using parody and irony to represent classical models, thus prompting readers to uncover affectation, hypocrisy, and "false appearances" within the text (35)—Fielding invites his readers to participate actively in constructing the novel's meaning. As Iser points out, this occurs

through a process of interplay between traditional narrative devices and the novel's self-conscious disruption of such devices at key moments in the text; readers' responses at these moments in turn shape their interpretations. Iser explains, "The right mode of conduct can be extracted from the novel through the interplay of attitudes and discoveries; it is not presented explicitly" (46). As I will show, McEwan makes such techniques of interplay and discovery central in engaging readers throughout *Atonement*.

Of course, these debates in which Robbie and Cecilia engage over reading aesthetics (as well as the differences between Richardson and Fielding) are also debates of interpretation, and McEwan emphasizes the instability that any one interpretation holds. When Robbie and Cecilia discuss Richardson against Fielding, Robbie claims, "There's more life in Fielding, but he can be psychologically crude compared to Richardson" (24). Cecilia disagrees with this analysis, as the narrator reveals: "She didn't think Fielding was crude at all, or that Richardson was a fine psychologist, but she wasn't going to be drawn in, defending, defining, attacking" (24-25). Cecilia's attention to psychology suggests more about the author-reader dynamic than the psychology of individual characters. In modeling Robbie and Cecilia as readers, and in particular readers with vastly different interpretative practices, McEwan explores the stance that any "good" reader must take toward a text. Readers are faced with a multiplicity of interpretations. They must be willing to commit to one and, more so, be expected to defend and define that interpretation from the attack of others. In the case of *Clarissa*, Cecilia has no desire to commit herself as a dedicated reader, perhaps because Richardson's text does not invite her toward this participatory interpretive stance.

McEwan's attention to the eighteenth century seems applicable in a novel which explores the actions of readers. A second reference to the eighteenth century novel comes in Briony's naming of the title character in her play *The Trials of Arabella*. Several critics have interpreted the name as another allusion to *Clarissa*, in which Arabella is the name of Clarissa's sister. However, Arabella also serves as the name for a different eighteenth-century mock heroine—made famous for her dramatic misreadings of the romance genre—in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*. Like Briony, Arabella cannot distinguish reality from fiction and continually misinterprets common interactions in her daily life as melodramatic moments lifted from the pages of her novels. She frequently fancies herself the object of men's desires, while her suitors inevitably fail to match the standards set by the romance genre. In the novel's climax, Arabella jumps into the Thames River to avoid what she interprets as a threat to her virtue in the form of "ravishers," in a clear misreading of the scene. Only when she is near death with the resulting fever and under the care of a "pious and learned Doctor" (366) does Arabella at last learn to read her surroundings with reason.

Several textual details prompt me to read *The Trials of Arabella* as an allusion to *The Female Quixote*, beginning with the plot of Briony's play itself.

A young heroine flees her family—in “an impetuous dash toward a seaside town” (McEwan 1)—in chase of a doomed, yet passionate, love. She catches cholera, and only after she is nursed back to health by an impoverished doctor, albeit a prince in disguise, does the girl find love and reunite with her family. Briony intends for the play to instruct her brother Leon in the virtues of choosing a wife out of reason rather than passion. The narrator explains, “Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife” (4). Although Briony, like Richardson, intends to stage an instructive tale, the play proves ironic, for Briony is the Arabella figure who views the world as an extension of her literary imagination.

Atonement makes a further gesture toward *The Female Quixote* when Robbie recounts the young Briony’s move to dive into the river after a swimming lesson to secure proof of his love; here Briony administers a kind of test of Robbie’s imagined affection, which, he observes, came “surely from one of her books, one she had read lately, or one she had written” (218). Briony’s act is purely sentimental and, just as in the climax of Lennox’s novel, betrays her as a girl not yet skilled in critical reading. Through his allusion to *The Female Quixote*, McEwan reminds readers to be critically engaged with the text, for while reader-response criticism—particularly the relativist stance that remains the inescapable implication of the deconstructionists’ position—denies the possibility of a single “correct” reading, McEwan illustrates that “incorrect” readings clearly exist. In the case of Briony, her move to read her reality through romantic impulses carries serious and far-reaching consequences. McEwan thus warns his readers to be sensitive to the romantic impulses they bring to their reading of this text. For example, how much has the reader invested in Robbie’s inevitable reunion with Cecilia? Is this an ending that, on some level, readers expect, or even require, Briony to write?

