

# THE PERILS OF SCIENCE AND IMAGINATION IN

## IAN McEVAN'S ATONEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*In a Godless universe, science - better said the popular science - tends to replace divinity, providing a different moral code. The fanatics of science can be more seriously misled by their convictions than the genuine church-goers. The pretensions of scientific thinking are manifest in arts, but also in love. Jealousy can be justified by the respect due to the principles of science. Identified with the absolute truth, science is transformed into a pitiless God. The new religion excludes humanity and compassion. Briony Tallis cannot escape the confines of her alleged objectivism without a life-long atonement for her youth sins.*

Key-words: *fiction, moral code, prejudice, science, sexuality.*

Ian McEwan's constant preoccupation in all his novels - be they simple or sophisticated -, has been the overlapping of imagination and the scientific spirit. One could hardly take the British novelist for a scientific mind. Nonetheless, on the one hand, he ironizes the hot-headed fanatics and, on the other hand, laughs at those who take logic for granted. The focus of my paper will be the massive, mainstream-like novel *Atonement*, but it will not confine to this one solely. Making use of the methods of cultural studies, I shall try to highlight the tensed relationship between the imaginative and the scientific spirit. Of course, this tension does not exist

between imagination and science taken as cosmic categories, not as narrow states of mind.

### **Memory as mediator**

The most obvious link between science and imagination is memory. Let us consider this fragment from *Waiting for Godot*:

*Estragon: I'm unhappy.*

*Vladimir: not really! Since when?*

*Estragon: I'd forgotten.*

*Vladimir: Extraordinary the tricks that memory play!*<sup>1</sup>

Maybe Estragon's unhappiness has its origins in the loss of memory. Aphasia means a blockage in the present. Why cannot one live up to the *carpe diem* precept when memory vanishes? Perhaps because there is no term of comparison between what is and what will be. Postmodernity actually resorts to aphasia in order to enjoy the irresponsibility of the present. Already with the modernists the mysterious forces that manipulated people's destinies became obvious. As it were: common people could do nothing to control their lives, so they satisfied themselves with minimalist environments and non-historical approaches to history.

Putting aside T. S. Eliot's grand pessimism in *The Waste Land*, Ian McEwan approaches postmodernism in a sceptical, self-amusing way. All his narratives concentrate on controversial aspects of apparently common destinies. He identified some of them: "I have a number of obsessions [...] Oedipal situations recur constantly in my work [...] I think there is a projected sense of evil in my stories"<sup>2</sup>.

### **Irony – the second mediator**

In fact, the writer enjoys relativizing whatever certainties humans may have. In *The Cement Garden*, 1978, the family values and ethical code are shattered by the early death of the parents of four underage kids. The situation is pretty much similar to the one in William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*. The kids and the adolescents are now stranded on an urban island, namely the messed up periphery of an industrial city. Their father

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<sup>1</sup> Beckett, Samuel, 2006. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Rogers, Ryan, (ed.), 2010. *Conversations with Ian McEwan*. USA: University Press of Mississippi, p. 16.

dies in an attempt to civilize nature - that is to cement the house garden. Once this effort proves to be a fatal failure, the children become an easy prey for their own instincts. Later on, their mother dies too. In an effort to preserve their family so that they should not be sent to different orphanages, they hide their mother's corpse in the basement of the house. From a surrogate family they advance to a "real" one. Jack, the fifteen-year-old brother, and Julie, the seventeen-year-old sister, embark upon an incestuous relationship. The author confessed that he had an "idea that in the nuclear family the kind of forces that are being suppressed – the oedipal, incestuous forces – are also paradoxically the very forces which keep the family together". This coincides with the fact that "the oedipal and the incestuous are identical"<sup>3</sup>. The connection between imagination and science is realized with the help of irony, which encompasses and transcends every good deed. On account of incompleteness in the human psychological development every good deed ends up as an evil action.

Very much the same is the situation in *Atonement* (2001), where the target of authorial irony is Briony Tallis, a thirteen-year-old girl belonging to the upper-middle-class. As I shall pinpoint, Ian McEwan's irony is always intertextual. In this novel he parallels Briony's mindset with that of Catherine Morland, the heroine from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, who avidly reads Gothic novels. Both characters mistake the boundaries of reality for those of fiction. More than this – and here is to be traced the ironical vein – Briony loves to generate order, even if this one is established in a dictatorial manner. But in every McEwan's novel imposing order at the level of details means generating disorder at the higher levels. It is impossible to clarify one's life prior to obtaining full possession of the big picture of reality. Not the complete picture – accomplishment impossible for a being trapped in a tridimensional existence -, but the big one, at least.

