TIME AND NARRATIVE: READING IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*

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Abstract The present paper is committed to the topic of time and narrative. We will firstly draw a contextualizing outline, emphasizing the conditions which brought about the postmodern shift, followed by a cursory survey concerning the cultural aspects of postmodernism. In the second part of the paper, we will review some of the major works in the field of time and narrative. In the last part, we will finally investigate a postmodern British novel (Ian McEwan's Atonement) by using structuralist and phenomenological instruments of analysis.
Keywords time, narratology, postmodernism, reading, phenomenology.

Postmodern, Postmodernity, Postmodernism

David Lodge showed that postmodernity typically includes a vast range of cultural styles, attitudes, and arguments: deconstruction, post-structuralism, post-industrialism, consumerism, quantum physics, or cybernetics (amongst others).[1] It is an event or set of events (some of these events include: the universalism of technology, the collapse of spatial distinctiveness and identity, and the uncontrolled acceleration of temporal processes)[2] which dramatically alter the ways in which we view the world, calling our ideological assumptions into question.[3] Richard Rorty's pragmatism, the work of philosophical scientists, Michel Foucault's genealogies, catastrophe and chaos theories, Jean-François Lytorad's war on totality, fractal geometry, Jean Baudrillard's simulations, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomes – all of these add up to what postmodernity feverishly celebrates: pluralism and the rejection of all cultural certainties (anti-foundationalism and anti-authoritarianism).[4]

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[1] David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel. Collected Essays* (London: Penguin Group, 2002), 89.
[2] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 209.
[3] Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2006), 10.
[4] Sim, *Companion to Postmodernism*, 9.

Indeed, Hayden White convincingly argued that the rejection of history was the result of the tension between a series of conceptual, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetical oppositions: fact and fiction, subject and object, form and content, surface and depth, sense and reference.[5] The collapse of time horizons and the loss of temporality led to the disappearance of depth, bringing about a constant preoccupation with the problem of instantaneity. Jörn Rüsen argued that postmodernity's orientation towards the past reveals a desire to understand the present.[6] Nevertheless, this relationship is intentionally blurred because, as Fredric Jameson has shown, the 'truth of experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place'.[7]

Consequently, postmodernity marks a shift in representation and the ways in which knowledge – as commodity – is produced, distributed, and consumed. Postmodern novels customarily show us dazed and confused characters having serious ontological doubts (being aware of their own status as characters). This marks the shift from an epistemological to an ontological paradigm. In *Atonement*, for instance, the epistemological binary opposition between the verbs *to know* and *to be told* gradually transgresses into an ontological one.

The anti-modern aesthetic of postmodernism was described as playful, schizoid, and self-ironizing (the use of modern strategies in the first part, for instance, and the meta-fictional end twist, in *Atonement*, are relevant illustrations of this aesthetic). It employs a language of commerce and commodity, emphasizing difference, fragmentation, simultaneousness, instantaneity, and indeterminacy.[8] Postmodernism – or, in Jameson's words, the cultural logic of late capitalism – is generally defined by the use of pastiche, because artists and writers are no longer "able to invent new styles and worlds."[9] While parody imitates another style in order to mock it, pastiche re-creates the past by ignoring historical specificity. Furthermore, pastiche involves the disappearance of the individual subject and, with it, the difficulty of representing the present for ourselves.[10]

[5] Hayden White, "American Modernism, Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde," in *Modernism and Antimodernism. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Sorin Antohi (Bucharest: Cuvântul, 2008), 35.
[6] Jörn Rüsen, "Historical Studies between Modernity and Postmodernity," in *Modernism and Antimodernism. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Sorin Antohi (Bucharest: Cuvântul, 2008), 83.
[7] Ibid., p. 262.
[8] Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 3–7.
[9] Sim, *Companion to Postmodernism*, 126.
[10] Ibid., 23.

