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## IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*: FROM JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S "WHY WRITE?" TO BRIONY'S ROLES AS AUTHOR AND CHARACTER NARRATOR

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Resumo: Partindo das considerações filosóficas, históricas e críticas de Jean-Paul Sartre em *What is Literature?* e, especificamente, em "What is to write?", "Why write?" e "For whom does one write?", este artigo discute as funções de Briony Tallis como autora, narradora e personagem no romance metaficcional de Ian McEwan *Atonement* (2001). Através dos questionamentos de Sartre serão examinadas as razões aparentes bem como a escolha mais profunda que estão por trás da criação artística de Briony – a peça teatral *The Trials of Arabella* – e as diferentes versões de seu último romance *Atonement*: por um lado, sua compulsão de contar histórias para beneficiar-se de seu poder transformador e como meio de obter reparação pelo falso testemunho que dera a respeito do estupro de sua prima Lola, o que privou sua irmã Cecília e Robbie Turner, seu namorado, de serem felizes juntos; por outro, suas ponderações sobre a arte de escrever histórias e os mecanismos do romance, sobre seu poder demiúrgico de artista, e, conseqüentemente, sobre seu dilema "como pode uma romancista realizar uma reparação se, com seu poder absoluto de decidir como a história termina, ela é também Deus?" Esses são alguns dos assuntos abordados, levando à percepção de que o romance de McEwan é uma narrativa sobre literatura e arte, ao discutir a questão da autoria e por que os autores escrevem romances, enquanto permanece um romance sobre o ser humano e a fragilidade humana, ao ponderar sobre as razões da traição, a natureza da culpa e a necessidade de reparação.

Palavras-chave: romance metaficcional; Ian McEwan; *Atonement*; Jean-Paul Sartre.

*Abstract:* Starting from Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical, historical and critical considerations in *What is Literature?* and, specifically, in "What is to write?", "Why write?", and "For whom does one write?", this article discusses the roles of Briony Tallis as author, narrator and character in Ian McEwan's metafictional novel *Atonement* (2001). By way of Sartre's questionings, the apparent reasons as well as the deeper choice that lie behind Briony's artistic creation – the play *The Trials of Arabella* and the different versions of her last novel *Atonement* – will be examined: on the one hand, her need for storytelling to benefit from its transformative power and as a means of obtaining atonement for the false testimony she gave concerning her cousin Lola's rape, which deprived her sister Cecilia and her lover Robbie Turner of being happy together; on the other, her musings on the art of story-telling and on the mechanisms of the novel,

on her God-like power as artist, and, consequently, on her dilemma “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?” These are some of the foregrounded issues, leading to the realization that McEwan’s novel is a narrative about literature and art, as it discusses the question of authorship and why authors write novels, while remaining a novel about man and human frailty, as it ponders on the reasons for betrayal, on the nature of guilt, and on the need for atonement.

*Keywords:* metafictional novel; Ian McEwan; *Reparação*; Jean-Paul Sartre.

The reading of Ian Mc Ewan’s metafictional novel *Atonement* (2001) provides an instigating opportunity to reflect on and discuss two distinct but simultaneously interpenetrating issues: the novel itself and the art of writing. Although the intertwining of both themes is easily recognizable in the novel and several critical reviews have already confirmed that *Atonement* tells an engrossing story while also meditating on story-telling and its pitfalls (TONKIN, 2001), that it is at the same time a novel about literature and a novel about man (FINGER, 2002)<sup>1</sup>, and that it is a book that explores the power of art and the limits of forgiveness (MENDELSON, 2002), many other procedures leading to this double perspective nevertheless can and should be considered to deepen our thoughts about the narrative and about the art of writing, among them the roles Mc Ewan attributes to Briony Tallis as character, narrator and author.

The discussion of these roles, in their turn, will be further emphasized by way of Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical, historical and critical considerations in *What is Literature?* and, specifically, in “What is to write?”, “Why write?”, and “For whom does one write?” in order to reflect not only upon the apparent reasons but also on the deeper choice that lies behind Briony’s artistic creation – from the play *The Trials of Arabella*, written when she was thirteen, to the different versions of her last novel “Atonement”, completed when she was seventy-seven: on the one hand, her need for storytelling as a youngster to benefit from its transformative power and, as an adult, as a means of obtaining atonement for the false testimony she gave against Robbie Turner, which deprived him and her sister Cecilia of being happy together; on the other, her musings on the art of story-telling, on the mechanisms of the novel, and on the consequences and limitations of her God-like power as artist.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation from the German: “Ian Mc Ewan hat einen Roman über die Literatur geschrieben, der gleichzeitig ein Roman über den Menschen ist”.