Although the eighteenth-century novel provides the textual medium through which to begin his exploration of readership, McEwan turns to the modernist aesthetic to further explore the responsibilities that come with reading. Modernist critics—as well as anyone who has ever read the works of high modernists such as Joyce, Eliot, or Woolf—know quite well the way that modernist texts invite dedicated, attentive, and literary readers. Distinguished by fragmentation, shifting perspectives, unstable beginnings and endings, and unusual patterns of temporality, these works often *demand* critical readers. Moreover, certain high modernist writers seemed to cultivate these expectations within their readership. Leonard Diepeveen explores T.S. Eliot’s use of his critical essays to reshape audience expectations and, in turn, to assert a place for his style of poetics. In constructing this new conception of the reader’s role, Eliot warns against bad readers—whom he frequently describes as “general readers”—characterized as “lazy,” “confused,” and “invariably middle class and complacent” (qtd. in Diepeveen 47). In contrast, for Eliot the ideal audience

may be somewhat smaller in number but remains a “qualified audience”—that is, a group of elite readers who possess sufficient background in the literary canon to approach new texts through the lens of the old (49). Diepeveen observes, “The qualifications for reading modern texts can be laid out as a program, an apprenticeship to an eventual ‘mastery,’ a professional setting of standards that can require one to go back and redo explicit parts of the course” (50). With the idea of a “professional” reader in place, the modernist author can rely on the reader’s active participation in the construction of the text.

In fact, Eliot’s idea of the “qualified reader” corresponds with what Stanley Fish has called the “optimal reader,” as “the reader whose education, opinions, concerns, linguistic competences, and so on make him capable of having the experience the author wished to provide” (297).² McEwan stages this very concept on the second page of *Atonement*, when Briony presents her manuscript for *The Trials of Arabella* to her mother, who proceeds to perform an idealized reading of the play. With “the author’s arm around her shoulder the whole time,” Mrs. Tallis “oblige[s] with looks of alarm, snickers of glee and, at the end, grateful smiles and wise, affirming nods” (2). Briony also imagines her brother Leon’s response as similarly optimal, fantasizing that he “punched the air in exultation as the finale curtain fell.” Briony’s perfected notions of her audience extend to her understanding of storytelling itself and the manner through which stories unproblematically transfer meaning. Recognizing the special conditions of drama, a medium that must be conveyed through actors whose “private ambitions or incompetence” (35) stand to threaten the author’s intentions, Briony develops a preference for fiction:

A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader.... By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader’s. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no one stopped to wonder at it. Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them. There was no gap during which the symbols were unraveled. You saw the word *castle*, and it was there, seen from some distance, with woods in high summer spread before it, the air bluish and soft with smoke rising from the blacksmith’s forge, and a cobbled road twisting away into the green shade. (35)

Briony’s description of the reader’s relationship to a text seems little more than a form of mental telepathy, through which words and symbols transmit an author’s meaning into the reader’s mind, and no linguistic “gap” exists. Presented early in the novel, the passage serves an ironic function for introducing McEwan’s stance on the readers’ relationship to his text. Briony’s invocation of “castle” as a word naturally evoking romantic imagery underscores the limitations of her perspective. More so, McEwan places Briony’s musings at the moment just before she witnesses Robbie and Cecilia’s fateful scene at the fountain.

