

**Samara Anne Cahill**

## **An Untidy Finish**

### ***Atonement* as Political Gothic**

In the controversial epilogue of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Briony Tallis informs the reader that she has "always liked to make a tidy finish." The statement is formally ironic because it renders the conclusion of *Atonement* untidy: only in the epilogue do readers learn that Briony, a character within the narrative, also constructed the narrative. Her guilty consciousness, haunted by the ghosts of the past, the villains of the present, and the dementia that awaits her in the near future, is the filter through which readers have experienced the story of the love affair between Briony's sister, Cecilia, and Cecilia's lover, Robbie Turner. An exploration of the ethical crafting of narrative – both fictional and historical (that is, ostensibly "non-fictional") – *Atonement* formally mimics the comforting conventions of both religious ritual and realist description in order to suggest that "reality" is much more accurately apprehended (and represented) by a gothic, rather than a realist, sensibility.

Set in England in the years immediately before and during World War II, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) charts the thwarted romance of cross-class lovers, Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallis family's charwoman, and the recipient of a university education financed by Cecilia's father. Yet the novel is more centrally concerned with the ethical representation of reality through fiction. The person who best embodies how fiction can affect (and effect) reality is Cecilia's younger sister, Briony, who sends Robbie to jail based on a story she has created: the false accusation that Robbie raped Lola, Briony's cousin. Further, after three lengthy segments detailing the trajectory of Cecilia's and Robbie's love affair (starting in 1935 and continuing during World War II) and Briony's attempt to atone for the harm she caused them, readers learn in the coda (titled "London, 1999") that Briony has narrated the preceding novel – all that readers know, or think they know, of Cecilia and Robbie has been filtered through Briony's guilty consciousness. Cecilia and Robbie do not survive to love and to live happily ever after. They remain separated throughout the war (except for one brief encounter) and they die apart – Robbie at Dunkirk, Cecilia in London.

Several scholars have ably examined Briony's manipulation of the narrative conventions of the realist novel, but none of them has so far focused on the peculiar recurrence of religious symbolism in the novel, despite the religious resonance of

the title.<sup>1</sup> I contend that the references to repetitive religious ritual – explicit mentions of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as well as the practices of atonement, praying the rosary, making the sign of the cross, and genuflecting in church; structural allusions to the Stations of the Cross, pilgrimage, and the Passion of Jesus Christ – are significant because they ultimately underscore the damage caused by a too ready and unthinking reliance upon formal, predictable structure. Furthermore, the specifically Roman Catholic associations of *Atonement's* religious allusions hint at the novel's gothic allegiances, for gothic novels often rely on Roman Catholic stereotypes – villainous figures of corrupt, absolutist religious authority such as Schedoni in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) or Ambrosio in *The Monk* (1795) – to propel their narratives of persecuted innocents. Yet the Roman Catholic characters in *Atonement* (Betty the maid; the working-class family sheltered at the Tallis household during the war) are victims of the class hierarchy just as much as Cecilia and Robbie are. There are no easy, tidy symmetries in *Atonement*; at least, no symmetries that should be trusted. “Reality” is unjust, disorderly, and nightmarish – any attempt to fit it onto a procrustean bed of poetic justice will fall short of actual justice. Fiction ought to reflect the monstrosity of reality and a gothic sensibility may be more critically aware than a “realist” one.

This is why Briony's “atonement” for the crime of falsely accusing Robbie – her rewriting of the story of Cecilia's and Robbie's love – ultimately falls short, for, as the elderly Briony informs us in the novel's coda, as a storyteller (and a famous novelist) she has “always liked to make a tidy finish” (353).<sup>2</sup> Taken as a whole – the novel written by Briony and the confessional coda that complicates it – *Atonement* does *not* make a tidy finish. Briony reveals Cecilia and Robbie, retrospectively, to be phantoms – the fantasies of Briony's guilty consciousness. In other words, readers are meant to endure the pain, as Briony (facing dementia and death) no longer can,

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1. Particularly insightful have been the analyses of Brian Finney and Kathleen D'Angelo, as I will discuss below; however, Alistair Cormack's position that classical realism is *not* overturned in *Atonement* is worth noting. Cormack argues that rather “than belonging to the uncertain postmodern era, *Atonement* belongs to a world in which Enlightenment thinking, far from being in crisis, is confident enough to chastise fiction and its fripperies: an identifiable real world lies beneath, and casts a critical eye on, the fictional surface created by the novel's narrator” (Alistair Cormack, “Postmodernism and the Ethics of Fiction in *Atonement*,” in *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Sebastian Groes [London: Continuum, 2009], 70–82, p. 78). I must disagree. “Enlightenment thinking” (by which I take Cormack to mean an ideological privileging of rationality, realism, and probability) is laid out in *Atonement's* epigraph only to be refuted by the novel in its entirety.

2. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage Books, 2002).

of an untidy finish. In the epilogue Briony raises the question of who an author can turn to for forgiveness in a world in which the author is God. She concludes that 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. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists” (371). *Atonement*, therefore, while not a religious novel, is a novel about the individual’s ethical relationship to creation, history, fiction, and the ritual through which we construct meaning.

*Atonement*’s allusions to religious ritual (such as praying the rosary, partaking of communion, going on a pilgrimage) function alongside its negotiation of formal structures familiar to readers of the canonical novels *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones*. I conclude that McEwan invokes familiar narrative structures in order to “mash” them up, challenging the readers’ comfort and inciting them to a greater tragic awareness of the horrific gothic dimensions of everyday life. In order to make that case, however, I must first outline the ethical import of McEwan’s narrative sleight of hand by setting up the thematic and formal significance of *Atonement*’s epigraph.