## I. Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: meaning and structure

Mc Ewan's *Atonement* already implies by its title a double but complementary viewpoint. If "to atone" (from at+one=set at one, unite) means to expiate, to make amends, reparation given for an offense, as in "to make atonement for", but also, in its archaic use, to reconcile, hence leading to "atonement" meaning agreement, reconciliation after enmity or controversy, it is actually the way McEwan handles both meanings of "atonement" and how both perspectives – expiation and reconciliation – will become projected throughout the novel, that leads us to the main issues of this article.

The fact that McEwan's narrative is "a self-conscious, self-reflexive novel employing a character narrator who is herself a novelist" (PHELAN, 2008: 322), makes of course the two meanings of "atonement" even more complex, since Briony Tallis, as author, using an omniscient intrusive narrator, appears first as a character in her own novel "Atonement" which constitutes the first three parts of McEwan's *Atonement*, and then appears as a first-person intrusive narrator in her diary entry, which constitutes the last section of McEwan's novel. This shift of viewpoint is further enhanced by the fact that the first three parts of McEwan's *Atonement* are a novel within his novel and the fourth part is the diary entry of the character/author Briony Tallis.

Even more, this fourfold division also foregrounds the fact that the first three parts project the theme of offense-expiation, as they not only deal with the transgression which the protagonist Briony Tallis committed as a youngster – as she purposely testified against her sister's boyfriend Robbie, accused of raping her cousin Lola – and how this transgression has affected their lives, by destroying his chances of finishing his education and of marrying Cecilia but also deal with her effort, years later, at making amends, at *atoning* for her sin, her "misidentification" (PHELAN, 2008: 322). This atonement, as the story develops, is brought about by Briony's exhausting and emotionally draining work of nursing soldiers, as well as by tracking down Cecilia and Robbie – on leave from the army – in order to show her contrition for her "terrible"(A:434)<sup>2</sup> deed and begin legal procedures to exonerate Robbie. It is also brought about by our sudden discovery that Briony has been writing her own life story, as the author of "Atonement", which ends with her signature "BT, London, 1999" (A: 451).

The fourth section, "London, 1999", in its turn, ends with the theme of reconciliation, as it presents Briony Tallis' diary entry on the day of her seventy-seventh birthday. As she recalls the celebration her family had prepared for her – with the presentation of *The Trials of Arabella* – she also muses on the novel "Atonement" which she has been

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<sup>2</sup> All further quotations from *Atonement* will follow this pattern.

writing for the last fifty-nine years and on the already mentioned dilemma of “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?”(A:479). Her diary entry finishes with her comments that, as “a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair”(A: 479) she let her lovers “live” and “unite” at the end of her novel, and, maybe, even reconciled to her, as she imagines them “sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*” (A:480). Thus, we have reconciliation after estrangement, as a complement to expiation, as harmony at the end of the novel, in contrast to the disharmony which she had created in the lives of Cecilia, Robbie, and, consequently, in her own.

Within this fourfold division, what are the differences, then, that we find in Briony’s role as a character in her novel “Atonement”, embedded in McEwan’s *Atonement*, and her need as a girl to write, and in Briony’s role as a narrator/novelist in the last part of McEwan’s *Atonement* and her dilemma as an adult in receiving atonement through her novel, while she simultaneously meditates, throughout McEwan’s narrative, on the art and the mechanisms of fiction, and on her power as artist?

## II. Briony’s role as character in “Atonement” and her engagement in “the universe of language”

If one considers the beginning of Briony Tallis’ novel “Atonement” – “The play – for which Briony had designed the posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper – was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch” (A: 3) – it becomes immediately clear that fiction – as the play of life – has started, and that Briony, as the protagonist of “Atonement” and as the young author of “the seven pages of *The Trials of Arabella*”(A:4), has engaged herself in the world of writing.

