Experiencing Fiction

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Delayed Disclosure and the Problem of Other Minds

Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*

As its title suggests, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) focuses on its protagonist’s transgression and her effort at making amends for its disastrous consequences. In this respect, it is a novel that all but cries out for attention to readerly judgments. Furthermore, as a brief description of its progression indicates, it is a novel in which the interrelations of interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments—by and of its protagonist, Briony Tallis, and of the implied McEwan’s performance—are central to its effects. On a hot July day in 1935 Briony misidentifies her sister Cecilia’s lover, Robbie Turner, as the man who has sexually assaulted her cousin Lola, and then years later tries to do what she can to atone for her error. McEwan then throws a startling twist into the progression in its last twenty pages. These pages, Briony’s diary entry on the night of her seventy-seventh birthday, reveal that the previous 330 pages have been her novel as well as part of McEwan’s. In other words, Briony’s “Atonement,” a straightforward and fascinating modernist novel, is Parts One, Two, and Three of McEwan’s *Atonement*. McEwan’s novel continues for this fourth section, “London, 1999,” which, among other things, suddenly reveals that his *Atonement* is a self-conscious, self-reflexive novel employing a character narrator who is herself a novelist. Furthermore, Briony’s diary entry reveals that her novel has mixed a factual account of her transgression with a fictional account of her atonement even as she now regards the novel itself as her major effort at atonement.

In teaching the novel, I have learned that flesh-and-blood readers are often sharply divided in their ethical and aesthetic judgments of McEwan’s performance, especially in this ending, with some finding it to be brilliant and admirable and others finding it to be a cheap trick or cheat, one that
delights in unfairly jerking its audience around. Although I am a member of the first group, I think one test of a rhetorical analysis of the novel is its ability to identify the sources of both responses. Consequently, when I come to discuss the ending I shall take up this division among flesh-and-blood readers. But I begin with two broad questions and a strategy for answering them. How do we judge—formally, ethically, and aesthetically—(1) Briony’s embedded novel and (2) McEwan and his novel, especially his springing so much on us so suddenly? I propose to address these questions by looking, first, at the progression in Part One, especially the nature of the instabilities at the time of the entrance and the role of judgments in the representation of Briony’s transgression, and, second, at the reconfigurations of the overall progression required by “London, 1999,” reconfigurations that will necessarily lead us to consider the functions of Parts Two and Three in the novel’s design.

The Beginning of Atonement

The major event of the progression, Briony’s misidentification of Robbie as Lola’s assailant, occurs near the end of Part One, in the thirteenth of its fourteen chapters. Much like Sethe’s choice in Beloved, this event is a central node of the progression, something to which and from which everything flows for both characters and audience. Everything else in Part One carefully contextualizes it. Part Two recounts Robbie’s experiences as a consequence of it—he is a soldier in the retreat to Dunkirk in 1939, having joined the military in order to escape his prison sentence. Part Three narrates Briony’s experiences as a nurse in the war and the direct steps she takes to atone (her crime and the war combine to make her choose nursing rather than the university); and “London, 1999” offers Briony’s reflections on her struggle to come to narrative terms with her error and its consequences.

The beginning consists of the title, the epigraph, and the first three chapters of Part One; these chapters introduce two global instabilities and suggest at least a potential connection between them. The first instability involves Briony and her aspirations to be a great writer, and the second involves the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie. I shall return later to the issue of how the delayed disclosure that McEwan’s beginning is also the beginning of Briony’s novel leads us to reconfigure our judgments and our understanding of the novel’s progression.¹

¹. It is worth asking whether the paratexts of McEwan’s Atonement are also the
The epigraph is the passage from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* in which Henry Tilney calls Catherine Morland to task for her erroneous gothic suspicions about General Tilney’s mistreatment of his late wife. The passage reads in part:

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 observations of what is passing around you. . . . Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?

They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her room. (n.p.)

While the title signals that McEwan’s narrative will involve some effort at making amends for a transgression, this epigraph invites us to expect that the transgression will involve a misjudgment like Catherine’s, the product of an overactive imagination under the influence of certain kinds of literature. At the same time, the title itself suggests that McEwan’s novel will have a different emphasis from Austen’s, if only because Catherine’s misjudgments do not have consequences so serious that atonement becomes a major issue in *Northanger Abbey*.

The paratexts clue us to recognize the first chapter’s exposition about thirteen-year-old Briony’s ambitions to be a writer of fiction as the basis for significant instabilities. The chapter itself then gives some specificity to those instabilities, and Chapter Two, which switches from Briony to Cecilia as the primary focal character, introduces instabilities between Cecilia and Robbie, instabilities that are especially evident in their struggle at the fountain over the Tallis family’s heirloom vase, which they manage to break. Chapter Three then returns to Briony’s perspective and establishes the potential connection between the two sets of instabilities, as it reveals Briony’s reflections on the scene at the fountain between Cecilia and Robbie.