This epigraph is taken from the famous passage in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) in which Henry Tilney confronts Catherine Morland, a naïve reader of gothic novels, with the damage that her reading of “reality” in terms of the conventions of gothic novels has done. Tilney sternly reprimands Catherine,

Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open?<sup>3</sup>

For Tilney, the real world – at least, the real “England” – is nothing like the nightmare world found in gothic novels in which evil monks and other sinister figures orchestrate elaborate, improbable rituals of emotional torture for doomed innocents amidst imposing architectural monstrosities, dramatic weather patterns, lurking shadows, and bloody evidence of foul deeds. Catherine – who has anticipat-

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3. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Susan Fraiman (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 136.

ed experiencing some or all of these conventions in Henry's home of Northanger Abbey – runs off in tears of shame, clearly convinced of the truth of Tilney's statement. One might, following the epigraph, expect to encounter in *Atonement* the narrative of a young woman learning the perils of using fictional conventions to interpret real life experience.

Predictably, *Atonement* opens with thirteen-year-old writer Briony Tallis feverishly preparing for the rehearsal of her play *The Trials of Arabella*. Over the course of the next day Briony will encounter and misread a consensual sexual act, a rape, and an obscene letter. The narrative she crafts from these misreadings will send an innocent man to jail. Briony's "atonement" will be her attempt to use narrative to make amends for the suffering she has caused. In other words, the thematic relevance of the epigraph seems perfectly clear: just as Catherine Morland incorrectly assumed that Henry's father, General Tilney, had murdered his wife (as an aloof figure of patriarchal authority might be expected to do in a gothic novel), so Briony assumes that because Robbie Turner engaged in a consensual sexual act with her sister, Cecilia, so he must also be the rapist of her cousin, Lola. The "truth was in the symmetry," as Briony believes (169). Yet the truth is never clear or symmetrical in *Atonement* and neither, I argue, is the epigraph. Rather, with the title of his novel (*Atonement*) and the epigraph (a key passage from *Northanger Abbey*), McEwan has invoked two systems of belief – institutional religion and realist prose fiction – that depend for their meaning on communally agreed upon conventions. *Atonement* indicates that these conventional structures must be encountered anew for the sake of the intersubjective experience of both "real" life and fiction.<sup>4</sup> McEwan does this not simply by using *Atonement's* infamous coda ("London, 1999") to alter the diegetic level of the preceding narrative (Briony reveals herself to be both character and "author" of the narrative); the coda alters the diegetic level of the epigraph, too.

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4. By "communally agreed upon conventions" I mean the repetitive, tradition-oriented nature of religious ritual (particularly in Roman Catholic practice because that church bases its authority on the historical continuity of the Pope's direct succession from the apostles of Christ and because several distinctly Roman Catholic practices are mentioned in *Atonement*) and the "formal realism" of prose fiction which is frequently (though problematically) associated with the genre of the novel. As Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan describe it, formal realism is "a set of procedures through which the novel specifies the setting, the time, and the individuality of the events and personalities that it imagines." Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan, *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660–1789* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4. Emphasis mine. *Making the Novel* provides a particularly lucid overview of the peculiar blend of utility and inadequacy that "formal realism" offers for studies of the novel. Formal realism is, significantly, the "pointillist approach to verisimilitude, the correction of detail that cumulatively gives such satisfaction" that Briony as a novelist celebrates (359).

McEwan is contradicting the fictional Henry Tilney's description of "reality." Paradoxically, this circling back to the epigraph prevents *Atonement* from ever having the "tidy finish" its fictional author, Briony Tallis, always wanted. *Atonement* is not a postmodern novel; it is a twenty-first century political subgenre of the gothic – a genre devoted to that most asymmetrical, distorted, and nightmarish of realities: monstrous institutional authority. The shared subtext of *Atonement* and *Northanger Abbey* implicates history, genre, and reading practices in the crafting of political "reality."

*Northanger Abbey* is unusual among Austen's novels for at least two reasons. First, it is the novel in which she defends the community of novelists as "an injured body" (22). In fact, Austen's narrator delivers a rousing manifesto in which she concludes that in a novel "the greatest powers of the mind are displayed . . . the most thorough knowledge of human nature" (23). In other words, both *Northanger Abbey* and *Atonement* (signaled by the epigraph) are meditations on the value of fiction for the human community. They can both be interpreted according to Adam Zachary Newton's important argument in *Narrative Ethics* that fiction is concerned with the ethics of intersubjectivity. Newton argues that there is an inbuilt ethics of narrative, that narratives – especially ones that, like *Atonement*, are about the act of storytelling – establish an intersubjectivity between the isolated reader and the narrative he or she is encountering. Newton is clear that by "narrative ethics" he does not mean "moral paraphrases"; rather, "narrative ethics" entails the recognition that in encountering a text in its full "particularity" the reader necessarily becomes responsible to it.<sup>5</sup> There is "a reciprocity between life and fiction" even though they are not identical to each other.<sup>6</sup>

Newton's interpretive framework coincides with Margaret Doody's conclusion in her monumental *The True Story of the Novel* that our "sense of 'being alive' is not attained through a series of imagined contacts with things, but through a myth that makes sense of things, sensation and desire, together. This myth is connective. . . . The Novel through the generosity of 'character' enables us to enter."<sup>7</sup> The novel, in other words, is ethical, intersubjective, connective, and it is all of these things because it invites anyone who wishes to enter into a realm of constructed meaning. That meaning has a relation to "reality" even if it is not a strictly mimetic representation of the world beyond the page. Myth, like the two institutions McEwan invokes in *Atonement* – institutional Christianity and realist fiction – enables the experience

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5. Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 33, 30.

6. Newton, p. 8.

7. Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 479.

of a “reality” that is not available to the senses: the realm of belief, faith, fantasy, hope, dreams as well as nightmares, and imagination. Perhaps these are all enabling fictions. Perhaps.

