"She is also God": The Violence of Godlike Girlhood in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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The present paper offers a close reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* through the lens of girlhood. Known for its twist of revealing one of the main characters, Briony Tallis, as the writer of the novel, *Atonement* calls attention to its own fictional nature, while simultaneously creating micro images of entering and controlling which posit Briony as a godlike quasi-narrator who enacts violence on her creations. The paper analyses these images and considers the modal links between storytelling and girlishness by reading instances in the novel in terms of an intrusion. It relies on girlhood studies to interpret the girl as a menacing, central figure.

Keywords: girlhood studies, intrusion, violence, narratorial voice

> "Briony inhabited an ill-refined transitional space between the nursery and adult worlds which she crossed and recrossed unpredictably." (McEwan 2001, 141)

1 Introduction: Girls and the Novel

This article investigates the conceptions of girlhood and its motivic and narratorial capacities for authoritative violence in the 2001 novel *Atonement* by British author Ian McEwan. Known for its quintessentially postmodernist twist – which reveals one of the characters, Briony Tallis, to be the hidden-in-plain-sight writer, quasi-narrator[1] and focalising factor[2] of all events described –, *Atonement* is a novel about

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[1] The revelation of Briony as the author of the novel necessarily restructures the reading experience of *Atonement*. In this article, I interpret Briony's presence as girl storyteller by analysing the narratorial voice, the descriptive narrative voice in Part 1 and Part 2, which retroactively constructs Briony as a focalising factor in every phrasing and word usage long before the infamous twist is known by the reader.

[2] When coining the term focaliser, Gérard Genette posed the question, "who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?" (1980, 186) in order to examine "the regulation of

fiction which calls attention to its own constructed nature. Yet, not incidentally, it is a work which highlights the role of the girl as a menacing, authoritative and authoritarian figure, whose revelation as secret storyteller contributes and relates to the history of the novel, which insofar has rarely been considered as potentially a girls' domain.

To shed light on the motivic aspects of the girl, a brief examination of girlhood itself is required. A field on its own since the 1990s, girlhood studies has come to view girlhood as a construct, with the understanding that, as Catherine Driscoll puts it, "girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge" (2002, 5). In everyday usage, the word "girl" tends to refer to young women who are underage and are not yet married; yet even this has been inconstant. Girlhood is time and again constructed and reconstructed, and this has been the case since the latter half of the nineteenth century, when our contemporary ideas of girlhood came into being. Before the Victorian era, the notion of girlhood was largely discussed in terms of daughters and unmarried young women, as richly explored by Paula Marantz Cohen in *The Daughter's Dilemma* (1991). In *Health and Girlhood in Britain, 1874–1920*, Hilary Marland highlights that "the notion of girlhood as a separate stage of existence with its own values, interests [...] evolved from the 1870s onwards." In this conception, the term "girlhood" refers to those "who were neither children nor adult women" (2013, 3). As girlhood evolved as a concept, its various qualities have also broadened in criticism. As put by Mary Ann Harlan, "in the early 1990s the popularity of the text *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls* (Pipher 1994) led to subsequent cultural discussion focused on a narrative of girls at risk," which later gave rise to yet another cultural repurposing of girlhood with the advent of "girlpower" (2017, 54). When studying girls' role in the literary text, this duality of both being at risk and holding power (and thus *posing* risk) must be dealt with, as well as the fact that girlhood itself functions as a mode and construct which may have an impact on the narrative text.

Atonement holds within itself these dualities. In the novel's coda, seventy-seven-year-old Briony Tallis watches the first complete production of *The Trials of Arabella*, a play she had written and aspired to direct at the age of thirteen. The play had fallen apart on the eve of its conception in 1935: Briony's witnessing of her cousin Lola's rape, her indictment of Robbie, and the consequent breakup of the Tallis family made

narrative information" (1988, 41). Studying Briony's girlish and regulation-oriented presence in the narration, I refer to the extent of her implication in the storytelling of *Atonement* as both *more* and *less* than a focalising character or an unproblematic narrator by relying on the terms quasi-narrator and focalising factor in my analysis. With these terms, I aim to indicate the impact her presence bears on the text.