The textual dynamics of Chapter One proceed through the introduction and complication of the local instabilities surrounding the difficulties Briony faces in trying to get her cousins, Lola, age fifteen, and the twins...
Jackson and Pierrot, age nine, to help her perform her new (and first) play, *The Trials of Arabella*. The play is a highly romantic affair complete with a heroine who endures many hardships before being rescued by a disguised prince. But these local instabilities about staging the play are framed by passages such as the following that combine exposition, initiation, and hints at a global instability:

writing stories not only involved secrecy it also gave her [Briony] all the pleasures of miniaturization. A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. The childhood of a spoiled prince could be framed within half a page, a moonlit dash through sleepy villages was one rhythmically emphatic sentence, falling in love could be achieved in a single word—a *glance*. The pages of a recently finished story seemed to vibrate in her hand with all the life they contained. Her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so. A crisis in a heroine’s life could be made to coincide with hailstones, gales, and thunder, whereas nuptials were generally blessed with good light and soft breezes. A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter a reward withheld until the final page. (7; emphasis in original)

In addition to the exposition about Briony’s character and her interests, the passage initiates us into a particular kind of rhetorical exchange. The narration in this passage is primarily from Briony’s vision, but it is primarily rendered in the narrator’s voice. The technique, common in modernist novels, allows us both to enter with some sympathy into Briony’s attraction to writing stories and to recognize the potential dangers of that attraction. The most telling sentence is: “The pages of a recently finished story seemed to vibrate in her hand with all the life they contained” and the most telling phrase is “seemed to vibrate,” because the sentence and the phrase dramatize the difference between Briony’s interpretive judgments and ours. Briony understands her stories to be much more than words on a page, to be something closer to a container vibrating with life itself. But we interpret “seemed to vibrate” as double-voiced and double-visioned: for Briony it is an innocent metaphor, but for the narrator and the authorial audience it points to Briony’s failure to recognize the cost of making “an unruly world . . . just so.” In making the world conform to her
romantic desires and tastes, including a penchant for the pathetic fallacy, her stories suck the life out of unruly reality. What's vibrating in the pages is not life itself but her romantic imagination and her belief in the power of the verbal formulas she has learned. At this point in the narrative, there is no significant ethical consequence to Briony’s interpretive misjudgment, though there are aesthetic consequences for her stories, since they are all melodramatic, romantic, and formulaic. Our awareness of the gap between her interpretive judgment and our own sets up the potential for ethical and aesthetic consequences within McEwan’s novel.

Chapter Two continues the pattern of Chapter One’s initiation but shifts the focus to Cecilia and her unstable situation, and toward the end of the chapter, also includes Robbie’s perspective. Cecilia, having recently graduated from Cambridge, is feeling uneasy during her summer at home. She feels that she should move on soon but is reluctant to:

Lingering here, bored and comfortable, was a form of self-punishment tinged with pleasure, or the expectation of it. If she went away something bad might happen or, worse, something good, something she could not afford to miss. And there was Robbie, who exasperated her with his affectation of distance, and his grand plans which he would only discuss with her father. They had known each other since they were seven, she and Robbie, and it bothered her that they were awkward when they talked. Even though she felt it was largely his fault—could his first have gone to his head?—she knew this was something she must clear up before she thought of leaving. (21)

The instability with Robbie gets immediately complicated as the two of them meet by the fountain on the estate, have an awkward conversation, and end up struggling over Uncle Clem’s vase, which Cecilia had been planning to fill with water. The struggle leads to their breaking the vase and some of the pieces falling into the fountain. When Robbie begins to unbutton his shirt in preparation for going in after those pieces, Cecilia acts more swiftly:

Immediately she knew what he was about. Intolerable. He had come to the house and removed his shoes and socks—well, she would show him then. She kicked off her sandals, unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, unfastened her skirt and stepped out of it and went to the basin wall. He stood with hands on his hips and stared as
she climbed into the water in her underwear. Denying his help, any possibility of making amends, was his punishment. The unexpectedly freezing water that caused her to gasp was his punishment. She held her breath, and sank, leaving her hair fanned out across the surface. Drowning herself would be his punishment. . . .

Her movements were savage, and she would not meet his eye. He did not exist, he was banished, and this was also his punishment. He stood there dumbly as she walked away from him, barefoot across the lawn, and he watched her darkened hair swing heavily across her shoulders, drenching her blouse. (29)

The technique focuses on Cecilia’s interpretive and ethical judgments and allows us to recognize that the only accurate one is her recognition that Robbie intends to enter the fountain. Her interpretation that her self-punishment in the freezing water is actually his punishment is far off the mark, though his visual pleasure in her disrobing and acting the part of the “frail white nymph” from whom water cascades “far more successfully than it does from the beefy Triton” in the fountain (29) is no doubt leavened by her anger. More than that, the ethical judgment that he deserves punishment is off the mark. Each of them insists on handling the vase, and each is responsible for its breaking. But what the whole scene—their awkward conversation, the struggle over the vase, Cecilia’s impetuous plunge into the fountain before Robbie’s eyes—reveals is that Cecilia can’t leave because of her desire for Robbie, a desire that she has only partially repressed. That repression is revealed in the scene in her overt anger at Robbie and her covert anger at herself, and its partiality is revealed in her stripping to her underwear. The anger provides the cover under which she can display her body before him, and it’s striking that the triggers for that display are his beginning to unbutton his shirt and her thought about his removing his shoes and socks in the house: “well, she would show him then.” Show him, that is, how to strip right.

Our interpretive judgment about the workings of repression contextualizes our ethical judgments of Cecilia and, thus, our emotional responses to the scene. Cecilia’s interpretive and ethical misjudgments are more significant as indicators of her unstable situation than of her permanent character, and, as a result, we regard her with considerable sympathy. Though the chapter ends before we learn a lot about Robbie, our developing responses to Cecilia lead us to desire positive developments in their relationship.

Chapter Three establishes the potential connection between the instabilities about Briony’s writerly ambitions and those about Cecilia and Robbie
as the narration returns to Briony’s perspective and eventually moves to her reflections after she witnesses the scene at the fountain. But first the narrator shows us some of Briony’s other thoughts about writing:

a story was a form of telepathy. 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)

The technique here moves from the vision of Briony and the voice of the narrator to the vision and voice of Briony herself. The distance between the narrator’s interpretive judgment and Briony’s is again significant: the naiveté about the relation between life and her stories that affects her thoughts in Chapter One comes through here in her view of language as a transparent medium. The passage itself enacts the problem with her view by means of the word castle. When we encounter the clause “You saw the word castle,” we are likely to imagine a castle, but we are highly unlikely to imagine the highly embellished image of a castle that Briony believes we can’t help imagining. It’s revealing—and consistent—that Briony’s image is of a setting for some romantic tale.