Briony watches her sister remove her blouse and skirt, and then descend into the pond; as she proceeds to utterly fail in interpreting the scene with accuracy, McEwan exposes the falsity of her earlier claims. While she initially imagines a marriage proposal, the details of the scene—with the potential “drowning” taking place *after* the supposed proposal, and the suitor standing awkwardly on the gravel while his new betrothed enters the water—quickly contradict this romantic narrative. Particular objects, such as the vase of flowers Briony notices, do not provoke automatic meaning, or even add meaningful clues to help her understand the scene. The simplicity of her fairy tales—and the very language, symbols, and narratives they have provided her—are no longer sufficient for exploring the complexities of human experience: “Briony had her first, weak intimation that 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, completely wrong” (37). Briony realizes this from the perspective of a writer who “had written her way through a whole history of literature...to arrive at an impartial psychological realism” (38). Nonetheless, the implications for readership are clear: If the transfer of meaning is not a swift, clean move from author to reader, then something more is required.

McEwan, like Eliot, presents the author’s intended experience as one that demands critical and educated reading; his “optimal” reader must bring with him or her particular knowledge of the literary past. McEwan enriches *Atonement* with dozens of textual allusions, several of which I have already discussed. (See also Hidalgo.) In addition to direct references to Richardson, Fielding, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Bowen, McEwan includes more implied allusions to canonical British writers such as D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, L.P. Hartley, and Evelyn Waugh, among others. The result is a work that seems to position itself in direct conversation with literary tradition. Brian Finney reads these intertextual elements as a further move toward textual “productivity,” a term he acquires from theorists Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida: “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” (73). Echoing T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Finney articulates a process wherein the intertextuality invites both a new reading of the original text through the modern comparison and a deeper reading of the new work through its interaction with tradition. (See Eliot 71-72.) In comparing the two works, readers can acquire a richer understanding of both novels’ meanings.

McEwan’s “optimal reader,” then, must bring a certain literary background to his reading of *Atonement*. Of course, through its suspenseful narrative and

romantic plot, *Atonement* can certainly appeal to a much wider audience; in fact, as I will argue below, McEwan deliberately establishes such an emotional connection with his readers. However, Eliot's "general reader" stands to miss the layered meanings throughout the text. It seems that Finney is responding to this very reader when he discusses the series of misreadings that mark the first section of *Atonement*. He points out the way in which Cecilia and Robbie misread each others' intentions, and he argues that this sets up the more significant misreading of the book: Briony's misreading of the couple's interaction at the fountain, as well as her misreading of Lola's rape. But we cannot forget that several other characters misread behaviors, including every person seated at the dinner party who fails to read Lola's scratches appropriately—as well as Paul Marshall's reactions to them during the ensuing discussion. Finney asks, "Is not this succession of misinterpretations of the facts aimed at McEwan's implied reader? Is it not intended to prevent the reader from misinterpreting the long Part One as a classical realist text?" (80).

These misreadings, and the ease with which a casual reader might gloss over them, all suggest a larger point about the responsibility of critical reading. The literary allusions actually point a critical reader to solve the crime before it takes place: The presence of *Clarissa* directs readers to consider the lurking threat of sexual violation that surrounds these young women; the naming of Lola, a reference to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, prompts readers to carefully consider the young girl's interaction with Paul, the older male figure; Briony's references to her eighteenth-century Arabella, as well as the novel's epigraph from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, indicate the very limitations of Briony's perceptions; and Robbie's repeated references to himself on the evening of the dinner party as Shakespeare's Malvolio, the victimized steward from *Twelfth Night*, foreshadow his fate as easy prey for the household's cruelty. A reader seeking clues regarding Robbie's fate in Part Two may consider the poem that he carries throughout France, W.H. Auden's elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." The poem hints at the death that awaits Robbie himself, but also reiterates the limitations of Briony's fictional gesture toward atonement in Auden's well-known line, "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making" (Auden 197).

In other words, readers approaching the text through the lens of literary history will find layers of meaning unavailable to a general reader.³ By staging the novel's dilemma as one in which readers find themselves excavating the text in order to solve the riddle of the crime, as well as excavating literary tradition itself, McEwan illustrates the absolute necessity for close and critical reading. This move corresponds with Stanley Fish's observations on the tasks that active readers perform while reading: "They include making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of cause, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers,

the solving of puzzles" (296). McEwan seems acutely aware of his authorial responsibility to engage his readers in such activities.

