Fractured Narratives in Novel and Film

MONICA SPIRIDON

Abstract: Our contribution points to the strategic split operated by Ian McEwan's narrative and, comparatively, by Joe Wright's film *Atonement.* This split allows them to craft two diverging narrative *discourses* which overtly compete to dominate the interpretation of the fiction and especially its reading transactions. Eventually these narrative maneuvers of both the writer and the director overcome the teleological fate of the narratives and allow them to perform a meta-fictional and self-reflexive role.

Keywords: meta-fiction, fictional self-reflection, narrative voice, narrative split, genre patterns

1. Story and Counter-story

My contribution draws on the functions assigned to narrative strategies in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, also adapted into a successful film. Switching from one narrative voice to another, the author unexpectedly fractures his novel into two parts: the main body – which I will call the *Story* – and the final chapter – which I will call the *Counter-story*. This split allows him to craft two diverging narrative *discourses* which overtly compete to dominate the interpretation of the novel and especially its reading transactions.

In the novel and, similarly, in the film, the final and surprising *Counter-story* assigned to a different narrative instance, retrospectively amends the *Story* and provides an alternative. In this way the British writer emphatically rebuffs the fundamental axiom of the potent strain between Beginning and Ending, dating back to Aristotle's *Poetics* and brilliantly elaborated by Frank Kermode in his dazzling book the *Sense of the Ending* (Kermode 1967: 50).

In short, Ian McEwan's narrative, an odd story of love, war and inner turmoil, is a patchwork of different perspectives belonging to either visible or undisclosed observers. Set against a fateful historical background, the story revolves around the outbreak of the Second World War and focuses on the appalling British retreat from Dunkirk.

Over and above the love story of Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis, McEwan's narrative also follows the destiny of Bryony Tallis, the young girl responsible for their misfortune. Hers is the account of an unfolding awareness of guilt, followed by an imperative atonement that the repentant girl progressively develops into a strong commitment to a written confession. The end of McEwan's novel occurs in *Part Three*, dedicated to the war experiences of the tentative writer Bryony Tallis. Overall it is a happy ending: Robbie and Cecilia painfully survive their ordeals. There is also hope that Bryony is ready to publicly admit her guilt and that after the war the lovers will reintegrate into normal life. Signed "B.[ryony] T.[allis]", this *Story* also implies that the girl committed to atone through writing eventually achieved a successful career as a professional writer emerging as the author of the three chapters we have just read.

To this story, its narrator has appended a *Counter-story,* titled "London, 1999". It has a both visible and audible fictional author, the writer Bryony Tallis, turning 77, terminally ill and seeking to come to terms with herself and with her virtual reader. It reveals the tragic death of the two lovers and reveals that the *Story* with a happy ending was only a convenient reshaping of the real events that the author describes as "pitiless".

In this *Counter-story* which emphatically fractures McEwan's novel in more than one respect, the main point is the plea of the fictitious author in favor of her misleading account, which purposefully distorted "real" facts. According to Bryony, a happy ending had seemed more suitable for the common reader who would have rejected the bleak truth she would have reported. From the point of view of a high caliber professional writer Bryony also acknowledges that, as a narrative instance, her demiurgic position leaves no room for a higher Almighty God able to take note of her atonement and eventually to absolve her.

As Mieke Bal contends, every story is a mere retrospective projection, inferred from a discourse cunningly crafted by the narrator, in order to fit his/her interests and purposes (Bal 1985: 74). We might call this the *free will* of all narrative instances who devise a *discourse* in order to report a *story.* All narrators are Creators of their fictional universes and Ian McEwan resolutely draws on this fact. In *Atonement* his *Counter-story* allows an apologetic discourse to prevail over an impersonal *Story* and also to emerge as its meta-fictional interpretation.

The strategies that help McEwan make the most out of this narrative schism touch upon two basic devices of the narrative craft: *focalization* and *voice.* In this respect, a parallel between the *Story* and the *Counter-story* reveal significant changes made in the latter.

