DE GRUYTER OPEN

DOI: 10.1515/aa-2015-0002

Artistic symbols as support of a biased imagination

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Abstract

Ian McEwan has indulged in macabre plots whose points of interest reside in the power of the imaginary over allegedly rational reality. In novels like Atonement, Enduring Love, On Chesil Beach *and* Amsterdam *he points out how approaching the world scientifically can be as misleading as doing it in religious or literary ways. The target of my paper is to spot those common loci of fanaticism and narrowed perspectives which have constituted the origin of many tragedies. Such a conjured tragedy may be identified with a sluice facilitating the passage from postmodernism to post-postmodernism.*

Ian McEwan's constant preoccupation in all his novels – be they simple or sophisticated – has been the overlapping of imagination and the scientific spirit. One could hardly take the British novelist for a scientific mind. Nonetheless, on the one hand, he ironizes hot-headed fanatics and, on the other hand, laughs at those who take logic for granted. The nucleus of my paper will be the massive, mainstream-like novel *Atonement*. Making use of approaches specific to cultural studies, I shall try to highlight the tense relationship between the imaginative and the scientific spirit. Of course, this tension does not exist between *imagination* and *science* taken as cosmotic categories, as long as they are not narrow states of mind. The far-fetched focus on imagination or on science generates erroneous statements and approximations of reality and the results are tragic all the time. Tragedy can be restored to an initial happy stance only with the help of fiction. Fictionalizing the damaged universe has a regenerative and healing effect on reality, be it physical or mental.

Memory as mediator

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

> Estragon: I'm unhappy.
> Vladimir: Not really! Since when?
> Estragon: I'd forgotten.
> Vladimir: Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays! (Beckett, 2006, p. 49)

Maybe Estragon's unhappiness has its origins in a loss of memory. Aphasia means a blockage in the present. Why cannot one live up to the *carpe diem* precept when memory vanishes? Perhaps because there is no term of comparison between what is and what will be. Postmodernity actually resorts to aphasia in order to enjoy the irresponsibility of the present. Already with the modernists the mysterious forces that manipulated people's destinies had become obvious. As it were: common people could do nothing to control their lives, so they satisfied themselves with minimalist environments and non-historical approaches to history.
Setting aside T.S. Eliot's modernist pessimism in *The Waste Land*, Ian McEwan approaches postmodernism in a sceptical, self-amusing way. All his narratives concentrate on controversial aspects of apparently common destinies. He identified some of them: "I have a number of obsessions […] Oedipal situations recur constantly in my work [...] I think there is a projected sense of evil in my stories" (Rogers, 2010, p. 16). But evil can be spotted only by remembering and re-living things with the help of memory. Otherwise, evil deeds become surrogates of life-intensifiers.

Irony – the second mediator

In fact, the writer enjoys relativizing whatever certainties humans may have. In *The Cement Garden*, 1978, family values and their adjacent ethical code are shattered by the early death of the parents of four underage kids. The situation is pretty much similar to the one in William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*. The kids and the adolescents are now stranded on an urban island, namely the messed up periphery of an industrial city. Their father dies in an attempt to civilize nature – that is to cement the house garden. Once this effort proves to be a fatal failure, the children become easy prey for their own instincts. Later on, their mother dies too. In an effort to preserve their family, so that they are not sent to different orphanages, they hide their mother's corpse in the basement of the house. From a heterogeneous family they advance to a "real" one. Jack, the fifteen-year-old brother, and Julie, the seventeen-year-old sister, embark upon an incestuous relationship. The author confessed that he had an "idea that in the nuclear family the kind of forces that are being suppressed – the oedipal, incestuous forces – are also paradoxically the very forces which keep the family together". This coincides with the fact that "the oedipal and the incestuous are identical" (Rogers, 2010, p. 17). The connection between imagination and science is realized with the help of irony, which encompasses and transcends every good deed. On account of the incompleteness of human psychological development every good deed ends up as an evil action.
Very similar is the situation in *Atonement* (2001), where the target of authorial irony is Briony Tallis, a thirteen-year-old girl who belongs to the upper middle class. As I shall highlight, Ian McEwan's irony is always intertextual. In this novel he parallels Briony's mindset with that of Catherine Morland, the heroine from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey***,** who avidly reads Gothic novels. Both characters mistake the boundaries of reality for those of fiction. More than this – and here the ironical vein can be traced – Briony loves to generate order, even if this one is established in a dictatorial manner. But in every McEwan novel imposing order at the level of details means generating disorder at the higher levels. It is impossible to clarify one's life prior to obtaining full possession of the big picture of reality. Not the complete picture – an accomplishment impossible for a being trapped in a tridimensional existence – but a big one, at least.