it so that *The Trials of Arabella* could not see the light of day for over sixty years. This time, however, it is a triumph. Briony's young nephews and nieces recite the lines with "a thrilling clarity" (McEwan 2001, 367), and the appropriate applause is given as Briony humbly takes the blame for the original failure of *Arabella*. While this sequence has been noted in the scholarship of *Atonement* as one that forms a frame structure, rhyming with the opening of the novel (Finney 2004, 75), one must not forget its placement in the text. At this point in the plot, Briony has just been revealed as having written (Parts 1 through 3 of) *Atonement*, and readers are obliged to reckon with the knowledge that all they have been shown was always already filtered through Briony's presence in the text as secret quasi-narrator and focalising factor. This revelation restructures the role of the play as a scene of origin, as I will elaborate on later.

In line with the twist for which *Atonement* is most famous, McEwan's text has almost universally been considered a novel about fiction (see Finney 2002; Swan 2007; Robinson 2010). But who does that fiction originate from? Regarding McEwan's novel as a particularly effective example of the postmodern, critics have time and again investigated how the revelation of Briony as true author may reshape the reading experience (Robinson 2010, 484–87). Yet Briony herself has not been given the same amount of attention, nor has a consensus been truly reached about her figure; Brian Finney states that McEwan's novel "employs the narrative voice of a 77-year-old English woman" (2004, 68), while Dominic Head refers to "a record of things the young girl saw and felt (as far as she can now make sense of them), rendered through the adult's vocabulary" (2007, 164). But who is Briony, the one that, as Head points out, is "implicated in the narrative stance" (163)? A girl or an elderly woman? And what is her atonement – a gesture of "final kindness" (McEwan 2001, 372) or rather a form of intrusion?

Taking the final rendition of *The Trials of Arabella* as an origin point via which the entirety of the text may be interpreted, I read *Atonement* as a novel about girlhood, wherein the focalising presence of the girl is continually foreshadowed and (re) constructed long before the twist is revealed to the reader. *The Trials of Arabella* serves as a first and final textual image of this reconstruction, as it problematises the true identity of Briony as a person and quasi-narrator. As her play comes alive before her eyes, Briony sees a vision of her younger self – "Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited little girl" (367) – and the implied distance combined with self-judgment in her words is crystal clear. The indication, however, that Briony Now and Briony Then are markedly different, is a form of deception on the novel's part. As elderly Briony herself states, "I still feel myself to be the exact same person I've always been" (356) – her voice, her figure and her apparatus as writer remain conspicuously unchanged. Briony, who, as Kathleen D'Angelo reminds critics, "herself is a fictional construct" (2009, 88), holds within

herself a constancy that ultimately forms in her an unchanging, perpetual girlhood. She is a voice onto herself, and so her girlishness may be read as a narrative mode utilised by McEwan. Therein lies the significance of *The Trials of Arabella* recurring in the novel's closing. It is a framing device which, rather than revoking Briony's girlish tendencies, reaffirms them and gives them a "tidy finish" (McEwan 2001, 353). Her desires for being celebrated by her brother Leon and the rest of her family are unfulfilled at thirteen but are finally realised in the final pages. Rather than a mere repetition, then, the scene is a chilling completion of what did not occur when it should have, of the applause she deserves. In fact, Part 1 of the novel foreshadows the play's later success and its effect on its creator: "This was precisely why she loved plays, or hers at least; everyone would adore her" (11). The desire for adoration then, the notion of having a shrine erected for her is the impetus behind Briony's writing. From this angle, the presence of the Coda itself (an ending which has been claimed to be gimmicky by reviewers [Moore 2001, 12]), gains additional meaning: it ultimately presents Briony as an Arabella figure, coming out onto the stage to receive her reward. It is an act of a puppeteer showing her hand. A girlish Briony, not an unnamed and impersonal or impartial narrator, is behind the machinations of *Atonement*. "There is nothing outside her" (McEwan 2001, 371), she is the source.