Second, *Northanger Abbey* is Austen’s most political novel. Several scholars have pointed out that Henry Tilney ignores the unrest of Austen’s contemporary England in his defense of reality against the irrationality of gothic representation. Most prominently Robert Hopkins has argued that *Northanger Abbey* addresses the “nightmarish political world of the 1790s and very early 1800s” (including the effects of enclosure on the rural poor and, according to Walton Litz, whom Hopkins cites, the Gordon Riots).<sup>8</sup> Further, Claudia Johnson argues that “the gothic is in fact the inside out of the ordinary . . . *Northanger Abbey* does not refute, but rather clarifies and reclaims, gothic conventions in distinctly political ways.”<sup>9</sup> So, too, does *Atonement*.

Tilney’s rejection of gothic conventions as a guide to interpreting “reality” hinges on an invocation of what is “probable” and a description of the clearly structured, civilized society of England. McEwan uses the conventional structures of religious ritual and narrative form to turn “reality” inside out. “London” in “1999” is a nightmare world of ghosts, unavenged corpses, victorious villainy, and a systemically abusive network of institutions. The “gothic” – asymmetrical, improbable, violent, unjust, a world in which innocence languishes while villainy flourishes – is the “real.”

The tidy forces of rationality and civilization so insisted upon in *Atonement’s* epigraph seem, by the end of the coda, to be in the thrall of the evil Lord and Lady Marshall. *Atonement* has been characterized as a postmodern novel masquerading as a realist novel<sup>10</sup>; but in fact McEwan has created a novel much more aligned with the aesthetics and sensibility of the gothic, a genre characterized by everything that seems antithetical to the Enlightenment appreciation of order, harmony, symmetry, reason, probability. Moreover, as Margaret Doody points out,

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8. Robert Hopkins, “General Tilney and Affairs of State: The Political Gothic of *Northanger Abbey*,” *Philological Quarterly* 57.2 (Spring 1978) 214–24. Excerpted in *Northanger Abbey*, Norton Critical Edition, 294–302, p. 301.

9. Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 28–29, 32–48. Excerpted in *Northanger Abbey*, Norton Critical Edition, 306–325, p. 310.

10. Brian Finney, who argues that *Atonement* is “a work of fiction that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction,” positions himself against the “minority of reviewers” who, he asserts, “[I]ulled by the long Part One . . . into the security associated with the classic realist novel . . . dismisses the coda as an instance of postmodern gimmickry.” Brian Finney, “Briony’s Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.3 (Winter 2004) 68–82, p. 70.

all-or-nothing Realism cuts out fantasy and experiment, and severely limits certain forms of psychic and social questioning. . . . It is noticeable that the eighteenth century, the first in which the Novel is apparently cramped into domesticity . . . also invents the “Gothic” novel, a momentous invention first wrought by women and homosexuals who could not be happy with the conceptual “reality” on which domesticated Realism was founded.<sup>11</sup>

The gothic – from Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) through Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) to Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) – presents reality as often frightening, overwhelming, dark, uncertain, and not structured by the comforting symmetry of poetic justice by which virtue is rewarded and vice punished. It is my contention that McEwan, like the eighteenth-century authors described by Doody, uses ostensibly comforting structures (religious ritual; literary conventions) to underscore that *no one* ought to be satisfied with the “reality” upon which “all-or-nothing Realism” is supposedly based. McEwan’s negotiation of the effects of form is further indicated by his intertextual use of two highly influential pre-gothic eighteenth-century novels – Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747/8) and Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) in the first part of *Atonement*.<sup>12</sup> McEwan, in other words, places *Atonement* in conversation with two of the most canonical eighteenth-century novels, thereby commenting on the formation of the novel as a genre and challenging the genre’s mimetic relationship to the reality that it ostensibly represents. *Atonement* presents a “reality” that is just as nightmarish as the most excessive gothic novel.

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Both social and literary history feature prominently in *Atonement*. Brian Finney, for instance, has argued that McEwan’s “enduring concern with the act of narration in *Atonement* surfaces . . . in his frequent use of intertextuality.”<sup>13</sup> While other critics have dwelt on the frequency of *Atonement*’s intertextuality, they have not – with the exception of Elke D’Hoker’s analysis of *Atonement* in terms of the *secularized* confessional genre – dwelt on the possibility of seeing religious works as intertexts in McEwan’s novel.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly puzzling given not only the religious

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11. Doody, p. 294.

12. By “pre-gothic” I mean published prior to the publication of what is taken to be the first gothic novel: Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

13. Finney, p. 72.

14. Elke D’Hoker, “Confession and Atonement in Contemporary Fiction: J. M. Coetzee, John Banville, and Ian McEwan,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 48.1 (2006) 31–43, p. 37.

inflection of *Atonement's* title, but also given the scholarly attention to the resonances between *Atonement* and its intertext *Clarissa* (a novel based on a “religious plan” in which the villain, Robert Lovelace, famously dies declaring, “LET THIS EXPI-ATE”).<sup>15</sup> I will argue that in using these religious references McEwan is certainly concerned with the ethics of reading, as Kathleen D’Angelo has persuasively argued, but that he is particularly demonstrating the ethical imperative to question the comfort offered by familiar structures on *and* off the page.<sup>16</sup> *Atonement* is a call to encounter narratives in their full particularity.

### Trinities

*Atonement* is, in part, a novel about “literary memory.”<sup>17</sup> D’Angelo situates *Atonement* in relation to the narrative techniques of the eighteenth-century novels *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones*, and, thematically, to Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752), a novel about the real-life consequences of bad reading that is itself intertextually linked with perhaps the first modern European novel, the humane satire on reading practices, Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605; second part, 1615). Jocelyn Harris sees *Atonement* as a “re-visioning” of *Clarissa* with an alternate ending provided.<sup>18</sup> Building on D’Angelo’s argument in reading *Atonement* in terms of *Clarissa* and its contemporary text *Tom Jones*, I will show that McEwan engages contrasting narrative structures familiar to readers of classic novels – tragic epistolarity in Richardson’s case, comic architectonics in Fielding’s – to challenge

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15. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross, Penguin Classics edition (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 1495, 1488.