McEwan makes direct allusion to Virginia Woolf throughout *Atonement*, and Woolf's stance on the reader's relationship within modernist novels proves significant for underscoring McEwan's second claim for his readers: that readers feel genuine empathy for Briony's victims. While the intertextual elements serve to guide readers toward the truth of Briony's crime, McEwan also pushes them to feel the weight of what has been lost. Examining Woolf's stance on the reader reveals the centrality of this type of reading within modernist novels, but her notion of readership is also worth exploring for its differences from that of Eliot. Virginia Woolf was clearly conscious of the need to shape critical and active readers; in fact, she published two volumes of essays addressed to *The Common Reader*. Unlike Eliot's more academic notion of a specialized reader, Woolf's conception is more democratic (as her title suggests), since it removes readership from any distinct marker of class or professional obligation. Nevertheless, Woolf does hold certain expectations of her readers. In her study of Woolf's contribution to English studies and pedagogies of reading, Melba Cuddy-Keane explains, "Her common reader is identified by an active, intelligent reading practice, motivated by a desire for a broad, inclusive knowledge and expanded human experience" (117).

Woolf set forth a kind of doctrine for the modernist novel in her well-known essays "Modern Novels" (1919) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1923). I would also like to consider her 1924 paper "Character in Fiction" (published in the *Criterion* in 1925), in which she expands on the idea of character in modern narrative and offers implications for plot—two narrative techniques that Briony speaks about directly in *Atonement*. High modernist narrative is most often associated with fragmentation and multiple perspectives; however, for Woolf, these aspects alone do not define the modern aesthetic. Instead, they are merely techniques writers may use to provide more accurate representations of modern experience—"to come closer to life," as she describes in "Modern Novels" (33). Novels must represent the truths of modern humanity in a new way: from the inside out. And for Woolf, character provides the best means through which novelists can forge a connection with readers, by presenting identifiable sketches of humanity:

May I end by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in the business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travelers with Mrs. Brown? For she is just as visible to you who remain silent as to us who tell stories about her. In the course of your daily life this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day, thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met,

collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow the writers to palm off upon you a version of all this, an image of Mrs. Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever. (435-36)

Because readers encounter character in their daily lives, Woolf believes they are poised to recognize authenticity within the new modes of representation being practiced in modern fiction. Her reliance upon the reader's final judgment of authenticity proves critical, since it acknowledges that readers hold interpretive power. The creation of character then becomes central for reaching readers' sense of identification and emotion. On the other hand, some modernist narratives, through their experimental technique, may fail to capture authenticity and reader identification. In fact, Woolf finds fault in Joyce's "indecency" and Eliot's "obscurity" in what she deems "artificial" literary conventions (434). The goal of the modernist novel must be to "describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs. Brown" (436)—and, in turn, to forge a genuine human connection with the reader.

Jacob's Room is of course the novel in which Woolf had already begun to practice some of these aesthetic theories. That novel proves significant for a discussion of *Atonement* for several reasons: First, it illustrates the stylistic experiments that Woolf endorsed through its shifting narrative perspective, emphasis on character, and fragmented mode of representation. However, it is also interesting to consider for the plot details themselves: *Jacob's Room* presents the story of a young man, Jacob Flanders, who has died in World War I. Just as in *Atonement*, Woolf's narrator attempts to reconstruct Jacob's life through the impressions of characters he encountered during his lifetime. While in *Atonement* the younger Briony expresses her outright fear of Robbie's masculinity and sexuality—the man who is, after all, her subject—Woolf's narrator also acknowledges a line of fear in her stance toward Jacob: "Granted ten years' seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him comes first; this is swallowed up by a desire to help—" (74). Although an anxiety of representation haunts both narrators, it is their "desire to help," or to atone in some way, that compels them to write down these stories. *Atonement* differs from *Jacob's Room* in that Briony extends the narrative in a way that Woolf does not: she enters Robbie's consciousness to present his own thoughts and emotions and takes Robbie directly to the war front, resisting representation only in the final moments of his life.