The juxtaposition of this passage with Briony’s reflections on how she could take a different approach to writing and represent the scene at the fountain shows Briony caught between significantly different ideas:

Even as her sister’s head broke the surface—thank God!—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. . . .

She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view [the two at the fountain and herself as observer]; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains.
None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn’t only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people were as real as you. And only in a story could you enter the different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have. (37–38)

Briony “need not judge,” but this passage invites us to, and we make the interpretive judgment that these reflections present a major step forward in Briony’s thinking about the relation between writing stories and life. To go from the black-and-white worlds of her previous stories to this one in which judgment drops out except to show the “equal value” of multiple minds is to move a long distance. The passage underlines Briony’s in-between status, her having one foot in the world of childhood and another, more tentative one in the world of adulthood. Briony’s understanding of judgment itself reflects this in-between status. At this stage she can recognize the limitations of the blunt judgments associated with “good versus bad” and “hero versus villain,” but she cannot do better than oppose that option to another stark alternative, that is, no judgment at all. The more nuanced judgments McEwan invites us to make in Chapter Two—and indeed, of Briony herself in this passage—are not yet options for her.

Our interpretive judgment about Briony’s in-between status also carries with it a recognition of Briony’s potential for more sophisticated aesthetic achievements. But our understanding of her in-between status also means that the ethical dimension of such achievements will depend on how she develops that potential. On the one hand, showing the equal value of multiple minds can itself be a substantial ethical achievement, since it requires, among other things, acts of sympathetic projection into those other minds. On the other hand, because the previous narration has invited us to judge the actors in the scene at the fountain, McEwan as implied author suggests that, within the terms of this narrative, representation without judgment is a less desirable ethical and aesthetic achievement than representation with nuanced judgments. In sum, even as the progression directs us to recognize Briony’s insight as a significant breakthrough, it also invites us, on ethical and aesthetic grounds, to stop short of fully embracing Briony’s new aesthetic principle of not judging.
Thus, by the end of Chapter Three, McEwan has launched his narrative with three global instabilities: (1) will Briony be able to achieve this new vision in her writing? It’s telling that Briony does not immediately try to execute her ideas because her thirteen-year-old sense of order asserts itself: “she must complete what she had initiated, there was a rehearsal in progress, Leon was on his way, the household was expecting a performance tonight. . . . The writing could wait until she was free” (39). (2) If Briony does achieve her new vision, will it be ethically satisfactory? (3) How will the progress of Briony’s quest relate to the development of the relationship between Cecilia and Robbie? Will one influence the other, and, if so, how? At this point of entrance, we have no clear expectations about the ways in which these instabilities will get complicated or resolved.

Readerly Judgments of Briony’s Misjudgment

Let us now move forward into the key event in the voyage, and examine the role of judgment in the representation of Briony’s misidentification of Robbie as Lola’s assailant. In this section, I will look at the judgments we make when we assume that Part One is only McEwan’s novel and then, in the next section, will consider how those judgments get modified—if at all—once we learn that Part One is also Briony’s novel. The voyage between Chapter Four and the key event is devoted to providing the context for the transgression, a context that shows it to be overdetermined.

In addition to Briony, Cecilia, their mother Emily, Robbie, and the cousins, the Tallis household is host on this July day in 1935 to Briony and Cecilia’s older brother, Leon, and to his friend Paul Marshall. Leon is a key member of Briony’s intended audience for The Trials of Arabella. Marshall remains in the background in Part One as the narrative primarily moves its focus from Briony to Cecilia to Robbie, with a few excursions into Emily’s consciousness and into Lola’s. Marshall is seen in the nursery with the children through Lola’s perception and again through Emily’s interpretation of his voice when she hears it from another part of the house. At dinner Robbie notices a two-inch scratch on Marshall’s face, shortly after Lola has shown Briony scratches and bruises of her own.

Briony’s hopes for a grand performance of The Trials of Arabella are dashed by the nonromantic realities of everyday life. Cecilia and Robbie, however, break through their repression after Robbie inadvertently gives Cecilia the wrong draft of a note, one containing the spontaneously overflow of his powerful feelings: “In my dreams I kiss your cunt, your sweet wet
cunt. In my thoughts I make love to you all day long” (80). What’s more, Robbie asks Briony to deliver the note, and she reads it before passing it on; a little later, Briony interrupts Cecilia and Robbie in the library where they are on the verge of consummating their newly discovered love.

Briony, in an effort to ingratiate herself with her fifteen-year-old cousin, tells Lola about Robbie’s note and then deems Lola’s description of him as a “maniac” to be apt. Jackson and Pierrot, the nine-year-old twins, struggle so much in their new environment that during dinner they decide to run away, though they leave a note explaining their plans. It is during the ensuing search for them that Lola is assaulted. Briony comes upon Lola and her assailant in the dark and sees only his retreating shape, yet she makes the interpretive judgment that the shape is Robbie’s. McEwan’s representation of this judgment and the reasons that Briony holds fast to it are worth a longer look.

Briony was there to help [Lola] at every stage. As far as she was concerned, everything fitted; the terrible present fulfilled the recent past. Events she herself witnessed foretold her cousin’s calamity.