In my view, it follows from the above that the very narrative act – that is, atonement – around which the whole novel is organised essentially stands for a young girl's telling a story and wishing desperately to be validated for doing so. The impossibility and vanity of such a girlish mode of storytelling are explicitly problematised in the final pages, as Briony proceeds to question the results of her youthfully phrased "fifty-nine-year assignment" (369): "how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (371). Being positioned as the Judeo-Christian God is an explicit attribute of her identity which is closely linked to her vengefully situated narration: her role as absolutistic narrative god[3] enters into a dialogue with her discursive role as girl – she imagines, fantasises and forces as both.

In order to understand the framework of godlike girlhood in *Atonement*, it is necessary to first briefly consider the processes of feminisation that the novel as a genre has undergone. As the novel rose into prominence in the eighteenth century, its

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[3]   As Briony herself refers to her own quasi-narratorial powers in terms of a Biblical God and her very act of atonement is embedded within a Judeo-Christian belief discourse, I acknowledge her absolutistic role by capitalising the word God in this article. In other instances, I refer to Briony as "godlike" in order to demonstrate her quasi-narratorial capacity. For further exploration of Briony Tallis as narrative God, see Charles Cornelius Pastoor's 2019 study entitled "Authorial Atonement in Ian McEwan's Atonement and Sweet Tooth."

critical discourse already increasingly considered it feminine.[4] As Nancy Armstrong puts it in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, by the early nineteenth century, "the novel was already known as a female form" (1987, 104). Armstrong's main argument is that the birth of the domestic woman was crucial in the birth of the modern novel. While the novel may have been, and continues to be, feminised, its potential *girlification* is what is at the centre of the work examined in this article. Can the novel be considered (at least partially) a girls' domain? In what way does it affect narrative writing to have a girl as a novel's author and a factor within its narratorial voice? Pondering these queries, it is worth noting that while both the reading and the writing of the novel have undergone feminisation, the girlishness of the former can also be clearly documented. The past few decades have seen the rise of reading as largely a girls' activity. Bozena White discusses the "anxiety regarding the purported gender gap in reading" (2007, 556), while Anne Simpson's study, *Fictions and Facts: An Investigation of the Reading Practices of Girls and Boys* yielded the result that "overall the 13 girls [involved in the study] completed nearly twice as many titles as the boys. Significantly, of the 56 books they finished, 51 were novels. That is, over 90% of the books read by the girls over a period of four weeks were narrative fiction. In contrast the 17 boys completed only 41 books, of which only 53% were novels, and half of these 22 novels were Choose-Your-Own adventure stories" (1996, 270).

The latter – novel writing belonging foremost to the terrain of girls – may be less obvious. Yet it is not without foundation or cultural history – far from it. Without a doubt, there is no shortage of girl narrators in romances and young adult literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, a collection of essays edited by Sara K. Day, explores the rebellious girl protagonist and narrator. In the Introduction, Day writes about "young women [who] in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century dystopian fiction embody liminality, straddling the lines of childhood and adulthood, of individuality and conformity, of empowerment and passivity" (2014, 4). Although they are heavily featured in literature, it is their presence in the canon that is more lacking. In some cases, they might be erroneously discovered, such as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, in which the ten-year-old Jane at the opening of the novel is merely a focaliser for her adult counterpart. In others, brief instances of embedded narration may serve crucial plot development, such as in Agatha Christie's *Crooked House*.[5] And while

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[4] Andreas Huyssen writes about this process in "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other" in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (1986, 44–62), as does Rita Felski in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995, 91–114).

[5] It is crucial in the structuring of Christie's 1949 murder mystery that it reveals, notably via a diary entry, that the gruesome murder was committed by a young girl of twelve, Josephine: "Today I killed grandfather" (Christie 1949, 276.) It ought to be noted, however, that Christie's middlebrow fiction

there are also trends in the current cultural moment which attempt to claim or re-member certain canonised authors as girls,[6] one must also consider exactly the relatively quieter history of journal writing, evoked by Christie and notably used by Dodie Smith in her 1948 Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman *I Capture the Castle* (in many ways a sister text to *Atonement* in its treatment of the observant teenage girl in 1930s England) as a partly girlish tradition.