Woolf's conception of elegy within *Jacob's Room* also has relevance for *Atonement* because of its implications regarding the purpose—and limitations—of narrative. Woolf's narrator presents the limited omniscience of various characters, most of whom are searching for greater knowledge of Jacob; yet, the text continually underscores the impossibility of this task: The novel opens with Jacob's mother calling for him, then a child, after he has run away from the family at the beach: "Where is that tiresome little boy?...I don't see him" (1).

Jacob's brother Archer shouts for him with a voice of "extraordinary sadness. Pure, from all body, pure from all passion, going out into the world, solitary, unanswered" (4). Although the narrator has not yet announced Jacob's death, contemporary readers would have immediately recognized Jacob as a soldier lost in World War I through Woolf's use of the name Flanders, an allusion to the World War I battlefields in Belgium's Flanders region. In this sense, from the novel's first page, Jacob is already gone, and the narrative process represents an attempt to recover all that one can of the otherwise anonymous young men who have died in the war. Just as with Briony's attempts to atone through her fiction, such efforts will fall short. The narrator's conscious denial of Jacob's internal voice underscores the point that Jacob cannot be returned to life through language. Instead, what remains are the objects: the books of classical literature on his shelves, the old pair of shoes left in his room. But just as the younger Briony recognizes the limitations of objects and of language itself for transferring meaning—as she realizes that *castle* will not necessarily evoke the bluish smoke from a blacksmith's forge—Woolf acknowledges this very reality within *Jacob's Room*. The reader's access to an authoritative, complete knowledge of Jacob remains impossible; what is possible, however, is the human recognition and feeling of this loss, the feeling that is "pure, from all body, pure from passion."

To explore how McEwan engages readers in such emotional identification, it is necessary to consider *Atonement*'s narrative structure, which also reveals particular support for Woolf's modernist ideals. The structure takes a form of revision that impels us to reread the opening section of the book just as we are reaching its close. In Part Three, the reader learns that Briony has written a novella, *Two Figures By a Fountain*, and submitted it to the prominent literary magazine *Horizon*, known for its celebration of modernist technique. When she receives a letter from the editor Cyril Connolly, readers gain insight into the revision process that has shaped what is now Part One. Although readers do not have access to Briony's initial draft, we get a clear sense of the aesthetic techniques it employed: She has presented the scene at the fountain through three different perspectives, relying largely on image and language to convey the symbolic meaning of the text. In this early draft, she eschews the more traditional aspects of narrative, such as plot and character, and renders the true meaning of the events inaccessible even to a close and careful reader. The narrator describes Briony's own reaction to her early representation of the scene:

What excited her about her achievement was its design, the pure geometry and the defining uncertainty which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility. The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots. Despite her journal sketches, she no longer really believed in characters. They were quaint devices that belonged to the nineteenth century. The very concept of character was founded on errors that modern psychology had

exposed. Plot was like a rusty machinery whose wheels would no longer turn. A modern novelist could no more write characters and plots than a modern composer could a Mozart symphony. It was thought, perception, sensations that interested her, the conscious mind as a river through time, and how to represent its onward roll, as well as all the tributaries that would swell it, and the obstacles that would divert it. (265)

Here, the reader observes Briony's thoughts on modernist narrative, but we can also see the ways in which Briony misreads the tenets of this aesthetic. In terms of her understanding of Woolf, Briony's rejection of "character" removes the very human element that Woolf believed narrative must convey. Briony has fallen under the misconception that technique alone is sufficient for conveying "modern" experience. And while the modernist aesthetic is interested in a "conscious mind" exploring "perceptions" and "sensations," for Woolf these notions must be grounded in an identifiable story of a character. With no plot to follow and no fully-developed characters with whom to identify, readers of Briony's chapter cannot hold her accountable for her actions. Connolly points out this very evasion when he states, "If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion?" (295). The fact that he poses these questions suggests the extent of Briony's omissions; she has used these narrative techniques to bury her crime within the text. Indeed, Briony later acknowledges, "The interminable pages about light and stone and water, a narrative split between three different points of view, the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen—none of this could conceal her cowardice. 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?" (302).