### **Scientific imagination**

Much in the same way does science come to its conclusions. First, the scientists venture all sorts of hypotheses, and then, once the selection is done, they stick to it and refute all other arguments. After a while, they are forced to admit that their knowledge was completely biased. Thus, imagination is exploited and afterwards is completely banned. The cycle is resumed over and over again in a strict loyalty to a politics of small steps. Karl Popper extensively discussed the laziness of the biased knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

(*The Myth of the Framework: in Defence of Science and Rationality*), but my point for now is not an epistemological one, it regards the game theory.

In the wake of James Joyce's style, McEwan also aims at clarity<sup>4</sup>. As I was telling above, Briony too is obsessed with clarity, in sheer opposition to her elder sister Cecilia, who conjugates an artistic temperament with disorderly habits. From this we deduce two types of imagination – a scientific one, enforcing some quick conclusions upon a larger-than-life elusive reality, and a truly artistic one, free of the temptation to distribute people and events into categories. The writer admits to have been preoccupied with “the idea that security is a comforting illusion, but only an illusion”<sup>5</sup>. Ironically enough, Briony tries to save her elder sister from somebody she considers to be a sexual maniac. But Robbie Turner is Cecilia's newly acquired lover, promoted to this position after a friendship which lasted all their childhood and teenage. For the pre-teen Briony sexual intercourse looks very much like an assault and she decides to save her sister by testifying against Robbie. Besides being a subtle ironist, McEwan is a wizard when it comes to blending coincidences with predestined gestures. He adores acting as Fate in his novels. So, he pays great attention to “how private fates and public events collide”<sup>6</sup> and to “the way time accelerates in a crisis”<sup>7</sup>. *Atonement* is a slow-motion massive novel which simply takes off after 150 pages. The writer is an executioner indulging the destruction of his characters' happy plans. Right in the beginning of the novel Briony envisages her success in the adults' world when she casts herself in the leading role in her own play: *Arabella's Trial*. Unexpectedly, Briony's cousin, Lola Quincey, subtly substitutes herself in this role leaving the dramatist with no other solution than to suspend the rehearsals. As Briony longs to be in the limelight, she has to commit something *di grande*, so she speculates much in the same way a scientist would do. Once the conclusions are drawn, she will not lose time to double-check them and tragedy is at an arm's length. Robbie will be imprisoned and after three years spent in jail he is set free on the condition to go on the front and fight in the first line. Thus, Cecilia and Robbie's life is practically ruined. The study of the incomprehensibility at the level of macro and microuniverse is practised by McEwan in a way that reminds Katherine Anne Porter's description of Thomas Hardy's method, namely

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<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, Margaret and Jonathan Noakes, 2003, *Ian McEwan – the Essential Guide*. London: Vintage, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, *ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *ibidem*, p. 13.

that he believed that “human nature is not grounded in common sense, that there is a deep place in it where the mind does not go, where the blind monsters sleep and wake, war among themselves and feed upon death”<sup>8</sup>.

### **The risks of islandization**

Significant for Ian McEwan’s perception of imagination is another one of his novels, *Enduring Love* (1997). The central couple here is hybrid in terms of intellectual approach to reality. While Joe Rose fetishizes rationality, his wife, Clarissa Mellon, relies more on John Keats’s “negative capability”, namely the apophatic understanding of the universe. When Joe praises the evolutionary psychology with its deterministic implications, she calls him a child<sup>9</sup>; because children long for certainties, even if they are able to cope with fairy-tale creatures. It is not that they like more imagination; children do not imagine para-realities; they vividly live in them as in an enlarged pluridimensional world. There is no effort to imagine new dimensions. Of course, Joe painfully and stubbornly tries to scientifically assimilate the strange events taking place in the world that surrounds him. But moral decisions and infatuation are unpredictable. Why only one man remains suspended to the rope hanging from the wind-swept balloon? Why John Logan is ready to sacrifice his life in order to save an unknown child? Why Jed Parry falls in love with Joe following the fugitive look they exchange while they grasp the rope of the balloon? Why some people develop the Clérambault syndrome and, consequently, have the impression that a certain person loves them without even knowing them? This is the inexplicable side of the world, but Ian McEwan’s narratives are never simple, manicheistic binomials. The scientific minds are many times limited, but the imaginative and the religious ones, although larger-than-life, get closer to craziness and violence. It is clear that a balanced person should keep away from excess and fanaticism but, similarly, such a person should not linger in a cosy lukewarm existence. There are few happy characters in McEwan’s novels. Still, they do exist! One condition for happiness is to avoid psychic isolation. Reclusiveness mortifies Jed Parry who is described by his creator as “a lonely man, very much an outsider with his own deep, intrapsychic world”<sup>10</sup>. Isolation and

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<sup>8</sup> Porter, Katherine Anne, 1952. On a Criticism of Thomas Hardy. In *The Days Before*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Gibson, Jane, 2003. *Ian McEwan’s Enduring Love*, U.K.: Cotton & Jarrett, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Reynolds, Margaret and Jonathan Noakes, 2003, *Ian McEwan – the Essential Guide*. London: Vintage, p. 16.