Atonement by Ian McEwan picks up the tradition of girls' storytelling to both hide it and create an intensive narrative situation in which the girl as a quasi-narratorial voice is embedded in a struggle to be able to tell a story. First published mere days after 9/11, *Atonement* offers a view of girlhood in England in the 1930s that is decidedly richer than the escapist nostalgia of *I Capture the Castle*, a luxury granted at least partly by its historical perspective and by its postmodernist tendencies. Its take on storytelling is naturally also heavily informed by postmodernism; and critics have not been idle in discovering the abundance of intertextual connections that *Atonement* readily offers. Finney makes note of the seemingly unending list of literary reminiscences, including Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, and Agatha Christie (2004, 71–72), and while Juliette Wells explores the extent of the Austenian influence in the novel (2008, 103), Richard Robinson finds Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* and Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* to be the most definitive models for McEwan (2010, 475).

By setting Briony against the postmodernist backdrop of metafiction, McEwan's novel essentially introduces the figure of the quasi girl narratorial voice in a manner which both reflects on the uncertainty of narration as well as the role played by focalisation and the narrator in general, and toys with late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century issues of girlpower. *Atonement* represents, as Brian Richardson remarks in his analysis of McEwan's novel along with other postmodernist works, "a general move away from what was thought to be 'omniscient' third-person narration to limited third-person narration to ever more unreliable first-person narrators" (2006, 13). Briony Tallis may be seen as a quasi-narrator hidden in plain sight, a thirteen-year-old girl whose powers of imagination work to sinister ends, and whose girlish power to tell stories raises her to the transcendental highs of being intrusively godlike.

(of which *Crooked House* is a lesser-known example) still lingers on the edges of the canon, rather than strictly belonging to it.

6   Fiona Sampson's 2018 biography of Mary Shelley, *In Search of Mary Shelley*, bears the subtitle, "The Girl Who Wrote *Frankenstein*," showcasing the new-found focus on girls. Granted, the cultural reconfiguring of Mary Shelley as a girl is at least somewhat problematic: despite being eighteen years old when she wrote the manuscript of *Frankenstein*, she was already a wife and a mother.

2 Entering Girlhood?

Finney states that *Atonement* is about "the dangers of entering a fictional world" (2004, 69), and it is this precise act of entering that is at work within the frame of girlhood and narrative control. Notably, Briony initially ponders about the forced entry into Cecilia's private world that reading a letter addressed to her entails, thinking that it is "overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers" (McEwan 2001, 36). Then, her musings are followed by "ripping" open the envelope handed to her by Robbie (113). The manner in which Briony opens the envelope and enters further into her sister's romantic relationship with Robbie signifies the very way Briony is present in this world: through violation.[7] Reading Briony's narrative presence from this angle – one which considers her attributing thoughts and actions to others as a form of intrusion – informs the significance of her childhood play being properly rendered: *Arabella*'s first and final production is a *mise-en-abyme* of all that has come before. As the young actors in *The Trials of Arabella* echo lines fed to them by Briony, so has every single character done in *Atonement*. Cecilia, Robbie, and Emily Tallis have all been brought back to life by Briony. Her mode of resurrecting them is inherently intrusive: she, the narrative deity, blows the breath of life into them, and like a puppeteer in a theatre, places them onto her stage. Her narratorial intrusion is mirrored in her ripping into Robbie's letter. Briony's continual intrusive presence as she enters the fictionalised world of her sister and Robbie manifests her absolute power and sheds light on the concept that her atoning storytelling is an act of violence to begin with. Her crime, in fact, is the same as her solution. Dominic Head, highlighting the origin of the word "atonement" as a religious-dogmatic concept, explores the ethical implications that crime and atonement bestow upon Briony: "the self that Briony is 'at-one' with, in her lifetime of rewriting, is also the self whose desire for order produces her crime – and the life sentence of rewriting" (2007, 174). Her lifetime of rewriting is, then, but a repetition of her original breach. Indeed, the motif of penetration which thus permeates the text organises nearly all instances into miniature images of Briony's intrusive storytelling. In this way, the falling apart of the first production of *Arabella*, the ripping open of Robbie's letter to Cecilia, the interruption of the love scene in the library, and even Lola's rape are all reenactments of the violence Briony imposes onto her characters via her godlike authoritative quasi-narration. In the following,