At the opposite end, Linda Hutcheon suggested that one can only revisit the past through the use of irony and parody[11] Indeed, Nigel Watson's essay *Postmodernism and Lifestyle or You Are What You Buy* similarly reveals a self-conscious condition of the postmodern world about its past and an ironic sense of playfulness.[12] "Historiographic metafiction", as defined by Linda Hutcheon, is a self-consciously distorted history (self-reflexive experimentations, anachronisms, ironic ambiguities, the contestation of classic realist representation, and the blending of history and fiction).[13] Furthermore, "historiography and fiction are seen as sharing the same act of refiguration of reshaping of our experience of time through plot configurations."[14] Other postmodern narrative features include multiple endings, text fragmentation, or participatory attitudes.[15]

Postmodernism doesn't deny the existence of the past, but simply questions our ability to know it.[16] Arguably, the only way in which one can truly know the past is through its textualised remains which possess an inherent ideological content (the ideological and the aesthetic are virtually inseparable).[17] Consequently, when writing about the past, one has to open it up to the present in order to prevent it from being "conclusive and teleological."[18]

Time and Narrative

Paul Ricoeur famously argued that time is anthropomorphised when it is organised as a narrative because narratives portray the temporal features of experience: "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence."[19] In order to discuss the temporal dimensions of narrative, Ricoeur reverted to St. Augustine's aporias of time, also picking up Aristotle's *Poetics* in order to distinguish between *mimēsis* and *muthos*. Voicing his ideas, we conclude that *mimēsis* represents the mimetic activity which is a creative type of imitation (or representation), while *muthos* stands for the mimetic activity as emplotment (or the organization of events).[20] Imitation, for Ricoeur, is not the representation of real life,

[11] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4.
[12] Sim, *Companion to Postmodernism*, 53.
[13] Ibid., 43–48.
[14] Ibid., 100.
[15] Ibid., 132.
[16] Ibid., 20.
[17] Ibid., 178.
[18] Ibid., 109.
[19] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Vol. 1. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.
[20] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 31–33.

but rather a certain type of organizing events through emplotment.[21] In other words, narrative (not the subject of action) is the sole object of representation (or imitation). Representation, in its turn, can only be applied to genres (ways of organizing the elements of narration).

Keeping in mind the fact that *muthos* is the object of *mimēsis*, we will follow Ricoeur by reproducing his famous dialectics of *mimēsis*: *mimēsis 1* is the first step in the poetic composition (the composition of the plot grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its structures, symbols, and temporal character); *mimēsis 2* is the imitation of creation (the mediating or configuration process of emplotment); *mimēsis 3* is the mimetic activity of the reader (who mediates between time and narrative, because all narratives receive their full meaning when they are restored to the time of action).[22]

Mimēsis 3 marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader (interweaving history and fiction).[23] We can narrate human action because it is already symbolically mediated (articulated by signs, rules, and norms). Ricoeur makes use of Leibniz's opposition between intuitive knowledge as direct insight and symbolic knowledge as abbreviated signs in order to stress the fact that cultural symbols underlie action and constitute action's power of signification.[24] Moreover, artistic works refer to the world of action through metaphorical reference.[25]

Ricoeur justly observed that the story happens to someone before anyone tells it. Telling and understanding (or simply reading) stories is the "continuation" of these untold stories.[26] Thus, poetics is not only about structure, but also about structuration. The latter is an oriented activity that is only completed in the mind of the reader (the written work being a sketch for reading).[27] Consequently, if the present stands for the possibility of redemption, *the fictional postmodern now* endows the reader with the power of absolving a writer's characters. Recognizing the transformative powers of fiction and their positive influence upon life and customs (the effects of fiction are brought about by the experience of reading), Ricoeur argues that 'the key to the problem of refiguration lies in the way history and fiction, taken together, after the reply of a poetics of narrative to the aporias of time brought about phenomenology'.[28] Husserl's phenomenology of internal time

[21] Ibid., 34.
[22] Ibid., 46.
[23] Ibid., 70–71.
[24] Ibid., 57.
[25] Ibid., 80.
[26] Ibid., 75.
[27] Ibid., 48.
[28] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Vol. 3. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 101.

consciousness and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology of temporality open the way for narrative to offer a poetic solution to the aporias of time.[29]