The version of *Two Figures By a Fountain* that readers of *Atonement* actually see is the section that has been revised and developed into Part One. In reconsidering her earlier attempt at "modern" narrative, Briony also seems to reconsider the very purpose of the modernist text. In fact, we find that she has incorporated all of Connolly's suggestions: She has added the "underlying pull of simple narrative" to develop a story that readers will want to follow; she has developed all of her main characters to portray rich psychological perspectives; she has tweaked events so that the young Briony does not realize the vase was broken in order to heighten her confusion over the fountain scene; and she has added *The Trials of Arabella* to give readers "a flavor" of "the fairy stories and homemade folktales and plays she had been writing" (295). In expanding her novella from a static scene into a fully-developed novel—the very one that readers of the text are holding—Briony seems to revise her understanding of the function of narrative: Rather than promote an extreme individual perspective, narrative must help readers understand human experience. As Woolf suggests, a successful modernist narrative engenders identification and empathy. The

younger Briony struggles over this very question when she asks: "Was everyone else really as alive as she was?" (34). Nonetheless, Briony the novelist has clearly resolved this dilemma. The answer has become her calling as a writer: she must make all of these characters "as alive as she is"—even those who did not survive the story.

The narrative structure also serves to induce a certain type of reading so that upon finishing a given section of the book, the reader must go back and "reread" everything he or she has previously encountered.⁴ The most obvious example of this is Briony's revelation in the epilogue, "London, 1999," that she authored the preceding three sections. In doing so, she has sought to resolve her crime in the only way left available to her—through the act of telling the story. The reader learns that Robbie and Cecilia did not reunite during the war in the apartment in Balham—the version presented in Part Three—because Robbie died from his wounds at Dunkirk and Cecilia was killed in the bombing of London. In reality, Briony never saw her sister again after the events of 1935. Briony defends her fictionalized account with the following assertion: "How could that constitute an ending? What sense or 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?" (350). She adds, "No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel." In this reading of her narrative, we see that endings serve an important task to underscore the ideological and aesthetic purpose of the text. Although Briony claims a particular narrative purpose here—to breathe life into the characters she robbed of life in 1935—the narrative's structure suggests a larger ideological aim: to critique the reader's expectations of narrative itself. What are the costs of these fictions we overlook for the sake of "[making] a novel"?

Briony's final revelation in fact discloses how much she still owes to the romance genre she supposedly left behind. The version of Cecilia and Robbie's romance in Part Three matches the details of Briony's amateur play, *The Trials of Arabella*: Briony's "spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (350), and we are left to expect that Cecilia will reunite in some capacity with her family. Briony's narrative, then, is little more than an updated version of the romantic melodrama of her youth. (See also Phelan, "Narrative," 331–32.) Why does she feel the need to retell this story? Perhaps the more important question becomes, why do we as readers find this version of Robbie and Cecilia's ending particularly satisfying?

Wolfgang Iser's critique of the eighteenth-century novel may help explore these very questions. In discussing Fielding's frequent use of contrasts and reversals, Iser notes:

The contrast that Fielding calls the 'reverse' implies that an idea, a norm, or an event can only take on its full shape in the reader if it is accompanied

more or less simultaneously by its negative form. This will bring out what is concealed if one sees the phenomenon only in isolation, and so the negative form, through its contradictory character, helps to reveal the true content of the phenomenon by outlining all that is missing from it. In the resultant interaction between the positive and the negative, there comes into being a whole dynamic process—not in the text itself, for this only sets up the two sides of the contrast, but in the imagination of the reader, which is to produce a picture of the phenomenon....Fielding rightly considered this process to be a “new vein of knowledge.” (48)