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[7]   René Girard has stressed perhaps more than any other commentator the relation between religion and violence. He has said, in fact, that the two are inextricable, that "violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred" and even that "the operations of violence and the sacred are ultimately the same process" (Girard 1977, 258).

I shall read textual instances which mirror Briony's mode of penetration and reveal her invasive presence in this world as a girl God.

3 "The Part of Her that Was Really in Charge"

Briony's storytelling is driven by the dichotomies of order and chaos. Her "desire to have the world just so" (McEwan 2001, 4) effects the spatial positioning of the Tallis estate; the pieces of her furniture are "all facing one way – towards their *owner*" (5, emphasis added), and every single family member in the house is, as Finney puts it, "ruthlessly subordinated" by Briony (2004, 69). The first finished draft of *The Trials of Arabella* is read by her mother "with the author's arm around her shoulder the whole time" (McEwan 2001, 4), and the purpose of the play itself is professed to be "for her brother […] to guide him" (4). Her presence in the novel as a quasi-narratorial voice is thus written into the machinations of the text: she *guides*, she orders, she forces.

 Yet small instances of rebellion against Briony appear to rear their head from time to time, all the while exposing her omnipresence. One of the most striking examples of this is the reluctance of the cousins to follow her direction. Lola's insistence to play the part of Arabella instead of Briony herself is decidedly chaotic in its restructuring of the young girl's worldview, and her sense of order is offended by this "catastrophe" (McEwan 2001, 12). As the mutinous cousins are "steadily wrecking Briony's creation" (17), she abandons the project and studies her fingers as though they were separate entities:

> She raised one hand and flexed its fingers and wondered, as she had sometimes before, how this thing, this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider on the end of her arm, came to be hers, entirely at her command. Or did it have some life of its own? 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. (35)

This excerpt on the one hand echoes the natural development of a child reckoning with the realisation that others bear the same complexity as herself, yet it also stands as a miniature of Briony's role as a focalising factor at large. The fingers, although seeming "remote, as though viewed from an immense distance" (35) *belong* to Briony, they are a part of her. The same applies to every utterance, movement and private thought of the novel's characters, marking this scene as a biological-anthropological reenactment of her narration. The first confrontation that Briony faces in *Atonement* thus produces a false discovery of pluralism and intersubjectivity: she mimes the acknowledgment of the "scribble of other minds" (36) and comes

to the conclusion that being Cecilia is "just as vivid an affair as being Briony" (36), all by self-contradictingly turning towards a part of *herself*. This way, her atoning storytelling is flawed at its foundations, it is yet another deception on the novel's part; she never truly gives voice to the resurrected Cecilia and Robbie but rather intrudes into their identities and bodies and speaks in their voices as herself. The text reflects on this mode of self-contradiction early on: "Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself" (6).

Instances of *ouroboros* like the one above continue to construct sequences that betray Briony's textual presence, of her "describing herself" (McEwan 2001, 6) through others. Cecilia's continual attempts to arrange flowers in a vase indicate a struggle between order and chaos:

> Cecilia went to the kitchen to fill the vase, and carried it up to her bedroom to retrieve the flowers from the handbasin. When she dropped them in they once again refused to fall into the artful disorder she preferred, and instead swung round in the water into a wilful neatness, with the taller stalks evenly distributed around the rim. She lifted the flowers and let them drop again, and they fell into another orderly pattern. (45)

An imposition, an intrusion is at work here: "disorder" and "neatness" wage war with each other through the implicit presence of Briony, who overwrites Cecilia's intention with her own. She guides Cecilia's hand, just as she intends to do with her brother Leon. One may also consider the language of malevolence and aggression that haunts Cecilia's repetitive arranging: the neatness that appears to come from an outside force is "wilful," while the act of trying to arrange the flowers itself is a "thrust" (22), a breaking through the surface.