This engagement – her play – which “told a tale of the heart whose message (...) was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed.”(A:3), – had been written “for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid”(A:5). As the sequence of verbs confirms – celebrate, provoke, guide, persuade – the play had been written not only to commemorate Leon’s return and win his respect, but also because her “passion for tidiness”, her “love of order”, and especially her wish “for a harmonious, organized world” (A: 6-8) might be revealed to her brother through art, so that he might be redirected toward the right path: find a suitable bride and return home. Therefore, Briony’s function as a playwright was to inspire “terror, relief and instruction” (A: 9), in

order to bring about her brother's "change" and reintegrate him into this "harmonious, organized world".

Nevertheless, if the "word" is symbolic of man's archetypal need to tell his life-story to relieve his sense of guilt and to achieve atonement, and thus to "create a name", and rebirth in individualized immortality (VRIES, 1974:508), thereby adding a significant cultural dimension to Briony's early engagement in writing as well as anticipating the development of the reasons for her compulsion to continue to write as a means of relieving her sense of guilt and obtaining atonement, and if "the end of language is to communicate" (SARTRE, 1966: 13), Briony's engagement can be still further explained and justified by referring to Sartre's essays. As his questions to a potential prose-writer already suggest – "What is your aim in writing? What undertakings are you engaged in, and why does it require you to have recourse to writing?", "What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?" (SARTRE, 1966: 13-14) –, they will set her relationship to language, her urge to write and her realization that one writes for the others into an even broader perspective. His arguments in "What is writing?"

language (...) is our shell and our antennae; it protects us against others and informs us about them; it is a prolongation of our senses, a third eye which is going to look into our neighbor's heart. We are within language as within our body. (...) There is the word which is lived and the word which is met. But in both cases it is in the course of an undertaking, either of me acting upon others, or the other upon me. (...) the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare. (...) the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about. And since he has once engaged himself in the universe of language, he can never again pretend that he cannot speak. (SARTRE, 1966:12-15)

make one realize that Briony's function as a playwright – even if she is not fully aware of it yet – was also "to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about", that her "undertaking", her activity was to act "upon others" (A: 9), and thus, to bring about her brother's "change". One can also understand how this activity has a definite purpose: "to reveal the world" of the play – Arabella, the passionate heroine and her misadventures – and "to reveal man to other men", to make Leon become aware of the world he lives in and, therefore, that he "may assume full responsibility" not only towards the play but also for his own actions.

It also becomes plain that, retrospectively, if her reasons for writing at the age of thirteen were to celebrate, to be admired by and to teach her brother, to then be rewarded by becoming a bridesmaid at his wedding, as "the principles of justice", death

and marriage, were “the main engines of housekeeping”(A: 9), Briony’s engagement in the “universe of language”, simultaneously her “shell” and her “antennae” – her hard outer case, her form, enclosing her precocious imagination – will become her future novel “Atonement”: in order to redress her wrongdoing and to protect her against the accusation and verdict of her sister and Robbie as well as the potential accusation and verdict of readers as a consequence of the “disorder” her false testimony will have provoked in the lives of her sister, Robbie, and, ultimately, her own.

But even at that early stage, Briony was also already concerned with the art of writing, when, annoyed by the fact that the rehearsals for her play had not been finished – which “also offended her sense of order” – she starts meditating on the differences between the art of writing a story, and of writing a play:

The simplest way to have impressed Leon would have been to write him a story and put it in his hands herself, and watch as he read it. The title lettering, the illustrated cover, the pages *bound* – in that word alone she felt the attraction of the neat, limited and controllable form she had left behind when she decided to write a play. A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader (...). In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the world; in a play you had to make do with what was available: no horses, no village streets, no seaside. No curtain. It seemed so obvious now that it was too late: 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;(…). There was no gap during which the symbols were unraveled. (A: 46-7)

These differences, at that moment, only suggest that Briony regretted not having remained with a story to greet Leon, with its controllable form, its immediate appeal to the reader, its direct representation of the world and its thought transference to the reader. But Briony’s incipient awareness of the potential reader of her story, to whom she would be able “to send thoughts and feelings”, “by means of inking symbols onto a page”, and thus recreate in him the same thoughts and feelings that she had had, becomes further emphasized and acquires a larger frame of reference if it is juxtaposed to Sartre’s considerations that “it is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others” (SARTRE, 1966: 26) : the “magical process” of “reading a sentence and understanding it” as Briony conceives it at that time is actually nothing more than “the conjoint effort of author and reader” to materialize the “work of the mind”.

