

The Sin of Ian McEwan's Fictive Atonement: Reading his Later Novels

Bruno M. Shah OP

Abstract

Ian McEwan is arguably the best living British novelist. His most successful novel, *Atonement*, was recently made into an internationally successful film. And indeed, through analysis of his novels, it is clear that Ian McEwan believes literature—precisely as fictive—might very well bear the task of atonement for postmodernity. His novels, though, are patently hopeless, (even as they are truly well-written). Because McEwan doesn't accept or see the causes of sin as such—formally understood as rebellion against the Creator—his diagnostic aesthetic of our postmodern malaise is incomplete and ineffectual. The literary or fictive atonement that he would achieve through his novels does not satisfy. This article aims to lay bare the philosophico-literary characteristics of Ian McEwan's later novels. The ultimate goal of this critical reading, though—tending toward an “evangelical lection”—is to transfigure McEwan's imaginative and creative virtuosity for otherwise disappointed Christian readers, precisely by envisioning his novels in the dark light of their redemptive deficit. Thus, the literary or fictive atonement that Ian McEwan's atheism cannot achieve might be saved apropos the Judeo-Christian revelation of divine atonement.

Keywords

Ian McEwan, atonement, novel, literary, evangelical lection

The last seven novels of Ian McEwan—who is as critically and popularly significant as any of his British peers—foreground tragic and/or absurd misfortune against the anxious historical backdrop of modern violence and war.¹ At their immediate, textual level, they

¹ The present essay's consideration of McEwan's later novels excludes *Amsterdam* (1998) and the most recently published, *On Chesil Beach* (2007)—two works generally and rightly recognized as substandard, although the former won the Man Booker Prize. McEwan's books are all published in the United States by Doubleday, Random House.

give voice to a mundane query: What is the day-to-day significance of rational consciousness in a selfish world of chaotic chance and social evil? But beyond the text, at the level of his art's human vocation, McEwan's questions are deeply spiritual: Can humanity transcend the apparent inexorability of evil? Can we be forgiven for being here? Is there any hope of atonement? These *aporia* that cry out for viable resolution are properly theological: The very semantic of these existential conundrums presupposes that the existence and agency of God is at least possible.

A Christian reader, therefore, can uniquely recognize and feel the problems that McEwan's art poses. But McEwan rejects and precludes a Christian understanding of the privative reality (original sin) to which he would give novelistic voice. Consequently, his novels' catharses are fated to frustrate, whatever delight is had along the way. Because McEwan doesn't accept or see the causes of sin as such—formally understood as rebellion against the Creator—his diagnostic aesthetic of our postmodern malaise is necessarily incomplete and ineffectual.

In this article, I offer an analysis of McEwan's vision that, while critical, is concomitantly or potentially "evangelical." The primary and immediate aim of this endeavor is to illumine the philosophical shadows that disfigure the artist's vision of the world and humanity, (as found in his later, mature novels). The ultimate goal of such a style of reading, however—which I have elsewhere called "evangelical lection"²—must be clearly stated and kept in mind throughout the analysis: To transfigure the artist's imaginative and creative virtuosity for otherwise disappointed readers, envisioning and appreciating his work precisely in the dark light of its redemptive deficit.

McEwan depicts a world wherein God's significance lies in his indifferent absence. Consider the opening situation of Henry Perowne in *Saturday* (2005). Like the evolutionist's primordial man, Henry is educed from the sleep of consciousness and awoken to the strange dawn of existence by some *je ne sais pas quoi*. Standing before an open window, Henry is bewitched by a sidereal spectacle over Heathrow airport. He associatively recollects a romantic impression: "He had watched Hale-Bopp with Rosalind and the children from a grassy hillock in the Lake District and he feels again the same leap of gratitude for a glimpse, beyond the earthly frame, of the truly impersonal. And this is better, brighter, faster, all the more impressive for being unexpected." But because this falling star soon turns out to be a crashing plane, the scene's ethereal delight turns portentous for both Henry and the reader. Towards the end of the day and of the

² See my "A Silent Echo of Hope: An Evangelical Lection of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*," in *Logos* 11:2 (2008): 91–125, which emphasizes more than the present article the positive, constructive task of an "evangelical lection."