16. 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) 88–105.

17. Pilar Hidalgo, “Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.2 (2005) 82–91. p. 86. Hidalgo has also pointed out “the subtle deployment in part 1 of narrative forms developed by the English novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (p.85). Hermione Lee argues, “all through, historical layers of English fiction are invoked – and rewritten.” Hermione Lee, “If your memories serve you well,” *The Observer* (23 September 2001) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.bookerprize2001>> (22 June 2011). As mentioned above, Elke D’Hoker has considered it in relation to the literary genre of the confession. Geoff Dyer has described it as “creatively extending and hauling a defining part of the British literary tradition up to and into the 21st century.” Geoff Dyer, “Who’s afraid of influence?” *The Guardian* (22 September 2001), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/22/fiction.ianmcewan>> (22 June 2011).

18. Jocelyn Harris, “Clarissa Lives! Reading Richardson through Rewritings,” in *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Samuel Richardson*, edited by Lisa Zunshine and Jocelyn Harris (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2006), 140–146, p. 140.

the reader's investment in the comfort of structure. Primarily, McEwan does this by manipulating the reader's expectations in a way comparable to Clarissa's manipulation of her protean, mercurial rapist, Robert Lovelace, a man committed to the act of transmuting tragedy into comedy. *Atonement* may not, as *Clarissa* does, have a "religious plan," but it does, like the earlier novel, interrogate the failure of its contemporary society to encounter suffering adequately.

In Part 1 of *Atonement*, we are introduced to the future lovers, Cecilia and Robbie, during an interchange about their shared university reading material:

"How's *Clarissa*?" [asks Robbie]

"Boring." [replies Cecilia]

"We mustn't say so."

"I wish she'd get on with it."

"She does. And it gets better."

(25)

The interchange presumably refers to the notorious prolixity of Samuel Richardson's monumental epistolary novel, a prolixity produced by the author's subordination of plot to sophisticated representations of psychological response. The eponymous heroine of *Clarissa* doesn't escape from her family's house, Harlowe Place, until the fourth volume of the novel (as published in its first edition). Furthermore, her lengthy house arrest precedes the central drama of the prolonged sexual power play between Clarissa and Robert Lovelace that results in her rape and death. Apart from the intertextual resonance of mismatched lovers, both novels are concerned with tradition, social hierarchy, and property (Harlowe Place and the Tallis estate); with sex and trauma; and with the power of the letter – it is Robbie's accidentally obscene letter to Cecilia that Briony uses to support her accusation that he raped Lola.

To begin the comparison with Richardson's text – like *Atonement*, a narrative of rape, persecution, and misreading – Clarissa is a beautiful paragon of English womanhood. Her grasping materialist family, the Harlowes, try to coerce her into an advantageous match with a repulsive man while the unscrupulous libertine, Robert Lovelace, simultaneously tries to wriggle his way into her affections. Frightened and overwhelmed, Clarissa inadvertently runs off with Lovelace. His overtures progressively escalate until he drugs and rapes her. Ultimately Clarissa dies, having constructed a sympathetic community around her example of suffering virtue.

Lovelace is an appealing villain with a charming sense of play. Yet his penchant for comedy, his commitment to the belief that no consequences are truly final, results in his misreading of Clarissa's character and his lack of understanding that the suffering he causes her has real consequences. He believes that anything can be turned to a comic purpose, one characterized by a happy ending and a satisfying, symmetrical, and conventionally expected conclusion. He is very much like Briony.

His misrepresentations of Clarissa to others increase her isolation and vulnerability, culminating in the rape. Clarissa ultimately responds by getting “on with it,” that is, by beating Lovelace at his own game.

Harassed by Lovelace after the rape, Clarissa decoys him away from her location by promising to meet him at her “father’s house” (1233). Lovelace misinterprets this to mean Harlowe Place, when in actual fact Clarissa means heaven (her “father” is God, not Mr. Harlowe). Lovelace ignores the biblical language Clarissa uses to open her message – “I have good news to tell you” (1233) – obtusely missing an important intertextual resonance. Lovelace later blames Clarissa for her manipulation, but the misinterpretation is actually his own fault and a predictable consequence of his inadequate reading practices, themselves a product of his lack of moral and emotional responsiveness. As Belford, Lovelace’s friend and a former rake writes, upon Clarissa explaining the allegory to him, “A *religious* meaning is couched under it, and that’s the reason that neither you nor I could find it out. . . . I stood astonished for a minute at her invention . . . and at thine and my own stupidity, to be thus taken in” (1274). Having been taken in by Lovelace’s fabrications, Clarissa “gets on with” her life by fabricating a fiction of her own. Like Lovelace, Richardson’s readers felt taken in and betrayed that Clarissa would choose heaven over the temporal pleasure of marriage. Some even engaged in their own rewrites of the narrative.<sup>19</sup> *Atonement* has provoked similar reactions and it, too, can be seen as “getting on with” the business of decoying readers in order to critique complacent reading practices.