Akin to the mixed presence of neatness and chaos in the scene above, Cecilia *par excellence* represents a chaos that repulses and attracts Briony's order simultaneously, while posing as a vicarious tool for Briony herself to speak through. As the physical discrepancy between the two girls' rooms (one a shrine while the other disorderly) is noted early on as the spatial imaging of two different ends of the spectrum, Cecilia's life in the adult world is utilised to allow Briony a transitory passage into this world. At the age of thirteen, Briony's lexicon acknowledges that "a good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable – sexual bliss" (McEwan 2001, 9), and such an encounter with sexuality is arranged by Briony during the fountain scene, where she witnesses (and misunderstands) an intense romantic moment between her sister and Robbie. The scene contrasts Cecilia's disorderliness in the breaking of the vase with Briony's quest for meaning. In fact, its primary function is its revelatory nature in Briony's personal worldview; she reflects on the change she feels within herself upon seeing Cecilia resurface in the water of the

fountain: "No more princesses!" (113). Strikingly, she regards the event as a "tableau mounted for her alone" (39), and her following interruption of Robbie and Cecilia's illicit library rendezvous is the perfect encapsulation of her violent, self-describing narrative act: "The scene was so entirely the realization of her worst fears that she sensed that her over-anxious imagination had projected the figures onto the packed spines of books" (123).

Thus, Briony appropriates the intimacy enjoyed by Cecilia and Robbie by understanding their actions as an extension of her own mentality, and so she repositions them into a mode of self-description. This imposed union with the lovers and their ultimate subordination as vicarious tools (which is revealed to the readers in the Coda) is foreshadowed in Part 1. Once Briony tells the authorities of Robbie's crime, she leads them to the library, putting herself in the place of both Robbie and Cecilia: "Briony wedged herself in, with her back to the books to show them how her sister was positioned" (180). Once again, the language of the text betrays Briony's quasi-narratorial position: she wedges herself into their relationship, intruding into it with force. In the same scene, the description calls attention to Briony's violence: she then turns "around to demonstrate *the attacker's stance*" (180, emphasis added). Here, Briony makes a quasi-directorial gesture when she repeats and acts out both parts in the scene; both Robbie's and Cecilia's actions transform into her own, while she inscribes herself into them.

Not incidentally, she does so to prove herself to the adults, to affirm that she is not "a silly girl […] who had wasted everybody's time" (McEwan 2001, 170). Girlishness emerges here as a discourse with negative implications, and this is not the first instance for the novel to place girlishness in a negative context. References are continually made to "girlish intrigue" (5), "ignorance, silly imagining and girlish rectitude" (139), while Briony is deemed a "silly, hysterical little girl" (209) by the text. Girlhood, then, acts as a discursive strategy that is diffused in the narrative. One must not forget that the first rebellion against Briony's dominance is made by another girl: her cousin Lola, who takes the part of Arabella away from Briony. Lola's central role in *Atonement* is undeniable; it is her sexual assault which provides Briony with the opportunity to "finally […] reveal that [Robbie] was the incarnation of evil" (115), and so Lola is implicated in the crime for which the titular atonement is practiced. However, the power dynamic between the two girls that allows Briony to ascend to an authoritative position and essentially defeat Lola plays just as crucial a part in conducting the narrative, and the culmination of this relational dynamic is the rape scene.