Moreover, these differences in favor of a story once more anticipate the novel she will start writing in the coming years, the story of her guilt as an act of atonement, and which

she will continue writing for the next six decades, as the flash forward of the omniscient narrator reveals:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. (A: 51)

Briony's metalinguistic and metafictional musings continue, after she has watched, without understanding it, the scene between Cecilia and Robbie at the Triton fountain – when Cecilia jumps in and comes out of the pond in her underwear to retrieve a piece of pottery that had fallen into the water – and starts meditating on “how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong” (A:49), thereby foreshadowing her misidentification and consequent misinterpretation of the perpetrator of Lola's rape. This scene again triggers her creative imagination, as she regards

what she had witnessed as a tableau mounted for her alone, a special moral for her wrapped in a mystery.(...) she sensed she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and could include a hidden observer like herself. (...) She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. (...) And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have. (A: 50-51)

Her hidden potentialities as a fiction writer are thus revealed, and again anticipate what the novelist Briony Tallis will do, as in her future novel the fountain scene between Cecilia and Robbie would be described first from the omniscient narrator's point of view in Chapter 2, then from Briony's, as she registers the scene significantly from one of “the nursery's wide-open windows” (A: 47) in chapter 3 – suggesting that she was not able yet to understand “adult behavior” (A: 49) – then again from Robbie's remembrances in Chapter 8. As Briony ponders, “she could begin now, setting it down as she had seen it, meeting the challenge by refusing to condemn her sister's shocking near-nakedness, in daylight, right by the house. Then the scene could be recast, through Cecilia's eyes, and then Robbie's” (A: 52).

These potentialities also bring out her awareness of, and excitement, “in the prospect of freedom”, of not having to judge and to choose between heroes and villains, by

showing the “equal value” between their different points of view<sup>3</sup>, which was “the only moral”, the only power a literary work “need have”. This awareness simultaneously corroborates, within a larger perspective, Sartre’s statements that

The work of art *does not have* an end (...). But the reason is that it is an end. (...) It presents itself as a task to be discharged; from the very beginning it places itself on the level of the categorical imperative. You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it. For freedom is not experienced by its enjoying its free subjective functioning, but in a creative act required by an imperative. This absolute end, (...) which freedom itself adopts as its own, is what we call a value. The work of art is a value because it is an appeal. (SARTRE, 1966:30)

It is because a work of art is at the same time an “absolute end”, a “value”, and “an appeal” to readers that Briony’s future novel will be presented to her readers, six decades later, for her freedom to write about her crime and expiation will equal the readers’ freedom to judge it, as

reading is an exercise in generosity, and what the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values. Only this person will give himself generously; freedom goes through and through him and comes to transform the darkest masses of his sensibility. (...)

Thus, the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. (SARTRE, 1966: 32)

But Briony’s concerns with the act of writing continue, while she is threshing nettles near the temple garden as a means of releasing her frustration and anger at the collapse of her play. Conscious that she “had lost her godly power of creation”(A: 97), she decides to stay and wait on the driveway to the bridge, “until something significant happened to her. This was the challenge she was putting to existence – (...). She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance” (A:98). A new facet of her personality thus comes to the surface, as she becomes aware that the power of creation is godlike – thus anticipating the great problem she would have during the fifty-nine years of her career as a novelist and which she will express at the end of her diary entry, as already mentioned, but which cannot be kept out of sight: “How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?”

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<sup>3</sup> Reminding us also of Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics*.



(A:479). At the same time, she is also conscious of her unimportance, which could only be dispelled when “real events” “rose to her challenge”, to defy her to transform them into art – thus again prefiguring not only the real event of Lola’s rape and her own false testimony, with its disastrous consequences, which will constitute the main core of her future “Atonement”, but also the fact that she would become the author of many books. As Sartre views the writer’s “essentiality” in relation to his work – and thus also our viewing Briony’s awareness of her need to write, in order to dispel her “insignificance” – “one of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world” (SARTRE, 1966: 24); and, as he continues, further on,

since the creation can find its fulfillment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work, all literary work is an appeal. To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken, by means of language. And if it should be asked to *what* the writer is appealing, the answer is simple. (...) The writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work. (SARTRE, 1966:28-9)

it becomes evident, once more, that the writer’s essentiality to his own work is a consequence of its appeal to the reader’s freedom to “collaborate in the production of his work”. In this way, the “significance” of Briony’s “Atonement”, as it will be discussed by Briony the successful novelist, is once more anticipated by Briony as an incipient writer.