Scientific imagination

In much the same way, science arrives at its conclusions. First, scientists venture all sorts of hypotheses, and then, once the selection is done, they stick to it and refute all other arguments. After a while, they are forced to admit that their knowledge was completely

biased. Thus, imagination is exploited and afterwards is completely banned. The cycle is resumed over and over again in a strict loyalty to a politics of small steps.
In the wake of James Joyce's style, McEwan also aims at clarity (Reynolds and Noakes, 2003, p. 8). As I stated above, Briony too is obsessed with clarity, in sheer opposition to her elder sister Cecilia, who conjugates an artistic temperament with disorderly habits. From this we deduce two types of imagination: a scientific one, enforcing some quick conclusions upon a larger-than-life elusive reality, and a truly artistic one, free of the temptation to distribute people and events into categories. The writer admits to having been preoccupied with "the idea that security is a comforting illusion, but only an illusion" (ibidem, p. 12). Ironically enough, Briony tries to save her elder sister from somebody she considers to be a sexual maniac. But Robbie Turner is Cecilia's newly acquired lover, promoted to this position after a friendship which lasted all their childhood and teenage years. For the pre-teen Briony sexual intercourse looks very much like an assault and she decides to save her sister by testifying against Robbie. Besides being a subtle ironist, McEwan is a wizard when it comes to blending coincidences with predestined gestures. He adores acting as Fate in his novels. So, he pays great attention to "how private fates and public events collide" (ibidem, p. 12) and to "the way time accelerates in a crisis" (ibidem, p. 13). *Atonement* is a massive slow-motion novel which simply takes off after 150 pages. The writer is an executioner indulging in the destruction of his characters' happy plans. Right at the beginning of the novel Briony envisages her success in the adults' world when she casts herself in the leading role in her own play: *Arabella's Trial*. Unexpectedly, Briony's cousin, Lola Quincey, subtly substitutes herself in this role leaving the dramatist with no other solution than to suspend rehearsals. As Briony longs to be in the limelight, she has to commit something *di grande*, so she speculates much in the same way a scientist would do. Once the conclusions are drawn, she will not lose time in double-checking them and tragedy is at arm's length. Robbie will be imprisoned and after three years spent in jail he is set free on the condition of going to the front and fighting on the frontline. Thus, Cecilia and Robbie's life is practically ruined. The study of the incomprehensibility at the level of macro and microuniverse is practised by McEwan in a way that is reminiscent of Katherine Anne Porter's description of Thomas Hardy's method, namely that he believed that "human nature is not grounded in common sense, that there is a deep place in it where the mind does not go, where the blind monsters sleep and wake, war among themselves and feed upon death" (Porter, 1952, p. 31).

The risks of islandization

Significant for Ian McEwan's perception of imagination is another one of his novels, *Enduring Love* (1997). The central couple here is hybrid in terms of their intellectual approach to reality. While Joe Rose fetishizes rationality, his wife, Clarissa Mellon, relies more on John Keats's "negative capability", namely the apophatic understanding of the universe. When Joe praises evolutionary psychology with its deterministic implications, she calls him a child (in Gibson, 2003, p. 17); because children long for certainties, even if they are able to cope with fairy-tale creatures. It is not that they like more imagination; children do not imagine para-realities, they vividly live in them as in an enlarged pluridimensional world. There is no effort to imagine new dimensions. Of course, Joe painfully and stubbornly tries to scientifically assimilate the strange events taking place in the world that surrounds him. But moral decisions and infatuation are unpredictable. Why does only one man remain suspended to the rope hanging from the wind-swept balloon? Why is John Logan ready to sacrifice his life in order to save an unknown child? Why does Jed Parry fall in love with Joe following the fugitive look they exchange while they grasp the rope of the balloon? Why do some people develop Clérambault syndrome and, consequently, have the impression that a certain person loves them without even knowing them? This is the inexplicable side of the world, but Ian