4 "The Superior Older Girl": Girlishness in *Atonement*

With Lola's rape, *Atonement* constructs the perfect mirror image of Briony's authoritative, godlike nature in what is surely the climax of Part 1. Even before Lola's assault takes place, Briony's godlike role manifests when she appears before Robbie as a nonhuman entity: "[s]taring at it dissolved its outlines, but within a few paces it had taken on a vaguely human form" (McEwan 2001, 93). The same process occurs in the sequence leading up to Briony's discovery of Lola and a dark tall figure. During the family's search for her young cousins, Jackson and Pierrot, Briony herself wanders the property and, walking by the temple, stumbles upon a "shrub she did not remember" and a duck whose call is "almost human in its breathy downward note" (164). Outlines and shapes in this scene change and dissolve from one line to the next, culminating in "the darker patch on the ground" turning into a person and calling out to Briony by name: "'Briony?' She heard the helplessness in Lola's voice – it was the sound she had thought belonged to a duck – and in an instant, Briony understood completely. She was nauseous with disgust and fear" (164–65). Lola's rape by, as is later revealed, Paul Marshall, is at this point rendered as a creation-evolution scene during which plants transform into animals and gradually into humans, once again reiterating the contrasts between order and chaos – as well as Briony's influence over the construction of order out of chaos. Mirroring the scene in which Cecilia encounters an invisible force as she thrusts the flowers into the vase, Lola's rape is similarly "ordered" by Briony herself. Markedly, the description of the rape scene places Briony at its centre, as the story is "writing itself around" her (166). It is an extreme image of Briony's quasi-narration and her presence within this world as an intrusion, a penetration that takes away the possibility of control from Lola. Similar images of breaking through surfaces can be, as I have stated before, found in *Atonement*, one of them being the scene when she interrupts Cecilia and Robbie in the library, and makes the couple stop mid-coitus, once the awareness of an outside party observing them sets in: "[s]omeone's come in" (138). During Lola's rape, too, the act of coming in and entering where she ought not to be marks Briony as master and conductor of the scene: she is the one who arranges the plants into animals and finally into human form. In fact, the reader's primary source for the scene above being a rape at all is Briony alone – she understands "completely" (165) and directs the events following her interruption to fit her understanding. Her seemingly infinite powers are reiterated by the text itself ("[t]here was nothing she could not describe" [165]), as is her role as godlike creator and director: "[i]t was her own discovery. It was her story" (166).

Via Lola's assault, there emerges a sense of unity and harmony between the two girls, one that surpasses Briony's sense of offense caused by Lola's wrecking the production of her play. "Briony felt a flowering tenderness towards her cousin.

Together they faced real terrors. She and her cousin were close" (McEwan 2001, 165). This closeness between the two girls is a motif which underlies the entire narrative. Comparison to Lola is the primary mode of connection between the two girls. This occurs on the level of wishing to mimic her older cousin's more womanly appearance, on the one hand: "[s]he thought how she should take more care of her appearance, like Lola. It was childish not to" (35). On the other hand, Briony's comparing herself to her cousin and wishing to defeat her may be causally linked to the ultimate act of physical intrusion in the narrative. In fact, Lola's sexual assault may be interpreted as being brought about by Briony in order to defeat the other girl. For Lola is conceived by *Atonement* as an irksome, frustrating entity, one which, by nature, defies Briony's subordination. During the rehearsal for *Arabella*, Briony cannot "*penetrate* Lola's detachment" (35, emphasis added), a dissenting sentiment which is the first to contradict Briony's ego-centrical worldview. Lola's rape then aids to put the other girl in her place, it penetrates where Briony cannot, and it finally positions her cousin into the desired submission. As the text notes, "their respective positions […] were established in these moments by the lake, with Briony's certainty rising whenever her cousin appeared to doubt herself" (167).

It is not just the rape scene itself that emphasises Briony's triumph over Lola: the discursive logic of girlishness (marked in *Atonement* mainly by competition and comparison with other girls as well as a desire for control) is also demonstrated elsewhere in the novel, even by characters who are not themselves young girls. Competition with Lola is not only practiced by Briony; it is an act mirrored by her mother, Emily Tallis, who expresses akin frustrations with her niece. Mother and daughter are already connected in *Atonement* by the above-quoted scene in which Briony observes her fingers and ponders on control. It is paralleled with a later scene, in which Emily Tallis is lying in bed in her dark bedroom, alert to all that goes on, with "a tentacular awareness that reached out from the dimness and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing" (McEwan 2001, 66). Emily's role as an origin point or *origo* in the house may function as a mode of reflection on Briony's control over all, and in a similar vein, the young girl's disdain for Lola is also practiced by her mother. When attempting to comfort Lola, "an old antagonism afflicts Emily," as she is reminded of her own sister and Lola's mother, Hermione, whom she describes as a "stealer of scenes" (146). The wording of this description mirrors Lola's offense of not wanting to be subdued by Briony's direction in *Arabella*, and it even highlights girlish jealousy as a marked discourse in the book. In light of the facts that Emily, an adult mother, still feels the same frustration with her sister and in fact transfers it onto Lola, another girl, I argue that girlishness is a notion that is not left behind upon having entered into adulthood: Emily, just like Briony, remains girlish throughout her life. Through Emily Tallis's disdain implicitly