Briony’s metafictional meditations continue after she has read the note that Robbie sent Cecilia through her, when, at her desk,

trapped between the urge to write a simple diary account of her day’s experiences and the ambition to make something greater of them that would be polished, self-contained and obscure, she sat for many minutes frowning at her sheet of paper (...). Actions she thought she could describe well enough, and she had the hang of dialogue. (...) But how to do feelings? (...) Even harder was the threat, or the confusion of feeling contradictory things. (A: 147-8).

Her new concern as a writer – how to transmit feelings and contradictory things – however, as she will later become aware of as she views her novel in retrospect, is considered by Sartre to be part of the very dialectic that lies behind the art of writing. As he argues,

if we ourselves produce the rules of production, the measures, the criteria, and if our creative drive comes from the very depths of our heart, then we never find anything but ourselves in our work. It is we who have invented the laws by which we judge it. It is our history, our love, our gaiety that we recognize in it. Even if we should regard it without touching it any further, we never receive from it that gaiety or love. We put them into it. (...)

The writer neither foresees nor conjectures; he projects. It often happens that he awaits, as they say, the inspiration. But one does not wait for himself the way he waits for others. If he hesitates, (...) if he still does not know what is going to happen to his hero, that simply means that he has not thought about it (...). Thus, the writer meets everywhere only *his* knowledge, *his* will, *his* plans, in short, himself. He touches only his own subjectivity; the object he creates is out of reach; he does not create it for *himself*. (SARTRE, 1966:24-6)

The contradictory feelings Briony fears she will not be able to describe, in her future writings, in order to make “her day’s experiences” “something greater” than a “simple diary account” – and thus again foreshadowing “London, 1999” – will be, according to Sartre, nothing more than her own feelings and doubts, which she will carry throughout her life and consequently throughout her fiction, and which will be portrayed in her “Atonement”: it is she, the writer, that has made her characters complex beings, that has put herself - her “history”, her “love” and her own confused feelings – into it, while trying to make something greater of it than a simple “diary account”, as she did while she was working as a nurse in the hospital.

And, as she broods over the change that has taken place in her from childhood into premature adulthood – significantly, a few moments before she witnesses Lola’s rapist leaving the scene –

She, Briony, was free to wander in the dark and contemplate her extraordinary day. Her childhood had ended, she decided now as she came away from the swimming pool, the moment she tore down her poster. The fairy stories behind her, and in the space of a few hours she had witnessed mysteries, an unspeakable word, interrupted brutal behavior, incurred the hatred of an adult, became a participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery. All she had to do now was discover the stories, not just the subjects, but a way of unfolding them, that would do justice to her new knowledge. (A: 204)

she also realizes that writing demands a specific form of developing that would validate her “new knowledge”, for she is now “a participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery”. As such, she simultaneously inserts herself into what Sartre identifies as being “in a situation”, which her writings must then necessarily surpass. For

one cannot write without a public and without a myth – without a *certain* public which historical circumstances have made, without a *certain* myth of literature which depends to a very great extent upon the demand of this public. In a word, the author is in a situation, like all other men. But his writings, like every human project, simultaneously enclose, specify, and surpass this situation, even explain it and set it up, just as the idea of a circle explains and sets up that of the rotation of a segment. (SARTRE, 1966:101)

This surpassing, nevertheless, will only occur when Briony has really become a “participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery”, when we see her again, in part III of her novel, at the age of eighteen, working as a trainee nurse in London during the weeks leading up to and following the Dunkirk evacuation. It is then that she sees her exhausting nursing work and the strict discipline to which she is subjected as a deserved punishment for having accused Robbie and consequently for his imprisonment, and also as a kind of atonement for Robbie having been sent to war. It is then that she continues to write in her notebook, even if she had no will, no freedom to leave hospital. As she ponders again upon her first drafts as writer, on how to write fiction, on how fiction revealed her true self, on the pleasure it gave her to see her own handwriting filling the pages; as she becomes aware that she had the liberty, as a writer, to write what she imagined without being committed to truth; and, most of all, that writing her journal preserved her self-respect and provided her with “the thread of continuity”,