With a nod to Genette's theories, Ricoeur believes that the literary text transcends itself: the world of the text opens up to the other by revealing its internal structure[30] through the reader's own process of interpretation (reflective reading).[31] Defined as the continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories, the process of reading affects the reader: 'reading is a picnic where the author brings the words and the readers the meaning'.[32] In Walker Gibson's footsteps, the real reader is construed as the concretization of the implied reader which was intended by the narrator's strategy of persuasion.[33] Adopting a rhetorical stance, Ricoeur finally suggests that the strategy of persuasion used by the implied author seeks to impose on the reader the force of conviction.[34] The instant has a twofold function (as break and as continuity) and a twofold meaning: as a source and as a limit.[35] Finally, there are, in Ricoeur's understanding, three modes of time responsible for organizing our experiences: duration is the quantity of existence; succession is the regularity of composition; coexistence is the simultaneity of inherence.[36]

Two temporal dimensions are always combined by/through emplotment: a chronological dimension which reveals the episodic dimension of narrative and the configurational dimension in which the plot transforms the events into a story[37] (also responsible for the "sense of an ending").[38] In Ricoeur's view, to understand a story is "to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story."[39] Ricoeur also believed that "an inconclusive ending suits a work that raises by design a problem the author considers to be unsolvable."[40] Christianity values the present as the now because it

[29] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 4.
[30] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 158.
[31] Ibid., 165.
[32] Ibid., 169.
[33] Ibid., 170.
[34] Ibid., 178.
[35] Ibid., 31.
[36] Ibid., 52.
[37] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 66.
[38] Ibid., 67.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Vol. 2. (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 22.

presents the possibility of redemption or atonement.[41] *Atonement*'s inconclusive end represents a problem which McEwan considered to be unsolvable.

Interestingly, Mark Currie begins his analysis by clearly stating that Ricoeur was wrong to divide novels in tales of time, on the one hand, and tales about time, on the other. Instead, he posits the idea that all novels are novels about time and that, some of them, are about "about time", emphasizing that a backward temporality is always at work in each and every narrative.[42] Thus, the postmodern experience of time is seen as the relation between the phenomenological experience of time and the way it is presented to human consciousness and to the collective consciousness altered by the shared conditions of technological innovations.[43]

Radically, Currie suggests we replace narrative with reading while asking us to imagine the process of reading with a bookmark: the position of the bookmark would indicate the present of the reader. The left of the bookmark is the past or the already known; conversely, the right of the bookmark represents the future or the not yet known. The past is fixed while the future is still open. In fact, a reader's present is never actually present – it is always past. What we read is, in fact, somebody else's present related to us in the past tense. This is why, Currie suggests, we experience the past tense in the present. Consequently, every narrative is understood as retrospection. Hence the reason we view the present as the object of a future memory and why we live it as such anticipating of the story we will tell. The author defines the present as "a place" from which we continually revise stories about this future-past. The continuous anticipation allows us to attach significance to present moments. All in all, Currie suggests that anticipation is a mode of being which allows us to experience the present as the object of a future memory[44] (a mode of anticipation which structures the present). In a sense, an event is recorded not because it happens, but it happens because it is recorded.[45] Currie defines *prolepsis* as the anticipation of retrospection. *Prolepsis* is the basic temporal structure of human experience and narrative.[46]

The relation between a text and its reading offers a model of time: the passage of events from a world of future possibilities into the actuality of the reader's present and onwards into the reader's memory.[47] He contrasts the unreality of the future in real life with the already-there-ness of the future in fiction. The idea

[41] Hayden White, "Primitivism and Modernism," in *Modernism and Antimodernism. New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Sorin Antohi (Bucharest: Cuvântul, 2008), 20.
[42] Mark Currie, *About Time. Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 4–5.
[43] Currie, 80.
[44] Ibid., 5–6.
[45] Ibid., 11.
[46] Ibid., 29.
[47] Ibid., 16.

that moving forwards in time involves backward narration represents, he contends, the shape of time itself.[48] The future of narrative is already in place because it has a spatial existence,[49] while the present is re-experienced and represented as the past.[50]