If only she, Briony, had been less innocent, less stupid. Now she saw, the affair was too consistent, too symmetrical to be anything other than what she said it was. She blamed herself for her childish assumption that Robbie would limit his attentions to Cecilia. What was she thinking of? He was a maniac after all. (158)

Strikingly, this passage details not just the interaction of Briony’s interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments, but the way her interpretive judgment is overrun by her ethical and aesthetic judgments. Briony is certain that the figure she saw retreating from the scene had to be Robbie not because she has ocular proof but because that interpretation fits the narrative she is scripting on the basis of her earlier encounters with Robbie. And that narrative fit is a consequence of her ethical judgments: any one who could write that sentence in the letter to Cecilia must be a “maniac,” and, hence, Lola’s rapist. Indeed, the passage recalls the earlier one in which Briony thinks about the word castle as an example of the direct relation between signifier and signified: if Robbie is a maniac after all, then of course he is Lola’s assailant. Briony, in short, now acts not according to the insights she achieved while observing Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain but rather according to the interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic vision of her youthful romances, including The Trials of Arabella.

McEwan, not surprisingly, clearly signals that each of these judgments is erroneous. Through several scenes dominated by the technique of internal
focalization, McEwan presents Robbie as an admirable young man; what’s more, as already noted, McEwan shows that his letter to Cecilia functions to break through his and Cecilia’s repressions and take them to a state of passionate love. Without the linchpin of Briony’s ethical judgment, her interpretive and aesthetic judgments fall apart.

Although Briony’s misjudgments of Robbie have the potential to be the basis of our strongly negative ethical judgment of her, McEwan carefully guides us to a more complex response, one that continues to underline her errors while also mitigating our judgment of them. On a macro level, McEwan relies on the careful tracing of the convergence of the different characters and events to show how Briony’s transgression was overdetermined; on a micro level, he shows how difficult it was for Briony to change her narrative once she had articulated it.

As early as the week that followed, the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks. Whenever she was conscious of them, which was not often, she was driven back, with a little swooping sensation in her stomach, to the understanding that what she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that. . . . Her eyes confirmed the sum of all she knew and had recently experienced. The truth was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes. So when she said, over and over again, I saw him, she meant it, and was perfectly honest, as well as passionate. What she meant was rather more complex than what everyone else so eagerly understood, and her moments of unease came when she felt that she could not express these nuances. She did not even seriously try. There were no opportunities, no time, no permission. Within a couple of days, no, within a matter of hours, a process was moving fast and well beyond her control. (158–59)

While this passage once again emphasizes her error (“It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that”), it also emphasizes how deeply she believes in her judgments (“she . . . was perfectly honest, as well as passionate”) and how, once she’d spoken, it was impossible to qualify or otherwise add nuance to her testimony: “what she meant was rather more complex than what everyone so eagerly understood,” but

2. For an analysis of McEwan’s representation of that love, see my discussion of a representative passage in The Nature of Narrative (Schuler, Kellogg, and Phelan, 2006), 323–33.
“there were no opportunities, no time, no permission” for her to express those complexities. Consequently, McEwan is asking us to understand and even be sympathetic toward Briony’s misjudgments, even as he leaves no doubt that they are egregiously erroneous and likely to have major negative consequences for Cecilia and Robbie. Furthermore, this handling of our ethical judgments raises the aesthetic and ethical stakes of the novel at this point of intermediate configuration: how will McEwan work through the difference between Briony’s intentions (and his mitigation of our negative ethical judgment) and the terrible practical consequences of her misjudgment? How will the instability about her development as a writer, now that she has failed to live up to the insight of Chapter Three in her behavior, be complicated and resolved?

**Judgments of Briony’s Effort to Atone**

Interestingly, this last question is not resolved either in Part Two with its focus on Robbie’s experience as a soldier during the retreat to Dunkirk in 1940 or in Part Three with its focus on Briony’s experience as a nurse during the war and on her pledge to Cecilia and Robbie shortly after the retreat to atone for her crime by making a full confession. Instead, McEwan opts to include “London, 1999” and its surprise disclosures as a way to resolve that instability. The surprise disclosures, as noted earlier, are that we have been reading a novel within a novel and that Briony’s novel has seamlessly combined the historical events of Part One with her mixtures of fact and invention in Parts Two and Three. The first reconfiguration we have to make, then, is that all three Parts of McEwan’s novel have indirectly been concerned with addressing the instability about Briony’s development as a writer because they all provide evidence about the writer she has become. “London, 1999” in a sense provides Briony’s preferred way of looking at her novel, especially about her choices to alter significant elements of the history she is recounting.

Thus, when Briony’s 1999 diary entry reveals that Robbie and Cecilia are never reunited, that he dies during the retreat and that she dies a few months later when a German bomb blows up the Balham Underground station in London, we have to come to terms with both the ethics and aesthetics of her act of novel writing. We also have to come to terms with our recognition that McEwan himself has asked us to invest our emotions and desires in Briony’s quest for an atonement that he and she both knew in their different ways was impossible. I will start with how McEwan resolves
the instability about Briony’s evolution as a writer by guiding our judgments of her decisions about her novel.

In her diary entry, Briony explains that, though she wrote her first draft of the novel in 1940, it is only in her final draft that she decided to alter history—to make, in effect, another judgment that is simultaneously interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic. More precisely, she explains her interpretive judgment to alter the historical record as a consequence of her aesthetic and ethical judgments. No one would want to believe the historical facts, she writes, except in “the service of the bleakest realism,” and she decided it was important that her novel provide some “sense of hope or satisfaction” (350). Furthermore, “I like to think that it isn’t weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me” (351).