Her entries consisted of artistic manifestos, trivial complaints, character sketches and simple accounts of her day which increasingly shaded off into fantasy. She rarely she read back over what she had written, but liked to flip the filled pages. Here, behind the name badge and uniform, was her true self, secretly hoarded, quietly accumulating. She had never lost that childhood pleasure in seeing pages covered in her own handwriting. It didn't matter what she wrote. (...) She changed the names of the patients (...). She liked to write out what she imagined to be their rambling thoughts. She was under no obligation to the truth, she had promised no one a chronicle. This was the only place she could be free. She built little stories (...) around people on the ward. (...) In later years she regretted not being more factual, not providing herself with a store of raw material. It would have been useful to know what happened, what it looked like, who was there, what was said. At that time the journal preserved her dignity: she might look and behave like and live the life of a trainee nurse, but she was really an important writer in disguise. And at a time when she was cut off from everything she knew - family, home, friends - writing was the thread of continuity. I was what she had always done. (A:359-60)

Sartre's former and further considerations are here brought to the surface again: Briony's realization that her chief motive for “artistic creation” was her need to feel that

she was “essential in relationship to the world” (SARTRE,1966:24), that writing was her thread of continuity, while preserving her dignity; the fact that a “writer meets everywhere only *his* knowledge, *his* will, *his* plans, in short, *himself*. He touches only his own subjectivity” (SARTRE,1966: 25-6), as she, too, was under no obligation to truth; that, as “no one is obliged to choose himself as a writer” (...) freedom is at the origin. I am an author, first of all, by my free project of writing” (SARTRE,1966:49), as she, in the same way, had to be literally free from work in to be free to create.

And, as Briony continues to muse and surpass her “situation”, as she is thinking “about the long story she had written and sent away to a magazine” and the pleasure it gave her to feel “the weight of her creation. All her own. No one else could have written it” (A:361), the gradual maturing of the writer, as in a *Bildungsroman*, becomes evident:

What excited her about her achievement was its design, the pure geometry and the defining uncertainty which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility. The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots. Despite her sketches, she no longer really believed in characters. (...) The very concept of character was founded on errors that modern psychology exposed. Plots too were like rusted machinery (...) A modern novelist could no more write characters and plots than a modern composer a Mozart symphony. It was thought, perception, sensations that interested her, the conscious mind as a river through time and how to represent its onward roll (...). If only she could reproduce the clear light of a summer’s morning, the sensations of a child standing at a window, the curve and dip of a swallow’s flight over a pool of water. The novel of the future would be unlike anything in the past. (... ) only fiction, a new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change. To enter a mind and show it at work, or being worked on, and to do this within a symmetrical design – this would be an artistic triumph. (A: 361-2)

On the one hand, she is enthusiastic about “the defining uncertainty” of its design, the oxymoronic combination of qualifiers already pointing to her “modern sensibility”. As “the age of clear answers (...) of characters and plots” was over, she wishes to be able to reproduce thoughts, sensations, and “capture”, by way of a “new kind of fiction”, “the essence of the change”, in this way also anticipating what the novel of the future would be like. On the other, her concern to be able to attain artistic success, by showing the meanderings of a mind “at work, or being worked on”, “within a symmetrical design”, again reveals the reasons for her need to create and thus, to reveal herself, as Sartre’s considerations have already shown.

This maturing of Briony the novelist is simultaneously accompanied by the maturing of Briony the character as, after learning from her father’s letter that Paul Marshall and Lola Quincey were to be married, she “felt her familiar guilt pursue her with a novel vibrancy” (A: 366), and, as she continues to realize, whatever “humble nursing she did and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination in tutorial she had

relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college lawn, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable”(A: 367). This deeper awareness of her guilt is further increased by her realization that “her secret torment and the public upheaval of war” which “had always seemed separate worlds” have now drawn close together, as she “now she understood how the war might compound her crime” if Robbie did not come back from Dunkirk and, consequently, that Cecilia and Robbie would never be together again (A:371).