*Tom Jones* – perhaps the most rigorously symmetrical of novels – ends happily and is a significant intertext in *Atonement*, too. *Atonement*, like *Tom Jones*, is organized into three geographically specific sections: country–road–city (London) with a final return to the country estate (Paradise Hall in *Tom Jones*; the Tallis estate, now significantly renamed the Tilney Hotel, in *Atonement*). Part 1 of *Atonement* sets up the crisis – a rape occurs on the Tallis country estate and Robbie is arrested for it based on Briony’s accusation; Part 2 follows Robbie as he journeys through France on foot to reach the shore at Dunkirk; Part 3 follows the adolescent Briony as she works as a nurse in London during World War II and attempts to atone for injuring Robbie and Cecilia; there is also the coda titled “London, 1999” in which the elderly Briony journeys back to the Tallis Estate to celebrate her birthday and to contemplate a life afflicted by vascular dementia (which entails the gradual loss of her memory). Similarly, *Tom Jones* is famously divided into eighteen books: the first six books describe Tom’s childhood and adolescence in the countryside on Squire Allworthy’s estate; the middle six books follow Tom, exiled from Paradise Hall because of a false accusation, as he journeys on the road suffering various acci-

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19. Harris, pp. 141–142.

dents and injuries associated with an army; the final six books describe Tom's misadventures and repentance in London. At the end of the novel Tom returns to the country with his love, Sophia. Yet it is Briony, not Robbie and Cecilia, who returns to the Tallis Estate (Tilney Hotel) to preside over her birthday celebrations, which include a family reunion and a completed performance of her childhood play, *The Trials of Arabella*. Unlike *Tom Jones*, *Atonement* offers no happy ending for the lovers: the coda substitutes the guilty Briony.

But there are further points of interest in McEwan's organization. Part 1 of *Atonement*, unlike that of *Tom Jones*, is the longest section and comprises half of the book. Part 1 is also the only section divided into chapters, of which there are fourteen. Given the title, *Atonement*, the number of chapters in this important section is significant, especially given Briony's reference to the Roman Catholic meditative tool of the rosary in the final chapter of Part 1 (Briony's "guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime," 173), and her ironic frustration that Robbie appears to be a "good shepherd" in rescuing Lola's younger twin brothers after they run away at night (183; it is during the search for the twins that Lola is raped). The Roman Catholic imagery, the reference to the repetitive, ritualistic prayer of the rosary, should suggest some connection to the fourteen Stations of the Cross, a formal, communal ritual most often practiced by Roman Catholics during the forty days of penitence prior to the celebration of Jesus Christ's resurrection at Easter. The Stations, which are generally depicted pictorially along the walls of every Roman Catholic church to encourage mental reflection and imaginative, participatory commemoration, enumerate the events of Jesus Christ's Passion – his arrest, unjust condemnation, journey to Calvary, crucifixion, and shameful death. Part 1 of *Atonement*, in short, is the "eternal loop" of Briony's memories and imaginative projections leading up to her crime and Robbie's unjust condemnation; Part 2 is Robbie's Passion, his military pilgrimage to Dunkirk in the hope of salvation (his longed-for reunion with Cecilia).<sup>20</sup> Briony's imaginative recreation of it is a ritual recreation that she returns to just as a penitent fingers the beads of a rosary.<sup>21</sup>

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20. The religious dimension of Robbie's pilgrimage is reinforced by the description of his ritual touching of Cecilia's letters (carried in the "breast pocket" of his military uniform) as "a kind of genuflection" (226). Genuflection is the practice of kneeling and making the sign of the cross when approaching, or passing in front of, the crucifix (which is not simply a representation of a cross but specifically the depiction of Jesus Christ's body *on* the cross) placed near the altar in every Roman Catholic church.

21. The recreation of the Passion is divided across the fourteen chapters of Part I (the false accusation and condemnation) and all of Part 2 (the injured Robbie's walk to his death at Dunkirk mirrors that of Christ's journey, after being scourged, to his crucifixion at Calvary).

We might notice something else about the structure of Part 1 – especially as the narrator draws our attention to the fact that it has all occurred in a single day; that Mrs. Tallis sees Robbie as a “polluting presence”; and that the young Briony herself describes it as a “tragedy” (182–185). The narrative unfurls according to the three unities of time, place, and action and terminates with a bright young man of ambiguous paternity being condemned by temporal authority. Part 1 is modeled, therefore, on both the classical Greek tragedy of Oedipus and the biblical Passion of Jesus Christ. Briony is a Judas but also a chorus member and artist who constantly reworks the same discrete experiences into alternate narratives. Her compulsion to narrate is that of both the artist and the penitent. Her narrative is a confession, the work of the artist-as-penitent.<sup>22</sup>

McEwan offers two narrative outcomes associated with two reading practices for consideration: Richardson’s claustrophobic epistolary domestic tragedy of psychological and sexual trauma and Fielding’s classically freighted social panoramic comedy of young adult sexuality. McEwan “gets on with it,” just as Clarissa does, by doing the unexpected: taking a reader’s horizon of expectations for granted in order to undo those expectations. Mashing up Richardson’s and Fielding’s narrative techniques – Richardson’s epistolary tragedy, Fielding’s architectonic comedy – and both pagan and Christian narratives of suffering, McEwan criticizes any unreflective investment in any of them as inadequate. McEwan’s formal cues suggest that the comfort offered by structure should itself be questioned. Ultimately, the ethical reader may enjoy the pleasure of the text, but he will not refuse the pain it gives.