But Briony also realizes that her alteration of history for these reasons has consequences for her relation to her original purpose for writing the novel: to use the power of narrative itself as a way to atone for her crime.

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? 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. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (350–51)

To paraphrase, the novelist’s power is also her limitation: since Briony’s writing brings into being the novel’s world, including both the crime and its aftermath, her decisions about the fates of her characters, whether they conform to history or not, cannot atone for what she has done to real people. There is no one external to the fiction who can serve as judge of whether her effort is sufficient to achieve atonement. Nevertheless, Briony thinks, the effort to seek the atonement is necessary, since attempting the impossible demonstrates the sincerity and depth of her desire to atone. This conclusion allows Briony, sixty-four years after the original crime, to come to terms with the impossibility of atoning for it, with the necessity of her 59-year effort, and with its result.

Before we can judge Briony’s judgments here, we need to come to terms with how the knowledge that she is the author of Part One influences
Our response to the beginning is not overturned but deepened. We understand the instabilities about Briony, about Robbie and Cecilia, and about the potential relation between them in the same way, but we recognize that Briony herself is the agent for our insights and for our judgments of her former self. Thus, at age seventy-seven, she has attained a view of her thirteen-year-old self that is full of insight, self-criticism, and partial sympathy. (I will shortly take up the issue of how we know that she has not invented everything we read in Parts One, Two, and Three.) And given that she has directed our judgments of her thirteen-year-old self’s attraction to writing that does not judge, we can see that she has not opted for that aesthetic. Indeed, this choice of hers, enacted so brilliantly in Part One, is very much in keeping with the rejection of her submission “Two Figures by a Fountain” by Cyril Connolly at *Horizon*, which we learn about in Part Three, on the grounds that it is insufficiently narrative: “Simply put,” Connolly writes in the letter reproduced in Part Three, “you need the backbone of a story” (296).

Our understanding of the beginning—and, indeed, all the segments of Part One that are given over to the representation of Robbie and Cecilia’s consciousnesses via the techniques of modernist fiction—also deepens in another way. These segments of the novel demonstrate Briony’s success with another part of her developing aesthetic: the writer’s imperative to act upon “the simple truth that other people are as real as you” and to use narrative as a way to “enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value” (38). Since this element of her aesthetic is simultaneously a commitment to an ethical principle, Briony’s successful execution of it leads us to positive aesthetic and ethical judgments of this component of her novel.

Our retrospective look at the representation of Briony’s transgression adds another layer to our judgments rather than overturning them. It is one thing for us to regard McEwan’s mitigation of Briony’s blameworthiness as a positive feature of the narrative, quite another to make that same judgment about Briony’s own representation of her behavior, since as novelist she clearly has a conflict of interest. Nevertheless, because her narrative so sympathetically enters into the consciousnesses of the other characters, and because she so clearly signals how deficient her judgments were, McEwan invites us to admire her now clear-eyed reconstruction of what she later calls her “crime” (349).

Returning to Briony’s judgments in “London, 1999,” however, we begin to complicate this view of Briony the novelist. A key question is whether the ethical/aesthetic credo Briony espouses and practices in her
novel—entering other minds and offering nuanced judgments of them—is sufficient to warrant the liberties that she takes with history, especially since those liberties mean that she atones by allowing the fictional version of herself an atonement that she never actually achieves. The issue is complex because, as Briony notes, the readers of her novel (as opposed to the readers of her novel and her diary entry, i.e., the readers of McEwan’s novel) will not know that she has altered history, will not know how much, if any, of the novel’s action is actually based on the experience of historical personages. Here it is helpful to think about the judgments likely to be made by different audiences. The authorial audience of Briony’s novel will simply admire the brilliant representation of the minds of her main characters, especially Briony, Cecilia, and Robbie, and her exploration of transgression and atonement. Briony’s defense of her choices in relation to this audience is plausible: unable to atone for her error in her life, she tries through her art to compensate in some measure by giving such a rich mental life to Cecilia and Robbie and ending the narrative with the promise of their future happiness together. But since her authorial audience does not know the backstory of her novel the atonement is largely invisible to them: as she says, the attempt is all.

But as members of McEwan’s authorial audience we are in a very different situation because we have access to Briony’s diary entry which reveals the relation between fiction and history in Briony’s novel and which implicitly asks us to use that revelation in our coming to terms with Briony’s novel. The device of the diary entry is crucial here too, because it provides McEwan a way to stabilize the historical and the fictional in Briony’s novel: since Briony is writing for herself, we have every reason to believe that she is telling the truth, not engaging in further fiction-making. If she were writing for someone else, an audience whose opinion of her she would be especially concerned with—say, a literary critic working on a biography of her—we would have more reason to suspect the reliability of what she reports in the diary entry. But this way, McEwan allows us to bank on what she tells about Robbie’s death in Dunkirk and Cecilia’s in Balham Station as well as on what she tells us about the historical basis for her novel. Indeed, Briony’s reflections on the research she has done about the retreat to Dunkirk shows her concern for anchoring her imaginative recreation of Robbie’s experience within what is actually known about the retreat.

The diary entry, with its clear separation of the historical and the invented, also helps us come to terms with the question of Briony’s possible alterations within what she claims as historically accurate. This question
arises from a detail in Briony’s rejection letter from Horizon. Connolly suggests that the use of a Ming vase in “Two Figures by a Fountain” is implausible since a Ming is “rather too priceless to take outside” (295), and, sure enough, in her novel Briony has changed it to a vase by Höroldt. While this change may seem to open up the possibility that Briony’s narrative of the historical events has been fictionalized through and through, the distinctions that she makes in her diary entry point to a better answer. Briony has actively shaped the historical events as she has constructed her novel. Her goal has not been to make every detail as accurate as possible but rather to highlight the disastrous consequences that follow from the historical intersection of her development as a writer with Cecilia and Robbie’s discovery of their love. In other words, the diary entry does not attest to the absolute correspondence between every detail that Briony does not acknowledge having altered and the historical unfolding of events, but it does identify a line between history and invention and it shows how and why Briony crossed that line.