In relation to *Atonement*, we might consider that Briony’s final admission reverses the narrative “ending” in which Cecilia and Robbie live, Briony publicly admits her crime, and the family is able to achieve some measure of resolution. Just a few pages after this relatively neat conclusion, Briony informs the reader that that ending was pure fiction. Although she testifies to the narrative value of her fictional ending—and claims “it’s not impossible” that a further revision could place an elderly Robbie and Cecilia at Briony’s own 77th birthday celebration—the overpowering effect of the epilogue is its exposure of her narrative deceit. Why does McEwan utilize such a reversal in concluding *his* novel? As Iser suggests, the resolution to such a move cannot come through the text itself, but rather through the reader’s study of the “whole dynamic character” of the narrative process, as well as the reader’s assessment of his or her role in that process. In other words, Briony’s contrast forces the reader to examine his or her own narrative expectations and preferences. The “new vein of knowledge” that readers would acquire must seek to answer: Why do we cling to romantic narratives, however far we claim to have moved from them aesthetically? Why do we still fail to read texts critically enough?

By encouraging readers to critically explore the narrative reversal, McEwan demonstrates his commitment to a narrative aesthetic that favors truth over yearning. Returning to the notion of character, it is Briony’s fine development of both Robbie and Cecilia as characters that makes us feel their loss even further. Phelan notes, “In retrospect, we must admit that we were too ready to believe that Robbie survived the retreat....By encouraging our mimetic involvement in Parts One, Two, and Three, and then pulling the rug out from under that engagement in the final section, McEwan not only juxtaposes the hope held out by Briony’s novel to ‘the bleakest realism,’ but he also makes us feel that bleakness” (335). Just as Woolf has implored, McEwan has used his characters to inspire a genuine human response within his readers.

The implication of this type of involvement is that readers then hold the final responsibility to grant or deny Briony’s atonement. Each reader can determine for him or herself: Has she sufficiently atoned for her crime? As I have been arguing, readers are better positioned to dispense this kind of judgment once they have felt the full weight of Briony’s actions. Elke D’Hoker takes up the topic of secular confession and its recurrence in contemporary

fiction, observing that the concept of authority—which, in religious confession, gives the figure of religious authority all power to grant absolution—is less certain in a fictive realm. Are authors dependent upon readers for acceptance and atonement, or do closure and absolution come simply from speaking one's truth out loud? D'Hoker concludes that, in the case of *Atonement*, Briony's confession is enough. He notes, "She finally writes a story that she is prepared to recognize, acknowledge, and defend. In doing so, she achieves atonement of a kind. For by claiming this particular story—in which the lovers end happily—as her truth, she achieves a measure of self-acceptance, if not self-forgiveness" (41).

However, Briony's "self-acceptance" at the end of her narrative seems somewhat inconclusive. She has taken a stand on her version of the story—a "stand against oblivion"—and it is a stand she is willing to defend. Nevertheless, Briony seems acutely aware that her stand will be critiqued and questioned. She acknowledges that the story could be revised, given more time and less exhaustion, and admits that "the attempt was all": "There is no one, 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" (350-51). It seems significant to consider these statements in relation to Briony's position at the end of the novel. She faces impending dementia, which will erase all of her memories, indeed her grasp of language itself. She will experience a literal "death of the author," after which only the text will remain. In that realm, where the reader then holds the final role in constructing meaning, Briony's "attempt," as well as her "limits and terms," will inevitably be challenged. Simply put, Briony seems aware that the mere confession is not enough, and that her attempt may not withstand the interpretations of "tenacious" readers such as Robbie. True to the novel's symmetrical form, Briony raises this very question of a text's ownership in the first chapter, when she shows her younger self fretting over the interpretation of *The Trials of Arabella* by her mischievous cousins, who go about "steadily wrecking Briony's creation" (16). We have already seen that Briony abandons drama for the novel's potential to forge a more direct connection with readers. As she recollects in 1999, "I explained that it was entirely my fault the rehearsals fell apart, because halfway through I had decided to become a novelist" (348). Yet, if Briony is to succeed as a novelist, her greatest responsibility is to shape critical, responsible, and invested readers—for these will be the ones capable of granting final atonement and absolution for her crime.