### Fingering the Beads

McEwan makes a significant allusion to the rosary as a model of Briony’s narrative practice, so a brief description of the practice associated with it is in order. The rosary is a set of prayer beads, a meditative tool that encourages imaginative projection and a participatory engagement in biblical narratives through the process of repetitive prayer. The rosary, traditionally associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, was standardized during the papacy of Pope Pius V (1566–1572) as a set

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22. *Atonement* could be fruitfully analyzed using René Girard’s theory of mimesis, communal violence, and the scapegoat. Robbie clearly functions as a scapegoat for the Tallis family (a domestic community riddled with internal rivalries but also a microcosm of English class inequalities in the pre-World War II era). Girard’s “metanarrative” about the structural similarities of myth, religion, and fictional narrative, though controversial, would afford a productive interpretive framework for analyzing what is at stake in the persecution narrative of *Atonement*. See René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University press, 1989).

of fifteen “mysteries” or scenes from biblical accounts of Jesus Christ’s life and the formation of the early Church. The fifteen mysteries are divided into three chronologically and thematically organized narratives of five mysteries each (“Joyful,” “Sorrowful,” “Glorious”).<sup>23</sup> The structure of the rosary is meant to assist an imaginative and emotional engagement with discrete moments in the narrative of the formation of the Christian church. As the “Advertisement” to an anonymous English guide, *The Method Of saying the ROSARY Of our BLESSED LADY* (1669), explains, “the use of the following Method or manner of saying the Rosary, consisteth in a devout application, or attention of the mind to the Mystery assigned, while the Decad [*sic*] is saying, and raising correspondent affections in the will.”<sup>24</sup> The structure of the rosary enables, indeed requires, personal imaginative engagement – an intersubjective response to the experience of another. This imaginative engagement, especially in contemplating the suffering of the other, is also what makes the reading of fiction an act of ethical significance, a moment of intersubjective attention to the particularity of something or someone beyond the isolated self, as Newton would say.

However, some of Briony’s beads are more phantoms than mysteries. In Part 3 Briony, now a nurse, takes a walk across Clapham Common meditating on the marriage of Lola and her rapist, the chocolate magnate, Paul Marshall, a marriage that prevents the real rapist from ever being brought to justice. But this Briony is a phantom, a ghostly recreation of the starting point of Briony’s life as she would wish to revise it, a life in which she could achieve “atonement.” This becomes clear only at the end of the novel. Initially we are informed that, after witnessing Lola’s marriage to her rapist, Paul Marshall, Briony “as she walked along the Common . . . felt the distance widen between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back toward the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly persona” (329). Perhaps. But as Briony, the 77-year-old novelist says in the coda, “my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common . . . a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital” (370). Briony never went to the café. The timing of this departure from reality, this division of her selves, is significant, for Briony had just realized – upon encountering the church in which Lola and Paul are married – her mistake in using gothic conventions to read “reality.” Briony is surprised by the church, which resembles a “brick barn of elegant

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23. A fourth set, the “Luminous Mysteries,” was added in 2002.

24. *The Method Of saying the ROSARY Of our BLESSED LADY As it was ordered by Pope PIUS the Fifth, of the Holy Order of Preachers. As it is said in Her Majesties Chappel at S. James* (London?: s. n. Printed in the Year 1669), A2. I was able to access and compare several editions of this text thanks to the Early English Books Online database. All occurrences of the long ‘s’ have been modernized.

dimensions, like a Greek temple,” for she had envisioned it as “the scene of a crime, a gothic cathedral, whose flamboyant vaulting would be flooded with brazen light of scarlet and indigo from a stained-glass backdrop of lurid suffering” (322–323). Briony’s gothic expectations are false. Henry Tilney would seem, then, to be vindicated in *Atonement*, too, except that the implication of Briony’s misreading is even more unsettling. For it is far more horrifying that character does *not* map onto appearance, that the gothic reality *looks* like an Enlightenment structure of neoclassical symmetry and “harmonious proportions” (323). In other words, Tilney was wrong: reality is not civilized, it just looks that way. “Reality” is a white-washed sepulcher that conceals guilty consciences, unpunished crimes, and rotting corpses. The reader has unknowingly encountered ghosts and phantoms from beginning to end; the love story of Cecilia and Robbie is also a ghost story. *Atonement*’s coda springs this information on the reader and it is no wonder that readers feel betrayed.

Yet this feeling of betrayal is important for the reader’s participation in the narrative. Considering the structuring principle of religious ritual, it becomes clear that while Briony may not believe in a God higher than herself she sees Robbie as a Christ-figure whom she has betrayed. His unavenged ghost haunts her memory. Furthermore, her betrayal was facilitated and encouraged by the temporal authorities who ought to have questioned more thoroughly a narrative with so many “hair-line cracks” (168) as that provided by the young Briony. These authorities include Briony’s wealthy parents, Mr. and Mrs. Tallis; the class-conscious police who accept cigarettes from the gold cigarette case of Paul Marshall, who ought to be considered a suspect (and is indeed the rapist; 175); the medical authorities who write Robbie off as “morbidly over-sexed” (204); the military that won’t let him serve as an officer but the officers of which respond automatically to Robbie’s “toff” university accent in emergencies (193, 223); the Imperial War Museum that, while it houses the documentation Briony has used in constructing the “novel” that would vindicate Robbie, is funded by Lola and her rapist, now the litigious Lord and Lady Marshall (353, 359–360, 371). The question at the end of *Atonement* is not to whom Briony could atone but, rather, who could grant atonement to a society that would enable a child to commit such a crime?

*Atonement* is the pilgrimage of a Christ figure as imagined by a repentant Judas, but the trauma at the heart of the novel remains untreated: if a society sacrifices an innocent man to its own selfish financial interests how can it atone for this sacrifice? What author can write humanity’s cultural narratives when what terrorizes is inside rather than “out there”? Briony does not represent one girl, or one writer, or even the project of historical fiction. Briony represents collective guilt and this becomes clear when considering McEwan’s sustained engagement of *Northanger Abbey*. Brian Finney has studied the epigraph in terms of how it signals

McEwan's engagement with narrative method. While I agree with Finney's insightful analysis, the engagement of *Northanger Abbey* can be pushed further. Indeed, McEwan launches a sustained rebuttal of Henry Tilney's paean to British civility.