McEwan's narratives are never simple, manicheistic binomials. Scientific minds are very often limited, but the imaginative and the religious ones, although larger-than-life, get closer to craziness and violence. It is clear that a balanced person should keep away from excess and fanaticism but, similarly, such a person should not linger in a cosy, lukewarm existence. There are few happy characters in McEwan's novels. Still, they do exist! One condition for happiness is to avoid psychic isolation. Reclusiveness mortifies Jed Parry who is described by his creator as "a lonely man, very much an outsider with his own deep, intrapsychic world" (Reynols and Noakes, 2003, p. 16). Isolation and *islandization* generate perversity or moral numbness: it is the case of the protagonists in *Amsterdam* and *The Cement Garden*. This can be understood as a "game that highlights cultural difference and in a sense engages in what we might call 'othering' the other side, exaggerating difference while ignoring continuities and parallels" (Kroes, in *Hypercultura*, 2012, p. 22).

The problem of truth – *more geometrico*

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

> Analytic discourse demonstrates […] that the phallus is the conscientious objector made by one of the two sexed beings to the service to be rendered to the other […].
>
> I would go a little further. Phallic jouissance is the obstacle owing to which man does not come (n'arrive pas), I would say, to enjoy woman's body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ (in Miller, 1973, p. 7).

In such a context, sheer sex becomes expressive of limited knowledge. When the younger sister perceives the implication in a sexual act of her elder sister Cecilia as a physical assault exercised by a man upon her, she reads the event correctly up to a certain point. Briony's theory upon truth is geometrical: "the truth was in the symmetry which was to say, it was founded in common sense (McEwan, 2002, p. 169). There is an obvious dissymmetry in sexual intercourse and Briony wants to straighten the world around her. In a society deprived of tradition and moral rules: "The truth had become as ghostly as invention" (McEwan, 2002, p. 41). Such a line of interpretation offers an opening towards a writer taken aback by the profusion of possible decodings within his work. An older Briony's lifelong sense of unredeemed guilt is all the same motivated by her "self-mythologizing" (McEwan, 2002, p. 41) and by the "temptation for her to be magical and dramatic" (McEwan, 2002, p. 39). In other words, the character's efforts to purify and organize appearances are polluted by a narcissistic bias right from an early stage in life.

Ian McEwan advances the hypothesis that without imagination there is no knowledge. Even wrongfully used imagination stimulates understanding, be it in the form of life-long remorse. The writer wants us to assume his vision that Briony's life moved from initial narcissism towards self-flagellation, on account of the harm she produced: "how guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime" (McEwan, 2002, p. 173).

The architecture of subjectivized reality

Imagination more than gives birth to knowledge – it extracts the latter even by way of force. Biased gnoseology, obtained with the help of ambitious imagination, was characteristic of the Enlightenment's scientific enthusiasm. This way of enlarging the scope of known facts does not necessarily improve the quality of life; it only satisfies narcissistic representations. For Briony, to know more means to gain access into the adults' world. While she walks slashing

nettles pitilessly: "she decided she would stay there and wait until something significant happened to her. This was the challenge she was putting to existence – she would not stir, not for dinner, not even for her mother calling her in. She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance" (McEwan, 2002, p. 77).