book, when the main character is hopelessly looking about his study to forestall a violent home intruder, he glimpses his “screen saver—those pictures from the Hubble telescope of remote outer space, gas clouds light years across.” Now, with a family reunion threatened by an angry assailant’s knife, Henry recognizes that the impersonality of an almost transcendent fire is no reason to give thanks. Rather, in allusion to W.H. Auden’s “The More Loving One,” the “dying stars and red giants” of Perowne’s outer space “fail to diminish earthly cares. . .”³

Earlier in the Saturday’s course, which the novel introspectively maps (like a focused *Ulysses*), Henry ruminates on Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*: “Those five hundred pages deserved only one conclusion: endless and beautiful forms of life, such as you see in a common hedgerow, including exalted beings like ourselves, arose from physical laws, from war of nature, famine and death. This is the grandeur. And a bracing kind of consolation in the brief privilege of existence.” Ultimately, it is this “grandeur” of life’s senselessness that McEwan would impress on his readers as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Henry was initially if briefly hopeful before the epiphanic plane accident. But by the end of the mid-lifer’s critical day—comprised by brief but beautiful lovemaking with his wife, a car accident and scuffle with the knife-wielding intruder, a valiant but finally losing game of squash, and a visit to his demented, dying mother—after this quotidian course of “earthly cares,” “All Henry feels now is fear. He’s weak and ignorant, scared of the way consequences of an action leap away from your control and breed new events, new consequences, until you’re led to a place you never dreamed of and would never choose.”

Resisting an Aristotelian dramatic, McEwan’s chief interest lies more with “consequences” than “action.” *Saturday* is but his most refined and focused example to date. The author proffers a Zen-like and materialist psychology, according to which, human consciousness has the rational (but evanescent) privilege to render chaos into order. Thus, McEwan directs Henry and his readers to discover that, in order to understand properly and peacefully one’s place in the world, one must recognize that “a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of oneself”: One must be detachedly mindful of such “anthropic reference” if one is to remain sane.⁴ The secular, humanistic novelist would not disagree that man should go on helping others as well as making delightful stories to pass the time. But he

³ See W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage Book, 1976).

⁴ McEwan’s later work is beset with the influence of E.O. Wilson on “consilience” and moral evolution, and that of Steven Pinker on the mind and consciousness.

earnestly believes that man should take care to acknowledge (and then forget) that what he does is of no transforming, lasting significance.

Once directed towards contemplation, the noble uselessness of art now awaits absolute obsolescence.

Through his art, McEwan would pacify and even atone for the angst that is the existential byproduct of rational consciousness. His aesthetic vision is a kind of cosmic understanding that aims to clarify emotion and harmonize existence. And it proceeds from three philosophical premises, whose dialectical tension is a prominent source of the author's dramatic creativity. First, the premise of modern science: When the rational mind pragmatically applies its most current and tenable hypotheses, it can be useful to individuals—such as the brain surgery that Henry performs (“something of a master in the art”). Technical life can also be more immediately sociological, like the legal practice of Henry's wife, defending and ever-expanding the rights of a free press. Second, McEwan posits and underscores the significance of Romantic creativity. So, one's psychical life can take the form of bohemian virtuosity, as does the Perownes' blues-guitarist son, Theo. Alternatively, one might aspire to highly cultured despair, as expressed in the award-winning verse of Daisy, the Perownes' recently Oxbridged daughter. But all such endeavors of cosmic conciliation are as fleeting as they are solipsistic. These four examples of human significance, drawn from the dialectical postulates of modern science and Romantic creativity, are all offered by and for a member of the per-one's-own (Perowne) family, that is, by and for freestanding egos.

Therefore, beyond the atoning work of the practical and fine arts that is always an indistinguishable blend of “solicitous and selfish” intent, humanity needs a third, more transcending dynamic; whence appears the third datum of McEwan's vision, that erotic ecstasy beneficially suspends rational consciousness. For McEwan, an organism's orgasm explodes “the commonplace cycle of falling asleep and waking,” whose temporal encumbrance intercourse breaks. Such liberating effect is achieved “in darkness, under private cover, with another creature, a pale, soft tender mammal, putting faces together in a ritual of affection, briefly settled in the eternal necessities of warmth, comfort, safety—a simple, daily consolation. . .” Thus, a few hours after Henry's vision at the window, “He is raised from his stupor to take Rosalind in his arms and kiss her deeply. Yes, she's ready. And so his night ends, and this is where he begins his day, at 6 a.m., wondering whether all the essences of marital compromise have been flung carelessly into one moment: in darkness, in the missionary position, in a hurry, without preamble. But these are externals. Now he is freed from thought, from memory, from the passing seconds and from the state of the world. Sex is a different medium, refracting time and sense, a biological hyperspace as remote from conscious existence as