That Briony reveals in her diary entry that she has just been diagnosed as in the very early stages of vascular dementia is also relevant here. Since the doctor emphasizes the “slowness of the undoing” (334) and since Briony’s prose is clear and consistent with what we’ve read in Parts One, Two, and Three, McEwan signals that neither Briony’s entry nor her decisions about her novel are affected by her dementia. Instead the condition signals that we can believe Briony when she says that she has written the last draft of her novel, and it calls attention to the thematic importance of the representation of consciousness in both Briony’s and McEwan’s novels. That Briony will lose her memory and her own rich mental life as a novelist is affectively painful even as it carries a rough poetic justice: Briony’s vivid imagination has had such terrible consequences for Robbie and Cecilia and now she will suffer its loss. At the same time, the contrast between what she has done in her novel—exploring the rich consciousness of all her central characters—and how little she will soon be able to do underlines the importance of consciousness as an issue in her novel, in McEwan’s, and in the novel as a genre itself. Indeed, in representing Briony’s act of writing her novel, McEwan has paid tribute to modernist fiction’s achievements in its attention to representations of consciousness.

We can now move to consider the next layer of judgments generated by “London, 1999.” In McEwan’s authorial audience we recognize that Briony’s conflict of interest powerfully affects her ethical and aesthetic achievement. To be sure, the brilliant imaginative construction of the minds of Cecilia and Robbie—and, in this regard, Part Two’s representation
of Robbie’s experience on the retreat to Dunkirk is an extraordinary act of sympathetic imagination on Briony’s part—does provide a means for Briony to assert that these people she has wronged are at least of equal value. But Briony’s fulfilling her ethical/aesthetic credo is not sufficient justification for her altering history because the credo does not require such alteration. Moreover, those liberties raise the question of whether Briony has fully subscribed to the credo, because the avoidance of “bleak realism” about what happened to Cecilia and Robbie is also a way to mitigate the consequences of her transgression and, thus, suggests that she regards herself as more important than Cecilia and Robbie. Indeed, recognizing their equal value entails not giving them a happy ending that they never experienced but being true to the actual trajectory of their lives after the transgression. In other words, McEwan suggests that Briony has resolved her conflict of interest between reporting what actually happened and the temptation to soften her self-portrait in the ethically inferior way.

McEwan also includes other signals to guide our judgment of Briony’s choices as a novelist. Briony’s diary entry includes a description of the Tallis family’s present to her on her seventy-seventh birthday: a performance of *The Trials of Arabella* by the younger generation. The entry quotes the final couplet Arabella and her prince address to the audience:

Here’s the beginning of love at the end of our travail.

So farewell, kind friends, as into the sunset we sail!! (348)

More than simply rounding off the novel, this return by McEwan to thirteen-year-old Briony’s romance implicitly comments on the romantic impulses governing her novel. It ends with the “continuation of love” for Robbie and Cecilia at the end of their travail and with the possibility of Briony’s atonement. Indeed, if the performance of the play is not sufficient by itself to underline Briony’s romanticism, the novel’s farewell clinches the point. Briony writes, “but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration . . . Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It’s not impossible” (351). It’s not impossible, suggests McEwan, for someone with Briony’s romantic sensibility to take this next step in bending history to her own desires.

Briony’s question, “who would want to believe that [Cecilia and Robbie never reunited] except in the service of the bleakest realism?” (350) reminds McEwan’s audience that her romantic impulses fueled her misidentification of Robbie. Had she been more interested in realism then, she
would have required far more evidence before fingering Robbie. Had she been more interested in realism here, she would have followed through on revealing the grim consequences of her transgression. Her failure to do that, in a sense, is to turn away from her quest to atone.

McEwan also signals the inadequacy of Briony’s judgments through her commentary about Lola and Paul Marshall. In Part Three, we learn that although Marshall was, in fact, Lola’s assailant, she “saved herself from humiliation by falling in love, or persuading herself she had, and [she] could not believe her luck when Briony insisted on doing the talking and blaming. And what luck that was for Lola—barely more than a child, prized open and taken—to marry her rapist” (306). In the final section, we learn that Lola and Paul have become Lord and Lady Marshall and have enjoyed living in the luxury made possible by the success of his candy company. Even more important, we learn that Briony has never told anyone the truth about how they came together, not even her parents or siblings. Briony reflects:

There was our crime—Lola’s, Marshall’s, mine—and from the second version [of my novel] I set out to describe it. I’ve regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing—the names, the places, the exact circumstances—I put it all there as a matter of historical record. But as a matter of legal reality, so various editors have told me over the years, my forensic memoir could never be published while my fellow criminals were alive. You may only libel yourself and the dead. The Marshalls have been active in the courts since the late forties, defending their good names with a most expensive ferocity. . . . To be safe, one would have to be bland and obscure. I know I cannot publish until they are dead. And as of this morning, I accept that will not be until I am. (349)

Briony’s reflections, however, actually call attention to the fact that her long delay in finishing her novel has also been a way to avoid taking the one concrete step toward atonement available to her: the public admission of her crime—not in a novel but in some nonfictional form, including letters to all who were present at the Tallis estate in June 1935—and the effort to clear Robbie’s name. Her reflections show how difficult and uncertain that step would be, since the Marshalls would obviously deny Briony’s account and even sue for libel, but, in failing to take it, Briony perpetuates her crime against Robbie. Furthermore, Briony’s decision to make her narrative a novel rather than a memoir not only allows her to
make history conform to desire, but it also allows her audience to decide that she is offering only an invented account of how Lord and Lady Marshal came together. Surely any defense in a libel suit would be on the grounds that she is writing fiction rather than nonfiction.