To turn back to the epigraph, the indictment of a naïve reader who did not extrapolate from the fact that "we are English . . . we are Christians" to logical, probable conclusions about the world: which reader is truly the naïve one – Henry or Catherine? The scaffolding of Tilney's self assurance rests on specific identities (Christian, English) being forces of order, civility, and goodness. Yet *Atonement* disrupts a faith such as Tilney's in the orderly structure of what is real or probable (or unquestionably admirable about one's own culture). Mapping Tilney's reassuring descriptions of his contemporary England on to the England described in the coda of *Atonement* reveals that Catherine's "gothic" reading of reality may not be so unrealistic after all. In fact, *Atonement* could be seen as a point-by-point refutation of Tilney's description of England.

What is probable, after all? Robbie's section (Part 2), detailing his march across France as he slowly dies, dwells on the *surreal* experience of war: bodies instantaneously vaporize; dismembered limbs hang from trees; individuals exist one moment and vanish the next; the world is *not* probable, sensory perceptions are *not* reliable. Further, in *Atonement* education is inadequate because it does *not* prepare young men and women for war. (Cecilia and Robbie both graduated from Cambridge.) Laws *do* connive at atrocities when the interests of the wealthy are privileged above basic justice. Crimes *can* be perpetrated despite the presence of voluntary spies. As a surprised Briony remarks of the police during the rape investigation, it seemed "as if these terrifying authorities, these uniformed agents had been lying in wait behind the facades of pretty buildings for a disaster they knew must come" (169). Newspapers do *not* lay everything open because publishers can be bankrupted by being sued for libel by people like Lord and Lady Marshall (359). Neither do roads necessarily lay everything open for, as the teenage Briony experiences in World War II London, all "the signs had been taken down or blacked out" to confuse possible German invaders; indeed, most "plans and maps of the city had been confiscated by order" (318). And, as the elderly and dying Briony reflects as she is driven across London in 1999, "the addresses of the dead pile up" (355). London – the center of England's political, economic, and cultural power – is a map of the dead, a graveyard haunted by ghosts.

Briony cannot escape from the nightmare community of that ghostly walk across Clapham Common in which her cowardice persuaded her to prefer her own comfort to an encounter with her "recently bereaved sister" (371). The artist-as-penitent has no higher power to offer her salvation. She has only the comfort of a fabricated structure; the reader does not even have that.

### The Comfort of Structures

Like another unconventional narrator, Tristram Shandy, Briony staves off illness, impotence, and death through artful digression. Imitation and imaginative recreation not only constitute an attempt to understand another or to prolong one's own pleasure (though they are those, too), they are ultimately the attempt to acknowledge another's suffering. Yet while the "attempt was all" for Briony Tallis, who is both writer and actor in her own tragedy, it is not enough for the reader (371). This insufficiency mirrors the frustration of some reviewers of *Atonement*, a frustration similar to that felt by Richardson's contemporaries. Like Clarissa's decoying of Lovelace, McEwan presents readers with a happy resolution, one that is revealed to be historically false, to demonstrate to readers the ethical implications of accepting comfortable conventions rather than recognizing another's suffering.<sup>25</sup>

Fiction and imaginative meditation merge in the penitent's desire to atone. Yet if Briony, in writing fiction, figuratively fingers her rosary for the rest of her life, reliving her memories, she acknowledges in the coda that she has no God other than herself to turn to and that that god is slowly losing her memories. Nor are historical records reliable. We are left, ultimately, with a virtual world of ephemera, memories, loss, and corrupt social powers – Paul and Lola, Lord and Lady Marshall – invested in keeping the truth unknown and having the power to ensure that it remains so, at least in their lifetime. You can only speak the unpleasant truth about yourself and the dead, as Briony observes of libel (370), and because she cannot condemn (or feels she cannot condemn) the Marshalls in print, she instead resurrects another couple, Robbie and Cecilia, in fiction. Understandably, Briony wants to end her narrative happily – her emotional investment and her desire for a "tidy finish" seem to demand it – but the narrative reflects on her contemporary society. Briony's society enabled the couple outside of her power, the Marshalls, to thrive, to exercise institutional authority, indeed – given the Marshall's hefty monetary gift to the very museum to which Briony donated her archives – the ability, perhaps, to make evidence of their crime disappear (353, 360). The Marshalls have, after all, silenced dissenting voices, according to Briony, since the 1940s, when Paul Marshall made his fortune from the war (370). When Paul tells Lola to "bite" his candy bar (with the suggestive and polysemous brand name "Amo"), in the afternoon before he rapes her, he signals his investment in consumption, an investment underscored by his complacent reference to the tragedy of *Hamlet* – the most famous line of

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25. Indeed, McEwan's narratives evince a deep distrust of symmetry and geometry going as far back as the short story "Solid Geometry" of *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) in which the narcissistic narrator uses the "plane without a surface" – the textual portal to an alternate reality (like fiction) – to cruel effect.

which he quotes off-handedly without having read or seen the play (60, 62). This investment he successfully persuades Lola to share, given her passing familiarity with only an interrupted pantomime version of the same tragedy (61). The future Lord and Lady Marshall objectify and consume tragedy and it is no wonder that Briony refuses to reproduce it.