Mark Currie expounds the 'inauthentic present' as an act of reading which consists in the presentification of the past and the 'authentic present' as a mode of being which consists in the projection towards a future which looks back on the present:[51] "the temporal distance that separates the past from the present, and which permits the moral self-judgement of confession is immanent in the present."[52] Currie's most spectacular insight into the nature of the novel and the way it represents time is that the forward motion of life mimics the backward motion of explanation and that they are articulated to each other.[53] The future of fictional narratives is always already laid out spatially and, most importantly, reading allows us to interact with the past which lies ahead of us, while the future of narrative is always already a past event.[54]

At-One Time

In an essay entitled "Only Love and Then Oblivion", McEwan himself said that "imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and it is the beginning of morality."[55] His decision to remove closure is construed as a postmodern technique, dragging the readers out of the realist dream and reminding them that the author's control is another name for destiny. Fictionality is exposed by challenging the reader's expectations.[56] Alistair Cormack, in his essay "Postmodernism and the Ethics of Fiction in *Atonement*", argued that the novel presents a complex novelistic discourse, a collision between different styles and modes of representation, a self-conscious reference to a pantheon of canonical English writers and a postmodern conclusion.[57] Cormack showed that the novel doesn't necessarily challenge the functions of the novelistic discourse. Instead, it attacks morally disengaged modernism.[58] We make sense of the fictional universe through the process of

[48] Ibid., 88.
[49] Ibid., 33.
[50] Ibid., 40–41.
[51] Ibid., 55.
[52] Ibid., 70.
[53] Ibid., 97.
[54] Ibid., 143–148.
[55] Ibid., 15.
[56] Ibid., 17.
[57] Ibid., 70.
[58] Ibid., 77.

narrative which, in this case, proves to be misleading, thus the novel is about the ethical dimension of the processes of reading and writing fiction.[59]

In her essay, "Ian McEwan: Contemporary Realism and the Novel of Ideas", Judith Seaboyer reasons that *Atonement* allows us to experience the ethics of writing and reading.[60] It is important, however, to acknowledge the fact that this experience is fundamentally a temporal one, an experience delivered through and by narration. According to Philip Tew, the narrator seems to be powerless in its relationship with the past, transforming the past into a forever-now: a kind of perpetual back and forth reverberation.[61]

Coming back to time and narrativity, we will note that Briony's play was composed "in a two-day tempest."[62] After she completed her play, she had nothing else left to do because she could not, in real life, speed up the pace of action: "When the preparations were complete, she had nothing to do but contemplate her finished draft and wait for the appearance of her cousins from the distant north."[63] Furthermore, for Briony, as well as for Ricoeur, time only becomes human when it is narrated. Briony understood life only within temporal change represented by stories. Her present was constantly archived within diaries, notebooks, and letters. This detail is revealing if we think about the old Briony's account of her memories. Even if she had problems remembering different things (due to her vascular dementia), the memories of her younger days were safely kept as secrets: "here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention. In a toy safe opened by six secret numbers she stored letters and postcard."[64] The use of such material is meant to convey the impression of great closeness between writing and living.

Her expectations are formulated in fictional or literary terms. What's more, her experiences are shaped by her literary expectations, falling into different variations of what Abbott calls "masterplots". For example, here are Briony's thoughts, immediately after witnessing the fountain scene: "The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal. Such was Briony's last thought before she accepted that she did not understand and that she must simply watch."[65] In a sense, her memories (as written evidence) and her expectations (or her wanting of reality to fit into different pre-fabricated stories) constitute her mode(s) of viewing the present. This is how

[59] Ibid., 82.
[60] James Acheson and C.E. Sarah Ross, eds., *The Contemporary British Novel since 1980* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 32.
[61] Phillip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (Norfolk: Continuum, 2004), 122.
[62] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: The Random House Group, 2001), 3.
[63] Ibid., 3.
[64] Ibid., 5.
[65] Ibid., 39.

Briony measures time: she constructs her impressions and images of the present into her works of art: "at the age of eleven she wrote her first story […] the play she had written for Leon's homecoming was her first excursion into drama",[66] "she may have experienced nothing more than impatience to begin writing again."[67]

The matryoshka goes as follows: there is the first novel, as a whole, written by old Briony; secondly, there is the novel within a novel which refers to the first three parts of *Atonement* (diegetic imitation) with the exception of the epilogue, *London, 1999*; and, thirdly, there are the works of young Briony: *The Trials of Arabella* (dramatic imitation). Of course, McEwan's novel encompasses all of them. Finally, there is the reader's novel.