dreams. . ." Whence also follows McEwan's conclusion at the end of Henry's anti-sabbatical: "He closes his eyes. This time there'll be no trouble falling towards oblivion, there's nothing can stop him now. Sleep's no longer a concept, it's a material thing, an ancient means of transport, a softly moving belt, conveying him into Sunday. He fits himself around her, her silk pajamas, her scent, her warmth, her beloved form, and draws closer to her. Blindly, he kisses her nape. There's always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there's only this. And at last, faintly, falling: this day's over." This erotic dissipation of the anxious ego is necessarily achieved through another person. But it is communion with a cipher, with nothing—it is an ecstatic escape. Like the arousal of his main character, McEwan's secular vigil for a day of resurrection is as impersonal as it is fading.

A bit too typically, McEwan's novels end with the out-fading of a character's memory, consciousness, or existence. Ostensibly imitating the nature of human existence, the author's works are terminal orderings of chaos, proudly aware of their expiring significance, posturing good faith before the looming lour of everything's nothing.

McEwan would wash his characters from the nauseating, Sartrean sin of existence. Such priestly ministration for his readers requires that McEwan deal expressly with innocence and guilt, which, indeed, preoccupy the author. As existential dynamisms, innocence and guilt are malevolent forces that subtly but surely oppress his characters—his people are not so much persons as subjects. Although he follows the modern novelist's revaluating preference for the psychical over the real, McEwan regularly omits description of moral decision-making. He prefers to protract the character's preceding emotional state and to interject tendentious rumination, distracting the reader before the character's pivotal action. Suddenly, through an authorial sleight of hand, the character will have suffered the author's action, and so too, the former will have started the machinations of his own fate in unreflective, ambiguous freedom.

On the heels of World War II, *The Innocent* (1989) follows a young man's initiation into the world's practical and fine arts of sex, violence, and rock and roll. But before *The Innocent's* story is set in motion, the young British technician, working for the Royal Air Force in newly occupied West Berlin, has first to make a decisive foray into the life of one Maria. Days after a sodden, nightclub encounter with this more mature, German coquette, Leonard Marnham tracks down her apartment with the intention of slipping a note underneath her door. But once at the apartment,

He did an inexplicable thing, quite out of character. His upbringing had instilled a simple faith in the inviolability of property. He never took a short cut if it involved trespass, he never borrowed without first asking

permission, and he never stole from shops like some of his friends at school. He was an over-scrupulous observer of other people's privacy. Whenever he came across lovers kissing in a private place, he always felt it proper to avert his eyes, even though he longed to go closer and watch. So it made no sense now that without pausing to reflect, and without even a cursory knock on the door, he took hold of the handle and turned it. Perhaps he expected it to be locked, and perhaps therefore this was one of those meaningless little actions with which daily life is filled. The door yielded to him and swung open wide, and there she was, standing right before him." Soon, "Leonard was trying to formulate a greeting in the form of an apology. But how to explain away something so willed as the opening of a door?"

In McEwan's cold universe, people are essentially suffering beings. They are metaphysical patients whose affliction rests in their somewhat complicit subjection to the world's chaotic happenings. Regarding this point, our philosophical novelist likely agrees with the literary critic, Frank Kermode: "It is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for co-existence with it only by our fictive powers. And this may, in the absence of a supreme fiction or the possibility of it, be a hard fate. . ."⁵

In greater or lesser degrees, the hard fate of McEwan's later novels betrays their narratological determinism, which vitiates his characters' fictive élan—something to which major characters are certainly entitled. To be sure, an author's characters may be tragically determined. But the fatal forces should lie within the metaphysic of the text itself. If there are transcendent, cruel, irrational, or even predictable forces that control the characters' ends, it should be clear that they are essentially dramatic dynamics of the characterized plot. If characters are subjected to authorial fascism, however, whereby the novelist manipulates his characters' suffering from outside the metaphysic of their fictive world, then artful illusion becomes sadistic instrument.