As she leaves the hospital on Saturday morning, on her way to attend Lola’s wedding, she realizes again, while thinking about her little novel, that nothing “could conceal her cowardice”. And she asks herself:

Did she really think she would hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness? The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella – and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone.(A:412-13)

Her understanding that she would not “drown her guilt” by writing a complex stream-of-consciousness novel, as she had already considered, that the backbone that was missing in her novella was also missing in her life – moral fiber, courage, determination to change the status quo, to make amends and acquit Robbie – can be further reflected on by referring to Sartre’s question “Why write?”:

Each one has his reasons: for one, art is a flight; for another, a means of conquering. But one can flee into a hermitage, into madness, into death. One can conquer by arms. Why does it have to be *writing*, why does one have to manage his escapes and conquests by *writing*? Because, behind the various aims of authors, there is a deeper and more immediate choice which is common to all of us. (SARTRE,1966: 23)

It becomes evident, by way of his considerations, that Briony’s reasons for writing have oscillated from being “a means of conquering” – her brother, her family and friends – with *The Trials of Arabella*, to being a “flight”, to drown her guilt, as the reasons for her later efforts at writing a complex novella have been revealed in her musings. And, more importantly, as she takes the train back to London, after having visited Cecilia and Robbie to ask for forgiveness, her thoughts confirm her reason to write “Atonement”: “she knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin”(A:451). These metafictional thoughts, which constitute the

end of the third section of Briony Tallis' embedded novel, are followed, as already mentioned, by her initials "BT" and "London, 1999". The fact that "London 1999" is simultaneously the title of the fourth section of McEwan's novel implies that she has just finished the latest draft of her novel begun almost six decades earlier and that there is no time gap between the embedded and the embedding novel.

### III. Briony's role as narrator and author and her dilemma in receiving atonement

"London 1999" starts with Briony Tallis, now a successful novelist – after having attended the party that the members of her family had organized for her at the Tallis Estate, with the performance of *The Trials of Arabella* – meditating on the "strange time" (A:455) her seventy-seventh birthday provided her with. Back in her room, she starts remembering how on the morning of her birthday, and in spite of her awareness that she has vascular dementia, she decided to make one last visit to the Imperial War Museum library to return some books; how, by seeing Lola and Paul Marshall, she realized that she would not be able to publish her novel in her lifetime for, as her editor put it once, "publication equals litigation" (A: 463); how, on her way to the Tallis Estate, she is reminded of the past – the woods, the bridge, the island, as well as, inside the house, the changes that had taken place there; and how, during the family reunion, "every second person" wanted to tell her something kind about her books (A: 472). But it is the presentation of *The Trials of Arabella*, performed by her brother's and her cousins' grandchildren, that Briony dwells on, as she describes her own emotions at watching the play and seeing herself again as a young girl: "Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited little girl, and she was not dead either, for when people tittered appreciatively at "evanesce" my feeble heart – ridiculous vanity! – made a little leap" (A: 473-4). She also describes the applause at the end, her "little speech of thanks", and how she "tried to evoke that hot summer in 1935, when the cousins came down from the north", explaining to the audience that it had been entirely her fault that the rehearsals on that occasion fell apart, "because halfway through I had decided to become a novelist" (A: 475-6).

As Briony is gradually closing up the remembrances of her birthday celebration in her diary entry by returning to the events with which "Atonement" actually started – her preparations for the play – she almost completes the narrative circle by touching back on its beginning, thus reminding us again of Sartre's idea that a circle explains and sets up that of the rotation of a segment. But some threads still need to be tied up: as Briony, at "five in the morning" and "still at the writing desk" is thinking over her "strange two days" (A: 476), she also concludes her metafictional concerns by revealing to us that her last novel has received "half a dozen different drafts": from January 1940, the earliest version, to the second draft, June 1947, up to her latest – March 1999. But, as she then asks, "who cares to know? My fifty-nine-year assignment is over. There was our crime – Lola's, Marshall's, mine – and from the second version onward, I set out to describe it.

I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing (...) I put it all there as a matter of historical record" (A:476-7).