McEwan's novel serves, in a sense, as a primer on reading itself, with clear implications for the writer's obligations toward his or her reader.⁵ His extensive use of literary allusions and his play with the metafictional elements of the narrative structure direct readers to read more closely and to question even minor details that may obscure or reveal the "truth" embedded within the text. Although Briony's early draft of Part One may have concealed events beyond

recognition, McEwan's move to make transparent all of Briony's revisions, as well as her revised understanding of the modernist aesthetic, suggests the responsibility an author holds for representing truth. Narrative need not be straightforward and linear, or even necessarily realistic, so long as readers can mine the signs, symbols, allusions, reversals and other textual clues to uncover the text's meaning. Nevertheless, just as Woolf dismisses reliance solely upon technique in modern fiction, McEwan makes clear that critical devices alone are insufficient for forging connection with readers. His representation of Briony's "optimal reader" in the novel's opening pages suggests that the very concept of an ideal professional reader—one who will recognize each subtle textual clue at the appropriate moment—is itself another fictional construct by the author. Therefore, the writer's task of developing an emotional identification with the reader becomes even more urgent. The narrative trail must lead readers to more fully grasp the human experience, and do so in a manner that implores them to feel. For such a novelist, the greatest failure would be the un-invested, uninterested reader McEwan stages in Cecilia's stance toward *Clarissa*.

The novel's implicit argument about the value of critical reading, as well as its direction on just *how* we can become better readers, both seem particularly applicable today: We live in an age in which the dangers of misreading have become increasingly threatening—and increasingly common. It is a world in which romantic narratives abound (particularly national narratives during times of war). *Atonement* encourages readers to read our own world better, as well as the texts we encounter. It seems no coincidence that Paul Marshall, perhaps the novel's darkest character and Lola's actual rapist, is an unabashed capitalist particularly skilled in unethical marketing practices. And while certain iniquities of capitalism depend upon *uncritical* consumption, Marshall represents the kind of modern figure who often escapes critique. In fact, within the novel, even the two most critical readers we meet, Robbie and Cecilia, never suspect Paul of his crime. McEwan restages the characters' confusion over the rapist's identity for the reader to reexamine his or her own assumptions. In the process, he warns of the need to resist facile identifications that label indeterminacy as "progressive" and retrievable meaning as somehow "conservative"; rather, my reading of *Atonement* validates the continued pertinence of Iser's approach. If we as readers also failed to recognize Paul's role in the first section of the story, McEwan seems to suggest, there is an urgent need for us to become more critical readers of this—and any—text. The novel makes clear that such misreading can have serious consequences in the lives of others. Although its didacticism lacks the moralizing of Richardson's *Clarissa*, McEwan's novel offers its own instructive lesson, in this case about the ethical obligations of readers: to observe, question, investigate, and, finally, to feel.

NOTES

I would like to thank Brian Richardson for his generosity in reading several versions of this article.

¹ For an excellent discussion of contemporary debates within reader response criticism, see B. Richardson.

² Brian Richardson points out different notions of an optimal reader designated differently by various "monastic" reader-response critics, that is, critics favoring a prescriptive, formalist reading of a text (32).

³ While the textual allusions direct readers toward the "real" crime at the heart of the novel, I would resist classifying this move as entirely prescriptive in terms of the readers' acquisition of any final meaning. In fact, many of these allusions suggest the scope of "productivity" at the heart of *Atonement*. For example, does the reference to *Lolita* broaden our understanding of Lola and Paul's eventual marriage, or does it complicate this final outcome? Although the allusions serve to ground the text, McEwan seems aware that they will also fuel readers' individual interpretations and reshape judgments on both the new text and the old, as Finney has suggested.

⁴ Crosthwaite finds this particular experience comparable to the compulsions that often follow a traumatic event (63-64). Crosthwaite's argument makes clear the ethical dimensions of a reader's emotional investment in the text.

⁵ For statements on the ethics of reading, see Miller, Newton, and Phelan.

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