One has only to look at the bifocal story of *Atonement*, McEwan's most ambitious and triumphant project to date. *Atonement* focuses on the tragic love between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner. . .as seen and remembered by the former's younger sister, Briony. Briony's anthropic self-reference, which desires to create stories so as to order inherently chaotic experience as well as to legitimate her own, burgeoning genius, ultimately leads to her fictive criminality, to her egregious and family-divorcing lie for which she spends her (literary) life trying to atone. But the "anthropic reference" of one's fictive imagination ensures that Briony is irredeemable: A human story cannot save a human story.

⁵ See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending—Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

McEwan masterfully convinces that, at the heart of all fiction rests a lie, whose roots of falsification are found less in malice than in the misperception and fictive copings of anthropic reference. Before Briony can lie about the rape of her teenage cousin Lola, which, indicting Robbie, damns his and Cecilia's newfound love; before Briony literally and forever interrupts the virginal coitus between Robbie and "Cee," the younger girl has witnessed a mystifying exchange that foregrounds the rest of the novel's sensitively depicted turmoil: "[Cecilia] tightened her hold and twisted her body away from [Robbie]. He was not so easily shaken off. With a sound like a dry twig snapping, a section of the lip of the vase came away in his hand, and split into two triangular pieces which dropped into the water and tumbled to the bottom in a synchronous, seesawing motion, and lay there, several inches apart, writhing in the broken light." The description that begins the next paragraph captures the novel as an impressionistic whole: "Cecilia and Robbie froze[n] in the attitude of their struggle." Apparently, life is a succession of discrete and coldly impenetrable scenes, which hauntingly illumine writhing, would-be lovers who are baptized into death by their accidental brokenness. For both novelist and reader, the question is whether or not this brokenness can be definitively healed. In order to be saved from the angst of knowing only part of the story, the fittest consciousness invents narratives to survive. But, precisely because humans are selfish and fictive, stories exacerbate the discord they would heal.

Frustrated with Robbie, Cecilia antagonistically strips off her clothes and dives into the fountain's pool in order to retrieve the broken pieces. Witnessing this enigmatic drama from a nursery window, Briony is seemingly granted the "vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader's respect." An aspiring authoress both precocious and puerile, Briony had earlier in the narrative realized her need for aesthetic maturity. And now, because of Cecilia and Robbie's sexually charged tussle, Briony is led out of a traditional aesthetic by her bemusement. She had theretofore held that "an unruly world could be made just so." But no longer will she suffer from "a love of order [that] shapes the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter a reward withheld until the final page."

Forever transformed, Briony is now forced to account for something she experiences as incomprehensible, (not having seen the vase):

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. . . . [Briony] wanted to chase in solitude the faint

thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally. The definition would refine itself over the years. She was to concede that she may have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self. At the time there may have been no precise form of words; in fact, she may have experienced nothing more than impatience to begin again.

And “begin again” is all Briony and the reader can ever do. The final pages of *Atonement* disclose Briony as having been the narrator all along, now in her seventies and on the verge of an Alzheimer's death. Characteristically, McEwan's brief epilogue out-fades Briony and her atoning endeavors, informing the reader that the second two parts of the novel were Briony's attempt to fictively remember and thereby redeem the tragic consequences of what is recounted in the first part. What originally appeared as an omniscient and sympathetic point of view is immediately devalued: The dramatic denouement that these pages feign is merely the narrating expiration of a contrite but effete and solipsistic sinner, who, at any rate, is ambiguously culpable for a “crime” she committed at age thirteen. Such fictive conceit would postmodernly debunk metaphysical transcendence and moral objectivity, eviscerating any hope one might have had for the characters. Obviating hope in this *a priori* way, a writer is left with only one, sad stance towards his characters—and McEwan adopts this cruel, fatalistic poise (however deftly). Consequently, both Robbie and Cecilia are casualties of war before Briony could own up to her sin against their love and receive actual, that is, personal forgiveness.

There is something sinister (as well as disappointing) about an author whose effects are achieved at the expense of his characters, particularly when the principal ones are so sensitively drawn. Robbie, the son of a servant on the Tallis estate, suffers nobly and terribly, redeeming the remainder of his prison sentence through military service. Cecilia, who never relinquishes hope in Robbie's innocence, similarly opts for a tour of duty as a nurse, while she faithfully waits for Robbie to “come back.” (Again: These are but the fictive imaginations of the beleaguered Briony.) Even Briony, whose girlhood crime is the source of so much suffering, does not merit anything that approaches hate. Once the reader discovers that Briony is the narrator, he cannot but hope for her literary atonement. In the end, then, the reader must either appreciate the futile brilliance of what McEwan has created or empathize against the nihilistic tyranny to which he subjects his characters. . .and his readers.