Nevertheless, as she continues writing, she also remembers "the lovers. Lovers and their happy ends"(A: 477) and it then occurs to her that , as she says, "I have not traveled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place. It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away. All preceding drafts were pitiless"(A: 478). It is at this moment that Briony the novelist becomes aware again of her reading public. For, as she continues,

But now I can think of no purpose in persuading my reader (...) that Robbie died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. That I never saw them in that year. That (...) a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital, unable to confront her bereaved sister. That the letters the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War Museum. (A: 478)

she poses the question:

"How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining. (...) When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions. No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, my fortuitous sister and her prince survive to love."(A:478)

As she expresses her concern for the reader, Briony's rhetorical questions – which she herself answers when she states that the only answer she can give to the reader who asks "What really happened?" is that "the lovers survive and flourish" – can again be further reflected on within a philosophical frame, if we remember Sartre's statement that "the writer, like all other artists, aims at giving his reader a certain feeling that is customarily called aesthetic pleasure and which I would very much rather call aesthetic joy, and that this feeling, when it appears, is a sign that the work is achieved". (SARTRE,1966: 37)

But this achievement, this “aesthetic joy” which the work of art brings out in us readers, is necessarily accompanied by the awareness of the reader’s “freedom”; it is at the same time a “creative activity”, for “reading is creation” (SARTRE,1966:37). For this reason, when Sartre concludes further on that “to write is thus both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader. It is to have recourse to the consciousness of others in order to make one’s self recognized as *essential* to the totality of being; it is to wish to live this essentiality by means of interposed persons” (SARTRE, 1966:38) it becomes plain that Briony’s awareness of the reader’s need to draw a sense of hope from her story necessarily involves an ending in which “the lovers survive and flourish”. Sartre, further on, also complements and intensifies Briony’s decision to be generous towards with her lovers, when he states that “however bad and hopeless the humanity which it paints may be, the work must have an air of generosity.(...) it must be the very warp and wool of the book, the stuff out of which the people and things are cut; whatever the subject, a sort of essential lightness must appear everywhere and remind us that the work is never a natural datum, but an *exigence* and a *gift*” (SARTRE,1966:39).

But if writing has become an *exigence* , an urgent need for Briony, not only in order “to make one’s self recognized as *essential* to the totality of being” but, in relation to her latest novel, also as an act of atonement for her “crime” (A: 477), this atonement, nevertheless, as already referred to due to its significance, is still further problematized when she asks herself about her fifty-nine-year old dilemma:

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. (A:479)

Realizing that what really matters was “the attempt” – for her “godly power of creation” (A: 37), as she was already aware as a child, her *gift* as a novelist, endowed her with the authority to decide outcomes but also denied her the possibility of ever achieving atonement – Briony ends her diary entry by stating that

I like to think that it isn’t 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 the 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. (A:479-480)



Briony's "final act of kindness", giving her lovers happiness by uniting them at the end of her novel, nevertheless, does not include, in a first reading, their forgiveness and, consequently, reconciliation, as the second meaning of "atonement" implies, as mentioned above. But, in a last metafictional twist, Briony's "not quite, not yet", points to her latest and probably last wish: to conjure them at her birthday celebration. By wishing she had this "power", the meaning of "conjure" (to constrain spirit to appear by invocation > conjurer= con+jurare >to swear, to band together by oath) thus becomes clear: only by invocation could they appear, sitting "side by side in the library" – the place in which Cecilia and Robbie had made love for the first and only time – and "smiling at *The trials of Arabella*", for, as Briony had written in the preceding drafts of her novel, both lovers had died in 1940.

Although it is unclear whether Briony would still add a final chapter to include her last wish in her novel, for, as she states "it's not impossible" to have both lovers "smiling" at the presentation of her play, what really matters is Briony's "final act of kindness" – her last attempt at "atonement" – which can once more be visualized within a more far-reaching perspective: by way of Sartre's statement that "since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men"(SARTRE,1966: 40).

It is this confidence that Briony's words project, aware as she is not only that her "final act of kindness" will be received by her readers as "her stand against oblivion and despair", but also that her readers are free to accept her fiction as her freedom – fact and invention, fiction, metafiction and authorship, expiation and reconciliation – for her work of art, inside McEwan's, will always remain "an act of confidence in the freedom of men".

These foregrounded issues thus have led us once more, but within a broader perspective, to the realization that McEwan's novel remains a narrative about man and human frailty, as it ponders on the reasons for betrayal, on the nature of guilt, and on the need for atonement, while it is simultaneously a narrative about literature and art, as it discusses the question of what writing is, why authors write, as well as who one writes for. As Briony as character, narrator and author was already aware, as a girl, "wasn't writing a kind of soaring, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination?"

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