The actual novel is composed of three parts. The first part is about the hot long summer day in 1935 when Briony was thirteen years old. This is, in its turn, constituted from fourteen numbered chapters. The first chapter is narrated in a third-person narrative having Briony as its main centre of consciousness (Briony is thus the reflector or the focaliser of this first chapter). The second chapter is also narrated in a third-person narrative, but, this time, Cecilia plays the role of the reflector. The third chapter is where Briony first witnesses the fountain scene. It is a third-person narrative, and, obviously, Briony plays the role of the reflector. This is also the chapter in which Briony decides that she would rewrite the scene three times over, from three points of view. Furthermore, this is where Briony realises that "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."[68] The fourth chapter has Cecilia as its reflector. The fifth chapter reveals a shift between an omniscient narrator and Lola as a reflector. The sixth chapter has Emily Tallis as the reflector. The seventh chapter returns to Briony's role as the central reflector. The eighth chapter belongs to Robbie. Chapter nine is, once again, seen through Cecilia's eyes. The tenth chapter is dominated by Briony's point of view, while the eleventh focuses on Robbie. This is the chapter containing the love-making scene. The twelfth chapter belongs to Briony's mother. The thirteenth chapter is delivered through Briony's consciousness and it is here we encounter the so-called rape scene. Finally, the last chapter oscillates between Briony's point of view and the omniscient narrator's.

The second part of the novel is Robbie's account of the Dunkirk retreat. Its chapters are not numbered. It could be inferred that the lack of numbered chapters is a formal expression which emphasises the chaos and the temporal disruptions caused by the war. While not dismissing this idea, we would argue that, in fact, the main reason for which the second part lacks numbered chapters is because the seventy-seven-year-old Briony (from the epilogue) wanted to confer the feel that

[66] Ibid., 6–7.
[67] Ibid., 40.
[68] Ibid., 40.

these are Robbie's real thoughts and words. The first part and its numbered chapters reveal Briony's (both young and old) sense of order and her wanting to have a sense of continuity. The third part is about the time Briony spent at St. Thomas's Hospital in London and about her literary endeavours (also containing the death-bed scene) The epilogue is entitled "London 1999". It is, in fact, Briony's account of what had really happened to Robbie and Cecilia. This is the moment in which we realise that all that we have read is, in fact, a conscious and premeditated product of a novelist. Briony's actions were not driven by an ethical belief, but from a literary one (although McEwan would argue they are the same thing).

The beginning is represented by the events that took place in the long hot summer day of 1935. The story develops after Marshall rapes Lola. Briony understands both life and fiction through the processes of fiction: schematization, synthetization, and assimilation. Influenced by what she has read, Briony believes that, according to her narrative or literary logic, Robbie is the only one capable of doing such a thing. The middle of the story is composed of the second and the third part, while the end is constituted by the epilogue. The plot is built through the logical construction of time and not by the chronological construction of time. We cannot truly speak about interaction because everything that happens is imagined by Briony, the writer. Of course, the conflict is evident, but it is consciously presented from the point of view of a *doubly-articulated unreliable narrator*.

The only authentic sense of time is found in the epilogue, which is actually dated 1999. This is the only clear and real reference, within the fictional world (with the exception of the battle). The measurement of time (in the first three parts) is an imaginary measurement of an imaginary time. This is why we can come back to it, re-read it and interpret it from an entirely new perspective. This re-evaluation of time is assessable only from the point of view of the last chapter because this is the only stable account of time. Evidently, if we view it from the perspective of its real author, the last part also becomes untrustworthy. In the sense envisaged by Ricoeur, poetic structuration is made affordable through the existence of the last chapter.