Naturally, McEwan's endings are the least satisfying aspect of his work. Intentional and absolute hopelessness can be wry or even comic, but never beautiful. In *Black Dogs* (1992), the narrator is attempting to write a loving memoir of his in-laws, one of whom is

hopelessly spiritual, the other of whom is intransigently practical. As a preface, McEwan has his narrator confess in the first pages:

I discovered that the emotional void, the feeling of belonging nowhere...had had an important intellectual consequence: I had no attachments, I believed in nothing. It was not that I was a doubter, or that I had armed myself with the useful skepticism of a rational curiosity, or that I saw all arguments from all sides; there was simply no good cause, no enduring principle, no fundamental idea with which I could identify, no transcendent entity whose existence I could truthfully, passionately, or quietly assert.

This confession could easily be McEwan's. Like the narrator of *Black Dogs*, the award-winning novelist would also depict the dialectical tension between intuitive and inductive philosophies, yet the while refusing to take sides, safeguarded (he believes) by the writer's pretense of existential compassion (which critics and/or the book-jacket hail as "redemptive love"). But the premise of this non-theistic melancholy, which would feign an outside and thus redemptive perspective, is the most errant of spiritual or anthropological beliefs, namely, that man is an orphan. If man has no ultimate parentage—that is, if each individual is utterly alone and knows not his origins, then salvation from the haunting ambience of angst and guilt will never be more than an artful trick of the imagination. Atonement will never be more than a fiction.

In fact, however, none of us is an orphan. We are all born of God. The rational knowledge of a "good cause" and "enduring principle" as well as religious belief in a Creator secures the "fundamental idea" of a Redeemer, who alone can save an otherwise bad ending. Conversely, McEwan believes that we come from nothing. Therefore, through his novels, he would have his readers tend towards nothing as well.

Not so unlike Ian McEwan or Frank Kermode (quoted above), the work of the critic and novelist John Gardner also teaches that "art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death." By its very human nature, art must poise the human "against entropy." Consequently, good art is inherently moral—it is life and emotion-affirming. Unfashionably, Gardner realized that "The moment philosophers and the direct or indirect saviors of philosophers shift their main focus to the part of the universe that is patently structured, and make [their own] achieved order the basis of their [cosmic] analogies, the artistic fascination with universal chaos and death begins to sound inadequate and boring." Moreover, "the too-close identification of stylistic and philosophical insight" is morally and horribly misleading when it is based on anthropological shortsightedness and metaphysical blindness. "Insofar as this misapprehension persuades, it encourages the artist to work in the wrong way and, at

the same time, encourages the rest of humanity to praise him for his sin."⁶

McEwan's atheism ends in oblique humanism. But because his imaginative and creative talent is spent (not to say wasted) on empathetically picturing existence as hopeless, he leaves no possibility for envisioning the only hopeful, beautiful answer. Without even the implicit possibility of hope in God's redemptive epiphany, man's only existential alternative is to imagine and picture himself creatively. (For, self-evidently, pure nihilism is not a viable option.) The spiritual exigency of self-knowledge is thus replaced by the postmodern, pop culture imperative of self-fictionalization. Like Madonna, meretricious and yogic, we need only "strike a pose."

As has been discussed above, McEwan's novels are ultimately lacking in metaphysical promise. Such hopelessness is revealed most saliently and disturbingly in unredeemed characters and unsatisfying endings. But the reason why McEwan's conclusions all evoke existential exasperation is that they have no transcendent reverence for the mystery of human origins. In order that the human person might contentedly anticipate (the prospect of) his own life-story's conclusion *as such*, one must have knowledge of the beginning...as such. And this need for knowledge of human origins applies to reading McEwan's novels as well.

To read McEwan while conscious of the Christian doctrine on human origins is neither intrusive nor adulterating. The opening chapter of *Enduring Love* (1997) epitomizes McEwan's vision of post-lapsarian man. The event with which the chapter and, by extension, the novel explicitly concern itself is called by the narrator, "the fall." But for McEwan, "the fall" is not an historical event at the beginning of time, the consequences of which all men must share. It is an irrational and absurd event that disruptively breaks into the otherwise innocent privacy of life.