In sum, looked at within the frame of McEwan’s novel, Briony’s development as a novelist is impressive, but her aesthetic commitment to the representation of other minds and to judging those representations does not provide the ethical grounds for the liberties she takes with the story of Cecilia, Robbie, and her own transgression. These conclusions invite us to reflect on McEwan’s purpose in framing Briony’s judgments this way, reflections that are part and parcel of the judgments we make about his larger construction of the novel.

**Judgments of McEwan’s Misidentification**

McEwan’s delayed disclosure pulls the rug out from under many of our judgments and emotional investments during Parts Two and Three. Many of our judgments, we suddenly learn, have been misguided because we based them on misinformation. The satisfaction we took in the reunion of Cecilia and Robbie after the horrific retreat and in Briony’s promise to recant her testimony about Robbie are significantly altered because we suddenly learn that these events, as part of Briony’s novel but not part of her life, exist on a different ontological level than her transgression. In this respect, McEwan’s delayed disclosure is analogous to Briony’s misidentification of Robbie: since we have no prior definitive signal that Parts One, Two, and Three are Briony’s novel, he has implicitly misidentified the nature of his narrative up until this point. To be sure, McEwan is aware—and expects his authorial audience to be aware—of the significant difference between the consequences of the two misidentifications. Nevertheless, when Briony finally decides in her diary entry that her effort at atonement via narrative has been both impossible and necessary, we need to ask whether McEwan is speaking directly through her about his own narrative as well, since that narrative both involves its own transgression and explores the possibility of atonement.

Briony writes, “[H]ow can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. . . . No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists.” Seen within the frame of McEwan’s novel, these comments have
significantly different implications than Briony could possibly be aware of. First, they invite us to add another layer to our understanding of the novel’s central concerns: what is the relation between art and atonement? Second, they raise some more specific questions: (1) the delayed disclosure is an instance of McEwan’s playing God, his using his novelist’s absolute power not only to decide the outcome but to reveal that decision suddenly and, from the perspective of our emotional engagement in Briony’s novel, violently. After playing God this way, does McEwan need to atone and, if so, how can he? (2) There is an entity to which McEwan can appeal for atonement and forgiveness: the audience that he has misled. Has McEwan also included some grounds upon which we can achieve reconciliation? Has he ultimately “set the limits and the terms” of the novel in such a way that his transgression also carries within it the seeds of his atonement? (3) Finally, what light does this dynamic between transgression and atonement in the telling shed on the similar dynamic in the represented action?

The first two questions come together in our interpretive and aesthetic judgments about the relation between the surprise disclosure and the previous three Parts of *Atonement*. As I have argued in the discussion of “Roman Fever” in the previous chapter, effective surprises are ones in which the audience begins by being taken aback and ends by nodding their heads in recognition that the surprise has been prepared for and by perceiving that the surprise enhances the narrative. Preparing the audience of *Atonement* is an especially delicate operation because the terms and limits of the novel stipulate that McEwan must write Parts One, Two, and Three as Briony’s novel, and Briony of course has no conception that she is a character in McEwan’s novel and thus no conception of McEwan’s audience. McEwan carries out the operation in two main ways: (1) he includes in Briony’s representation of the events details that, when seen retrospectively, function as clues to her introduction of fictionalizing elements; (2) he includes in Briony’s novel meta-level communications about its modernist techniques, communications that function for Briony as elements in the story of her evolution as a writer but function for McEwan as a way to establish a tension about the techniques of Briony’s novel—and by extension of his own.

The main clues in the representation of events occur in Parts Two and Three. At the end of Part Two, Robbie, though close to being evacuated from France to Britain, is wounded, exhausted, and only intermittently aware of his environment. Furthermore, his last utterance—and the final sentence of Part Two—is “I promise, you won’t hear another word from me” (250). In short, this section of the novel ends without McEwan’s audience being able to determine whether Robbie gets evacuated or dies. Part Three
appears to disambiguate that ending by showing Robbie reunited with Cecilia. But in retrospect we can see that the end of Part Two is a subtle preparation for the revelation that Robbie did not survive the retreat. This conclusion is reinforced by a passage in Part Three that, in retrospect, we can understand as functioning for both Briony and McEwan as marking the seam between history and fiction.

[Briony] left the café, and as she walked along the Common she 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. This unreal feeling was heightened when, after half an hour, she reached another High Street, more or less the same as the one she had left behind. (311)

In other words, the historical Briony returns to the hospital while her ghostly persona continues her wish-fulfilling journey to Cecilia and Robbie.

The most dramatic example of McEwan’s meta-level communications is that letter of rejection from Cyril Connolly; in addition to recommending that “Two Figures by a Fountain” needs the backbone of a story, Connolly also remarks that he and the other editors “wondered whether it owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf” (294). Although we come to recognize that Briony’s Chapter Two incorporates Connolly’s advice, we also infer that McEwan’s inclusion of the letter from Connolly is a way to raise questions about Atonement’s own extensive use of modernist techniques. The tension generated by McEwan’s meta-level communication can be put this way: what does it mean for an accomplished novelist writing in 2001 to construct a novel along modernist lines and simultaneously question such a construction? The surprise ending resolves the tension even as it provides an appropriate surprise: the accomplished novelist has been writing not a straight modernist novel in Briony’s (or Woolf’s) mode but a more self-conscious, self-reflexive novel. In its self-reflexiveness, McEwan’s surprise ending acknowledges Atonement’s postmodern moment, but, more important, it gives new weight to the elements of Parts One, Two, and Three that comment on Briony’s evolution as a writer and new weight to the novel’s theme of the relation between art and experience.