The reflexivity of the configuration act gives birth to different temporal levels. We can acknowledge the self-reflexivity of the first part in which Briony announces her wish to rewrite the same scene from three different points of view. Thus, the rhetorical and stylistic powers of narrative have deformed the reality of events. The grammatical tense loses its function of designating the past because the narrated action did not properly occur. In this sense, we can observe a double-loss or a paradoxical-direction in which the grammatical tense functions. Firstly, it is used to designate an unreal past. Secondly, the same grammatical tense gains fictional reference if viewed from the point of view of the last chapter.

Atonement is a tale about time in the sense that it is about writing and reading fiction. Both writing and reading take time. The process of writing is, as we have seen, a threefold process. Reading also takes time, but reading also involves

the unfolding in front of the reader's eyes and in his imagination of both the time of narration and narrated time. There are several break-points in *Atonement*: "She bent her finger and straightened it. The mystery was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving when her intention took effect."[69] These pivotal moments include Briony's reading of Robbie's letter, Briony's witnessing the scene at the fountain, and Briony's appearance in the love-making scene. It is obvious that Marshall's raping of Lola is also a 'pregnant moment'. The twofold meaning of the moment (as a source and as a limit) marks Briony's transition from childhood into adolescence.

The time of the novel has a threefold existence. The time, as described by Briony, has a specific duration. This is the quantity of its existence. It is represented as the period contained between the 1935 and 1999. Although, as we have already argued, the largest part of it is actually imaginary. Further on, there are two types of what Ricoeur called succession. The first version is the one that we, as readers, believe to be true until we reach the last part of the novel, and, obviously, the second version is that we re-imagine after having read the last chapter. Coexistence is applicable only to the last part. It is found in an open future. The two versions of succession do not influence its existence in either of them. In a sense, the last part is simultaneous because it is inherent in both of these two versions.

In *Atonement,* the reader is the one who, by moving forward, is forced to move backward in time in order to establish the reality of events. The priority of the future or the priority of Briony's final confession requires a moral (self)distancing stance which could be interpreted as the authentic part of the present. In the end, the narrated time catches up with the time of the narrative. Currie argues that when this happens, there is nothing left to remember but memory itself and nothing left to write about but the act of writing. The past lies ahead in the sense that all moments are passed in respect to the act of reading, and furthermore, the real past lies ahead in Briony's future confessions. Even the future is a past event because Briony's confessions were only published after her death.

Consciousness is responsible for our awareness of time and the passage of time. We represent our conscious awareness through language. In the first part, McEwan represents the characters' awareness of time by verbally dividing it into small intervals such as immediately,[70] quickly,[71] a few seconds later,[72] instant, moment,[73] several minutes,[74] not long after,[75] suddenly,[76] two minutes later.[77]

[69] Ibid., 35.
[70] Ibid., 9.
[71] Ibid., 19.
[72] Ibid., 30.
[73] Ibid., 35.
[74] Ibid., 50.
[75] Ibid., 63.

However, the first part is also divided into Victorian timetables, such as tea-time, bath-time. Briony's act of atonement and, in fact, the essence of the novel, can be summed up in the following passage:

> 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 folk tales, 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. She would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologising, and she gave her account a self-mocking or mock-heroic tone. Her fiction was known for its amorality, and like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself. She knew that it was not correct to refer to her dramas in the plural, that her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and that it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it. It was possible that the contemplation of a crooked finger, the unbearable idea of the other minds and the superiority of stories over plays were thoughts she had had on other days. She also knew that whatever actually happened drew its significance from her published work and would not have been remembered without it.[78]

Conclusions

Although it is narrated, as we have seen, through the eyes of a doubly-articulated unreliable narrator, the novel remains inconclusive and irresolute, yet fully acceptable and congruent within its own visionary project. Poetics is the inextricable gathering of structure and structuration. While structure refers to the organization of representation, structuration is a constant reminder of the real-life grounding of creative activities (composing and reading). Consequently, the transformative powers of fiction are entangled with issues of authorship and readership. Most importantly, we can conclude that reading – defined as the interplay of modified expectations and transformed memories - offers a model of time. Fascinatingly, reading McEwan's *Atonement* represents a temporary solution to the permanent impossibility of redeeming a culpable experience, mimicking both the prospective movement of life and the regressive dynamics of fiction.

[76] Ibid., 75.
[77] Ibid., 160.
[78] Ibid., 41.