expressed by Briony as quasi-narrator, girlishness emerges as a modal logic which affects the focalising, narratorial, and plot elements of *Atonement*. This is why it is a risky statement to claim, as Finney does, that *Atonement* applies the narrative voice of a seventy-seven-year-old woman (2004, 68), for the same antagonisms are diffused in the narrative voice of the novel , even when the very presence of an adult Briony is finally revealed in the Coda.

5 Conclusion

In *Atonement*, Briony's focalising and quasi-narratorial implication in the act of storytelling is decidedly involved with girlish discourses and images of intrusion, which can be tracked far before her revelation as author in the final pages of the novel, and which lead to a sense of victory for her as quasi-narrator. The Coda's Briony makes sense of her atoning manuscript in the same register as a young girl would when she ponders about Lola's role in the eventual publication of her novel: "was I competing with her?" (McEwan 2001, 361), she asks. And then, while noting that her cousin "was always the superior older girl" (361), Briony celebrates the promised triumph that releasing *Atonement* would bring her in her perpetual competition with Lola: "But in that final important matter, I will be ahead of her" (361). Being ahead of Lola and gaining control over her is thus Briony's design, and from this it follows that she as author constructs the whole narrative in the mode of exercising control, with the ultimate aim of winning. With the final return of her aborted play, this is made possible.

The Trials of Arabella is thus a mirror image for the Coda itself: they are both a return and a remedy via which Briony may come out onto the stage and be celebrated, "adored" (McEwan 2001, 11) for her genius. By revealing that she has been behind the scenes all along, Briony rips and wedges herself into the novel that the reader is holding in their hand, following the quasi-traditions of violating the pre-postmodern conventions of narration[8] in a way that has either delighted or appalled critics since the novel's 2001 publication. It is a final act of penetration that, instead of Cecilia, Robbie, Emily or Lola, turns now to the reader and asks for the same applause. Briony's childlike desire to tell a story – highlighted by reviewer

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[8]   It is perhaps no wonder that some reviewers, as noted above, deemed the ending of McEwan's novel "gimmicky" (Moore 2001, 12), since by 2001 introducing the author as a character was one of the antiques of postmodernism. Early examples of such narratorial twists include *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles, or *The Golden Notebook* (1962) by Doris Lessing.

C. C.'s (presumably a fictionalised Cecil Connolly's) suggestion that Briony turn away from pure modernism, as readers have a "childlike desire to be told a story" (314) – means that she wants readers to celebrate her and be in awe of her, acting as both a conceited young girl and as an Old Testament God, morphing into an immortal girl deity.

The closing of the novel becomes haunting once the reader is reminded that Briony's girlish voice is to become semi-eternal due to her eventual loss of memory and her oncoming 'second childhood,' during which she will regress to the prickly young girl whose voice has controlled this narrative. In the final lines, Briony makes a final, quasi-threatening promise that suggests she will do away with any pretence of atonement in her next draft, fully reviving Cecilia and Robbie and forcing them to stand there with the rest of her family, applauding her authorial triumph: "[i]t's not impossible" (371). With her atoning yet damning narration, *Atonement*'s Briony Tallis is an iconic and menacing girl figure of twenty-first century fiction, whose presence in the canon evokes intriguing ideas as to the motivic-discursive capacities of girlhood in the narrative text.

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