This layering of a modernist novel with its focus on the consciousness of its characters within a post-modernist, self-reflexive one and its consequences for the relation between the narrative and the authorial audiences go a long way toward explaining the division in the responses of flesh-
and-blood readers to McEwan’s performance. I’ll start with an analysis of the positive response to the novel, the one that I believe corresponds with McEwan’s invitations to the authorial audience. Consider, first, the relation between transgression and atonement in the represented action (Briony’s novel) and in the telling (McEwan’s delayed disclosure about our reading a novel-within-a-novel and the corresponding delayed disclosure of the actual fates of Robbie and Cecilia). McEwan invites his authorial audience to recognize that his initial undercutting of our emotions through Briony’s revelations in her diary entry allows him to engage with the problem of atonement even more deeply. This invitation depends on our responses in the narrative audience. Whatever else “London, 1999” does, it actually enhances the mimetic components of Cecilia’s, Robbie’s, and Briony’s characters because this section demonstrates that they all have a significant existence beyond the one represented in Briony’s novel. Vivid as those existences are, they are all more than they appear to be there. The effect sets up a meta-message from McEwan to his narrative and authorial audiences: our initial emotional trajectory through the problem of the crime and its atonement, however intense and difficult, has been too easy. We were too ready to believe that Robbie survived the retreat and that Briony’s meeting with Robbie and Cecilia would lead to some atonement. By pulling the rug out from under our emotional satisfaction in the relatively happy conclusion to Part III, McEwan not only contrasts the hope held out by Briony’s novel with “the bleakest realism,” but he also makes us feel that bleakness in both the narrative and the authorial audiences.

This effect exists alongside our awareness in the authorial audience, an awareness heightened by McEwan’s delayed disclosures, that he, McEwan, is the ultimate designer of the novel and, thus, of the fates of the characters. In other words, McEwan seeks to call attention to the synthetic component of his narrative without detracting from its mimetic component. This effect, in turn, underlines the difference between between Briony’s project of atonement through fiction and McEwan’s project of representing Briony’s fascinating but flawed endeavor. This difference and the coexistence of the mimetic and the synthetic also emphasize McEwan’s meditation on the power—and limits—of fiction.\(^3\)

I have already commented on McEwan’s judgments of Briony’s efforts to use fiction to atone, but it bears repeating that her novel is an attempt to do in art what she failed to do in life. McEwan’s transgression and atone-

\(^3\) For a highly intelligent and engaging account of the importance of fiction as both method and theme in the novel, see Finney.
ment remain within the boundaries of his novel. The juxtaposition conveys the message that, though art can carry out its own patterns of transgression and atonement, atonement for transgressions that occur beyond its boundaries is more difficult to achieve. Art, too, sets its standards for judgment, and Briony, in her imaginative reconstruction of other minds, meets some of those standards, but, in her return to the romanticism of her youth, falls short of others. Furthermore, the extent to which even a narrative that respected the bleak realism of Robbie’s and Cecelia’s fates would constitute a worthwhile atonement remains an open question. As for McEwan, he is more successful at atoning for his apparent transgressions in the novel, though it is worth noting that the nature of the atonement alters the initial judgment that the delayed disclosures were actually transgressions.

Having developed this positive account of the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of McEwan’s performance, I want to complicate it by returning to his strategy of simultaneously enhancing our involvement in the mimetic component of the narrative and calling attention to its synthetic component. The strategy entails the risk that McEwan’s delayed disclosures will not merely foreground the synthetic but call so much attention to his role as the ultimate designer of this narrative and of the characters’ fates that we will not be able to sustain our investment in those fates. Moreover, if we lose that investment, we will also lose our trust in McEwan, since he has cultivated that investment for so much of the novel and he does not offer us anything comparably substantial in return. Instead, the novel may strike us as an elaborate display of authorial dominance over the reader, and we will therefore render negative aesthetic and ethical judgments about McEwan’s achievement. I believe that flesh-and-blood readers who respond in these ways are missing some of the intricacies of McEwan’s communication, but I also believe that in McEwan’s strategies they have good reasons for their responses.

Strikingly, however, this conclusion does not detract from my ultimate judgment that Atonement is a stunning achievement formally, ethically, and aesthetically. I maintain this judgment because I believe that the divide among the readers is an inevitable consequence of McEwan’s admirable effort to offer both a deeply compelling experience of the mimetic and a meta-level meditation on the powers of fiction and the relation of art and atonement.

This chapter brings to a close my exploration of judgments and progressions in fictional narratives built on strong principles of narrativity. As
noted in chapter 3, my goal has not been to develop theoretical concepts that will predict what narratives must do but rather concepts that are flexible and capacious enough to help us understand what narratives have already done and what they may do in the future. The range of techniques and purposes in the four narratives we have examined, *Persuasion*, *Beloved*, “Roman Fever,” and *Atonement*, provides some measure of assurance about the suppleness of judgment and progression as tools for understanding narrative experience. In the next chapter I will draw on the work of these analyses as I seek to refine the role of rhetorical aesthetics within rhetorical poetics. Then in Part Two, I will extend my exploration of the explanatory power of judgments and progressions by considering fictional texts built on principles not only of narrativity but also of lyricality and of portraiture.