Properly said, imagination becomes perilous when its products are forced upon reality. *Reality*, not the *real*, is commonly shared by everybody, while imagination has individual specificity. We are told that "Briony began to understand the chasm that lay between an idea and its execution" (McEwan, 2002, p. 17). The moment she realizes this, she starts deforming reality. As a matter of fact, the girl does not invent as much as distorts the general accepted outline of reality. The weird fact is that the adults around her, police forces included, are ready to take for granted her suppositions announced as undisputable truth. With such reasons, it becomes conspicuous that people are irritated by truth. They only want to support their favourites and to eliminate intruders, especially when these are full of resources. That is why only Grace, Robbie's mother, has the courage to oppose the general condemnation, in a "gesture of scepticism, an antifoundational bias, and an almost dislike of authority" (Sim, 2001, p. 7). Even Cecilia does not openly side with Robbie when he is accused of having raped the underage Lola. All she can do is to reproach her family – Robbie's foster-family – for their narrow-mindedness. Whatever argument Robbie might bring in support of his innocence, not one of his friends seems disposed to accept it. At a closer glance, the reader notices that the maze of evidence for guilt built by the author is rather flimsy. McEwan intends to highlight, ironically mimicking E.A. Poe's ratiocination stories, that the human mind is fundamentally biased, unwilling to deeply analyse the objectivity of facts. Assuming this line of interpretation, we arrive to the conclusion that the imaginary is necessarily subjectivized or politicized. The author cleverly suggests the possibility that artistic products are compulsory ingredients in the subjectivization of the imaginary. The Tallis mansion is strewn with symbolic artefacts. Architecture, anyway, is seen as essential to the craft of writing by McEwan: "novels do resemble buildings. A first chapter, a first line is like an entrance hall, a doorway" (Reynolds and Noakes, 2003, p. 15). He favours clarity at the level of style, but, on the other hand, plays with contingencies and cultural interpretations. Consequently, his style invites, even entraps the reader, but later on this reader gets baffled by the profusion of significant details and openings. As Dominic Head observes, "one of his primary motivations as a novelist is to dramatize the emphatic impact of contingency on imagined lives, and to trace the personal tests and moral dilemmas that result from the unforeseen event" (Head, 2007, p. 12). Modernist and postmodernist devices attack and counterattack all throughout the novel.

Imagination gives vent to fiction and fictionalizing offers supplementary powers to the fictionalizer over reality. The young Briony becomes intoxicated by the fumes of re-writing reality: "writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturization" (McEwan, 2002, p. 7). Producing fiction as such equates to playing chess with people's lives. It means power. That is why Briony is an unreliable witness, as Henry James's narrators were.

Artistic symbols of conformist representations

Symbolic vestiges of power are the artefacts or their reproductions. In front of the Tallis house there is a fountain, a "half-scale reproduction of Bernini's *Triton* in the Piazza Barberini in Rome" (McEwan, 2002, p. 18). The miniaturized reproduction of the classic *objet d'art* would indicate the qualities of the family: decency, harmony, equilibrium and elegant beauty. Instead, the fountain will be the place wherein a precious vase, transmitted from generation to generation, gets broken. Also, it is next to the fountain that Briony,

positioned at a faraway window, sees her sister undressing in Robbie's presence in order to dive into the fountain and recover some broken pieces from the vase. She will interpret this gesture as a masculine threat. The vase in its turn should be the symbol of an Arcadian family tradition: "It was genuine Meissen porcelain, the work of the great artist Höroldt, who painted it in 1726." Cecilia, nonetheless, is not fascinated by the delicate porcelain: "Its little painted Chinese figures gathered formally in a garden around a table, with ornate plants and implausible birds, seemed fussy and oppressive" (McEwan, 2002, p. 24). The same intention of creating an Arcadian realm is salient in the construction of a temple on the island in the middle of a lake found on the property. The temple had been "built in the style of Nicolas Revett in the late 1780s […] intended as a point of interest, an eye-catching feature to enhance the pastoral ideal" (McEwan, 2002, p. 72). There was no religious destination attached to it.
The structural formula of this rationalistic environment, which is supposed to engender forged Victorian ideals, is congruent with Briony's state of mind. While she rambles across the fields and thinks of possible admission to the adults' world, she slashes the nettles as if she disliked their disordered arrangement. With Cecilia, in exchange, the situation is completely different: she wonders how flowers can distribute themselves in various patterns every time she drops them into a vase. Both sisters are imaginative beings, except that Briony's departure from reality is artsy and all-round affected: "Wasn't it writing a kind of soaring, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination?" (McEwan, 2002, p. 157). Her imaginary is double-fold: first, as a child, she destroys her sister's happiness trying to protect her; second, as an old famous writer, she redeems – in one of the two endings of the novel – the two lovers' sufferings. Of course, we could see Briony as the fictional and fictionalizing consciousness of a cowardly and frigid Cecilia – but this would make for a totally different line of interpretation.

Conclusion

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

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