Opening with the biblical words, "the beginning," the first chapter of *Enduring Love* closes with a horrifying image: "We watched him drop. You could see the acceleration. No forgiveness, no special dispensation for flesh, or bravery, or kindness. Only ruthless gravity. And from somewhere, perhaps from him, perhaps from some indifferent crow, a thin squawk cut through the stilled air. He fell as he hung, a stiff little black stick. I've never seen such a terrible thing as that falling man." In this jarringly picturesque introduction, a man and wife are picnicking together, enjoying each other's company after a brief, job-occasioned, separation, kneeling in peace and harmony under a paradisaical tree. But within a few lines, the couple hears a shout. They suddenly turn to look and see "the danger"—a hot-air

⁶ See John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

balloon running away with a helpless child inside. "Next thing, I was running towards it." Only now in hindsight does the narrator, Joe Rose, realize that he was "sprinting away from happiness" to chase a celestial harbinger, which would begin his own, "absolute transformation."

Courageously, "from different points around the field, four other men were converging on the scene." As he recounts the event to the reader, Joe wonders:

What were we running towards? I don't think any of us would ever know fully. But superficially the answer was a balloon. Not the nominal space that encloses a cartoon character's speech or thought, or, by analogy, the kind that's driven by mere hot air. It was an enormous balloon filled with helium, that elemental gas forged from hydrogen in the nuclear furnace of the stars, first step along the way in the generation of multiplicity and variety of matter in the universe, including our selves and all our thoughts.

Here, McEwan mixes together the Big Bang, edenic idyll, and post-modern tragedy to demythologize the story of Adam and Eve.

Unreflectively, the five men, who "shared a vague communality of purpose but were never a team," grabbed hold of the runaway balloon's tethers. Just as quickly, four men safely dropped, one by one, leaving the fifth to hang on for a brief while before inevitably losing his grip—falling to the earth and a grotesque death. What led to "the fall" was a "fatal lack of cooperation." Indeed, the pilot, whose grandson was in the balloon, "had abdicated authority." Remembering the event self-assuredly, Joe knows that "if [he] had been uncontested leader, the tragedy would not have happened." Suffering the fate of Babel's builders, "we were beginning to bawl our own instructions too." Nevertheless, Joe acknowledges, "It was my duty to hang on, and I thought we would all do the same." But they didn't.

I didn't know, nor have I ever discovered, who let go first. I'm not prepared to accept that it was me. But everyone claims not to have been first. What is certain is that if we had not broken ranks, our collective weight would have brought the balloon to earth a quarter of the way down the slope as the gust subsided a few seconds later. . . . Cooperation—the basis of our earliest hunting successes, the force behind our evolving capacity for language, the glue of our social cohesion. Our misery in the aftermath was proof that we knew we had failed ourselves. But letting go was in our nature too. Selfishness is also written on our hearts.

McEwan's modern day parable depicts the two principal characteristics (besides tragic mortality) of fallen man—ignorance and selfishness. The author's account is not only imaginatively written but

also enthralling. Yet one must recall that McEwan is basically concerned with “consequences,” not action. His keen depiction of what original sin dramatically looks like suffers because it is unconcerned with causes, that is, with the roots of actuality. Because of McEwan’s skepticism, there can be no accounting of causes, whether mundane or heavenly. It is for this reason that so many of his novels deploy an absurd accident or tragico-comedic scene in the first pages in order to initiate the chain of consequences. It is also for this reason that his novels leave such a poignant aftertaste of dissatisfaction, which may evince the strength of his artistic powers, but which mortally attenuates the humanity of his aesthetic vision, which all the while cries out for redemption.

In order to read McEwan (and postmodernity in general) with conclusive hope, the reader should draw upon the Christianly revealed design of our fallen but now redeemed origins. When such a reader experiences McEwan’s art—and brings such intelligent, reflective experience to the public forum—the displeasing aspects of the author’s fictive atonement will inversely reveal what is so deeply needed by secular women and men today—a forgiveness that is personal, transcendent, and above all, real. Purifying and uplifting the fallen writing of Ian McEwan with the metaphysical breadth of transcendent hope, critical, evangelical readers will not only find delightful satisfaction for themselves; moreover, they will proclaim the divine whence and whither of our world’s beautiful atonement . . . never to be faded away.

Bruno M. Shah OP
Dominican House of Studies
487 Michigan Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20017
USA
Email: bmsah@dhs.edu