*islandization* generate perversity or moral numbness: it is the case of the protagonists in *Amsterdam* and *The Cement Garden*. This can be understood as a “game that highlights cultural difference and in a sense engages in what we might call: ‘othering’ the other side, exaggerating difference while ignoring continuities and parallels”<sup>11</sup>.

### **The problem of truth – *more geometrico***

In the case of Briony Tallis imagination could be “lacanized” up to the point where we could risk the supposition that the younger sister saves her elder sister from incomplete *jouissance*. In one of his seminars, Jacques Lacan identified the causes of mediocre pleasure:

*Analytic discourse demonstrates [...] that the phallus is the conscientious objector made by one of the two sexed beings to the service to be rendered to the other [...].*

*I would go a little further. Phallic jouissance is the obstacle owing to which man does not come (n’arrive pas), I would say, to enjoy woman’s body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ<sup>12</sup>.*

In such a context sheer sex becomes expressive of limited knowledge. When the younger sister perceives the implication in a sexual act of her elder sister Cecilia as physical assault exercised by a man upon her, she reads the event correctly up to a certain point. Briony’s theory upon truth is geometrical: “the truth was in the symmetry which was to say, it was founded in common sense<sup>13</sup>. There is an obvious dissymmetry in sexual intercourse and Briony wants to straighten the world around her. In a society deprived of tradition and moral rules: “The truth had become

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<sup>11</sup> Kroes, Rob, 2012. Citizenship, Nationhood and Multiculturalism: European Dreams and the American Dream. In *Hypercultura*, no. 2(10)/2012, pp. 21-32. Victor Publishing House, Bucharest, p. 22. Available at

<http://hypercultura.zzl.org/Hypercultura%202012.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, Jacques-Allain, (ed.), 1972-1973. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, Book XX. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton&Company, p.7.

<sup>13</sup> McEwan, Ian, 2002. *Atonement*. London: Vintage, p.169.

as ghostly as invention”<sup>14</sup>. Such a line of interpretation offers an opening towards a writer taken aback by the profusion of possible decodings within his work. Briony’s lifelong sense of unredeemed guilt is all the same motivated by her “self-mythologizing” and by the “temptation for her to be magical and dramatic”<sup>15</sup>. In other words, the girl’s efforts to purify and organize the appearances are polluted by a narcissistic bias.

Ian McEwan advances the hypothesis that without imagination there is no knowledge. Even wrongfully used imagination stimulates understanding, be it in the form of life-long remorse. The writer wants us to assume his vision that Briony’s life moved from initial narcissism towards self-flagellation, on account of the harm she produced: “how guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime”<sup>16</sup>.

### **The architecture of the subjectivized reality**

Imagination more than gives birth to knowledge – it extracts the latter even by way of force. The biased gnoseology, obtained with the help of ambitious imagination, was characteristic for the Enlightenment’s scientific enthusiasm. This way of enlarging the scope of the known facts does not necessarily improve the quality of life; it only satisfies narcissistic representations. For Briony, to know more means to gain access into the adults’ world. While she walks slashing nettles pitilessly: “she decided she would stay there and wait until something significant happened to her. This was the challenge she was putting to existence – she would not stir, not for dinner, not even for her mother calling her in. She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance”<sup>17</sup>.

Properly said, imagination becomes perilous when its products are forced upon reality. *Reality*, not the *real*, is commonly shared by everybody, while imagination has individual specificity. We are told that “Briony began to understand the chasm that lay between an idea and its execution”<sup>18</sup>. The moment she realizes this, she starts deforming reality. As a matter of fact, the girl does not invent as much as she distorts the general accepted outline of reality. The weird fact is that the adults around her,

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<sup>14</sup> *ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> *ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> *ibidem*, p. 173.

<sup>17</sup> *ibidem*, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> *ibidem*, p. 17.