For readers the ending is not happy – people like the Marshalls do go unpunished for terrible crimes. Further, readers may wonder if the war (and the crime), as described by Briony, ever happened. Briony’s perceptions were unreliable throughout Part 1 of the novel and she is not alone, for a group of adults could not perceive “reality” any better than a misguided child. This becomes clear in perhaps the most explicitly gothic scene in *Atonement* – the moment of terrible misrecognition just before Robbie is arrested. In the early morning light, the police and members of the Tallis family see a figure moving across the lawn:

There was a collective murmur . . . as they caught sight of an indefinable shape, no more than a greyish smudge against the white . . . As the shape took form the waiting group fell silent again. No one could quite believe what was emerging. Surely it was a trick of the mist and light. No one in this age of telephones and motor cars could believe that giants seven or eight feet high existed in crowded Surrey. But here it was, an apparition as inhuman as it was purposeful. The thing was impossible and undeniable, and heading their way. Betty, who was known to be a Catholic, crossed herself as the little crowd huddled closer to the entrance. (182)

Of course, it is a trick of the mist and light – there is no giant, Robbie is carrying one of the twins on his shoulders. But this scene perfectly captures what is at stake in McEwan’s engagement of literary and social myth. Robbie appears, out of context, like the giant helmet that crushes Conrad at the beginning of *The Castle of Otranto* (itself the beginning of the gothic genre); no one can correctly perceive him because they have no point of reference. Though Betty’s making the sign of the cross (a tacit plea for divine protection) might seem at first to be superstitious she is no more ignorant than any of the other spectators. Indeed, her ritual act associates the community’s misrecognition of Robbie with the text – the obscene letter – that is used as evidence of his sexual depravity.

Betty crosses herself, thinking she is seeing a monster. Robbie’s letter is considered obscene because it contains the word “cunt,” but the narrator, describing Briony’s reaction to the expletive, associates it with the scene of Christ’s crucifixion: “The smooth-hollowed, partly enclosed forms of its first three letters were as clear as a set of anatomical drawings. Three figures huddling at the foot of the cross” (114). In other words, the apparent obscenity can be read as a depiction of the Vir-

gin Mary, John the Evangelist, and Mary Magdalene “huddling” at the foot of the crucified Christ just as the small crowd confronted with a mysterious, larger-than-life presence “huddled” at the entrance to the Tallis mansion. Text, sacrifice, and religious ritual are all tied to together in the four-letter word that persuades Briony and Lola that Robbie is a “maniac” who must be responsible for the rape (119).

Lola and Briony’s misrecognition of Robbie as a “maniac” and the crowd’s visual misrecognition of Robbie as a giant underscore the legal misrecognition of him as a rapist. It is only Robbie’s mother, the Tallis family’s charwoman (aptly named Grace) who is able to see the fabricated reality being constructed around her son for what it is. She denounces them as “Liars! Liars!” (187). And that is what they are, and how they thrive.

*Atonement* is therefore a meditation on the reliability of both fictional and historical narratives, the social myths human communities use to fabricate meaning. It points beyond the textual author to the hegemonic authors of the “real” world, those who control the representation of “reality.” McEwan’s Marshalls and Richardson’s Harlowes are the crass materialists of the world; Clarissa and Robbie are their sacrificial victims; and the tragic recognition that the reader does not have the power to resurrect them is both ethically and aesthetically necessary. Reuniting Robbie and Cecilia suggests that all is right with the world, that “the truth [is] in the symmetry,” as the young Briony believes (169). But symmetry is what characterizes the neoclassical architecture that, as Finney has shown, is associated in *Atonement* with the Marshalls. The truth is not symmetrical, and as long as people like the Marshalls have hegemonic power the world is a gothic reality – a white-washed sepulcher. Briony’s final draft (1999) is an entombment rather than an atonement.

*Atonement* ends with Briony’s birthday celebration – a last supper, a communion – that returns to the origin of the trauma. *The Trials of Arabella*, the play Briony wrote and was rehearsing with Lola and the twins during that fateful afternoon in 1935 is finally performed by a younger generation of their family. Briony’s narratives have always been written for approval, have always been directed to an audience whom she wishes to be sympathetic. The danger, however, the potential trauma of contemporary life, is that the audience, whether through corruption or complacency, may approve her efforts too well. Briony and her publishers do not have the courage to try the public taste; ultimately they are afraid of being sued, afraid to speak the truth to power. And because the tragedy of *Atonement* is *not* formed on a “religious plan” there is no God to turn to; even the comforting structure of religious ritual is inadequate.

If Briony’s London in 1999 is a whited sepulcher, an institution concealing a victim of institutional abuse in its bowels, then what is a contemporary Henry Tilney to do? For the Tilneys of the world are wrong: a girl’s nightmares – Cruella

de Vil (as Briony calls the elderly Lola, 358), a woman of the devil but also of the city – walks the streets of London in 1999. The horror is that whatever Lola wanted, Lola got. The same is true of Paul, who, in old age, finally cuts the figure of a “cruelly handsome plutocrat” (357). Like Dorian Gray, the Marshalls seem, by all appearances, to have even time in their thrall. Moreover, the newspapers, the museums, and the government all applaud their philanthropic efforts. “London” in 1999 is revealed to be a negative-image landscape – seemingly orderly and rational, just like the church in which the Marshalls were married, but really a gothic construction contaminated by death, illness, hypocrisy and injustice.

If *Northanger Abbey* is Austen’s defense of novelists, *Atonement* is the defense of Catherine Morland’s gothic sensibility – a sensibility that turns out to be a much better guide to “reality” than Tilney’s “sense of the probable.” For *Atonement* implicitly, but ironically, asks the same question regarding the relationship of reality and atrocity that Henry Tilney poses to Catherine Moreland: “what ideas have you been admitting?” By the end of *Atonement* the “reality” of England makes much more sense when interpreted in terms of gothic rather than “realist” conventions.

But there is something more. If, as Newton asserts, there is an “ethical mandate built into language use: vocative, interpellative, or dative impulses in utterance, we might say, which take narrative shape as address, command, plea, gift, and trust” and if these “become even more palpable” in “the light of an alternate narrative counter-text of secrecy, gossip, coercion, or control” (25), then what is the ethical response to *Atonement*? What myths, as Doody might put it, does humanity need to enter into and rewrite? McEwan invites us through the looking glass.