police forces included, are ready to take for granted her suppositions announced as undisputable truth. With such reasons, it becomes conspicuous that people are irritated by truth. They only want to support their favourites and to eliminate the intruders, especially when these ones are full of resources. That is why only Grace, Robbie's mother, has the courage to oppose to the general condemnation, in a "gesture of scepticism, an antifoundational bias, and an almost dislike of authority"<sup>19</sup>. Even Cecilia does not openly side with Robbie when he is accused of having raped the underage Lola. All she can do is to reproach her family – Robbie's foster-family – their narrow-mindedness. Whatever argument might Robbie bring in support of his innocence no one of his friends seems disposed to accept it. At a closer look, the reader notices that the maze of guilty evidence built by the author is rather flimsy. McEwan intends to highlight, ironically mimicking E. A. Poe's ratiocination stories, that the human mind is fundamentally biased, unwilling to deeply analyse the objectivity of facts. Assuming this line of interpretation, we get to the conclusion that imaginary is necessarily subjectivized or politicised. The author cleverly suggests the possibility that artistic products are compulsory ingredients in the subjectivization of the imaginary. The Tallis mansion is strewn with symbolic artefacts. Architecture, anyway, is seen as essential to the craft of writing by McEwan: "novels do resemble buildings. A first chapter, a first line is like an entrance hall, a doorway"<sup>20</sup>. He favours clarity at the level of style, but, on the other hand, plays with contingencies and cultural interpretations. Consequently, his style invites, even entraps the reader, but later on this one gets baffled by the profusion of significant details and openings. As Dominic Head observes, "one of his primary motivations as a novelist is to dramatize the emphatic impact of contingency on imagined lives, and to trace the personal tests and moral dilemmas that result from the unforeseen event"<sup>21</sup>. Modernist and postmodernist devices attack and counterattack all along the novel.

Imagination gives vent to fiction and fictionalising offers supplementary powers to the fictionalizer over reality. The young Briony gets intoxicated with the fumes of re-writing reality: "writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturization"<sup>22</sup>. Producing fiction as such equates to playing chess with

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<sup>19</sup> Sim, Stuart, (ed.), 2001. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. USA: Routledge, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Reynolds, Margaret and Jonathan Noakes, Work Cited, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Head, Dominic, 2007. *Ian McEwan*. U.K.: Manchester University Press, p.12.

<sup>22</sup> McEwan, Work Cited, p. 7.

people's lives. It means power. That is why Briony is an unreliable witness, as Henry James's narrators were.

### **Artistic symbols of conformist representations**

Symbolic vestiges of power are the artefacts or their reproductions. In front of the Tallis house there is a fountain, a "half-scale reproduction of Bernini's *Triton* in the Piazza Barberini in Rome"<sup>23</sup>. The miniaturized reproduction of the classic *objet d'art* would indicate the qualities of the family: decency, harmony, equilibrium and elegant beauty. Instead, the fountain will be the place wherein a precious vase, transmitted from generation to generation, gets broken. Also, it is next to the fountain that Briony, positioned at a faraway window, sees her sister undressing in Robbie's presence in order to dive into the fountain and recover some broken pieces from the vase. She will interpret this gesture as a masculine threat. The vase in its turn should be the symbol of an Arcadian family tradition: "It was genuine Meissen porcelain, the work of the great artist Höroldt, who painted it in 1726". Cecilia, nonetheless, is not fascinated by the delicate porcelain: "Its little painted Chinese figures gathered formally in a garden around a table, with ornate plants and implausible birds, seemed fussy and oppressive"<sup>24</sup>. The same intention of creating and Arcadian realm is salient in the construction of a temple on the island in the middle of a lake found on the property. The temple had been "built in the style of Nicolas Revett in the late 1780s [...] intended as a point of interest, an eye-catching feature to enhance the pastoral ideal"<sup>25</sup>. There was no religious destination attached to it.

The structural formula of this rationalistic environment, which is supposed to engender forged Victorian ideals, is congruent with Briony's state of mind. While she rambles across the fields and thinks of a possible admission into the adults' world, she slashes the nettles as if she disliked their disordered arrangement. With Cecilia, in exchange, the situation is completely different: she wonders how flowers can distribute themselves in various patterns every time she drops them into a vase. Both sisters are imaginative beings only that Briony's departure from reality is artsy and all-round affected: "Wasn't it writing a kind of soaring, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination"?<sup>26</sup>. Her imaginary is double-folded:

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<sup>23</sup> *ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> *ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> *ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> *ibidem*, p. 157.

first, as a child, she destroys her sister's happiness trying to protect her; second, as an old famous writer, she redeems – in one of the two endings of the novel – the two lovers' sufferings. Of course, we could see Briony as the fictional and fictionalizing consciousness of a coward and frigid Cecilia – but this would make a totally different line of interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

Imagination is considered by Ian McEwan one of the most active tools in advancing hypotheses. In his novels, the weakest characters are those who fetishize the extremes: science or mysticism. No one would admit the role played by imagination in formatting their beliefs. In fact, imagination controls everybody's intellectual activities, whether they like it or not. The knowledge the protagonists obtain from experience or from hypotheses will be fatally biased. Objectivity is impossible within a tridimensional world. Whatever relates to humanity gets to be biased. Ian McEwan's novels are a fictionalized study of the conditions of *moral* objectivity in an epistemologically biased society. We have to err in order to advance. The author seems to suggest that we should plan our errors in order to forward epistemology and to avoid non-ethical implications of our actions.

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