The so-called *focalization* represents "the point from which the narrative is being presented at any moment" (O'Neil 1994: 86). Jonathan Culler defines it

as "the identification of narrators, overt and covert, and the description of what in the text belongs to the perspective of the narrator" (Culler 1981: 170).

Seen as a whole, *Atonement* operates with an intricate mix of distinct focalizations, which swap between a comprehensive perspective endowed with omniscience and a more limited point of view, assigned to an actor or to a stealthy and intrusive spectator of the action.

In *Part One*, a crucial scene – the lovers' feud by the fountain – is first focalized by an all-embracing viewer, with free access to both Cecilia's and Robbie's minds. Secondly, the same episode is accidentally seen by a confused thirteen year old: "The sequence was illogical. Such was Bryony's last thought before she accepted that she did not understand and that she must simply watch." (McEwan 2007: 39) In what follows, Ian McEwan himself clearly exposes his kaleidoscopic technique: "Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, *in three separate and overlapping memories* [my emphasis]. The truth had become as ghostly as invention." (McEwan 2007: 41)

In *Part Two* (the Dunkirk episode), an *omniscient persona*, mostly providing information on the overall course of warfare, is constantly intertwined with private Turner's more restricted, inner point of view. Robbie recollects earlier events omitted by the narrator in *Part One*. He also goes over Cecilia's letters again and again, drawing plans for their life after the war. In *Part Three*, the perspective is progressively (not entirely though) seized by Bryony, who does not bother to delineate the demarcation between her real and her conveniently imagined experiences.

In contrast, and programmatically, the *Counter-story* chooses to assign the focalization to a unique narrative instance, endowed with both clarity of mind and interpreting expertise. It is in this way that we become aware that the apologetic encounter between the offender and her two victims at the end of *Part Three* is pure wishful thinking.

Another relevant device which helps the *Story* and the *Counter-story* structurally and functionally diverge is the so-called *voice*: the source of narrative discourse, either formally disclosed (usually in the first person), or undisclosed (in the third person). Theorists stress the fact that "point of view is still related to a problem of composition and so remains in the field of investigation of narrative configuration. *Voice, however, is already involved in the problems of communication, in as much as it addresses itself to a reader*" (Martin 1986: 97, my emphasis).

In *Atonement*, despite the intricate focalization of the *Story*, the voice remains grounded in third person discourse: the paradigm of *showing* the

events – in the Aristotelian sense of *mythos* as imitation of an action (Ricoeur 1985: 12) – rather than *telling* them.

On the contrary, the *Counter-story* sets up Bryony as the undisclosed author of the *Story* and embraces first person discourse, emphatically disclosing the source of the narrative.

The choice to "tell" the facts and not to let them "be" and to prevail over explanatory words is endowed with multiple capabilities and mostly overt purposes: defensive, argumentative, persuasive etc. In certain respects, of focalization and voice, the *Story* diversifies, engenders ambivalence and uncertainty, whilst the *Counter-story* resolutely seeks unity, clarity, even monopoly of thought and enunciation.

2. The Narrative Feud points to the Reader

It is true, as Walter Benjamin beautifully argues, that "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the fingerprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (Benjamin 1968: 92). Nonetheless, it is also true that the fingerprints *of the reader* cling to the vessel of the text and leave a significant mark on it. In other words, apart from the *story* and the *discourse* that accounts for it, the *reader* is a key landmark of any narrative.

As Paul Ricœur contends, "it is important not to confuse the two main structural processes that underlie the narration: configuration (by the author) and refiguration (by the reader). A work may be closed with respect to its configuration and open with respect to the breakthrough it is capable of effecting on the reader's world" (Ricœur 1985: 20).

In *Atonement*, both the novel and the film, the negotiation between the author and the virtual reader is assigned to the *Counter-story*. At a superficial level, the differences in the reading transaction between the verbal and the visual *Counter-story* touch upon the relationship of the author with the real audience.

In the novel, the *Counter-story* accounts for the late confession of an exhausted and insomniac writer, who deceives herself by inferring that if fiction allows happy endings, real life also does, and that consequently she was within her right to interfere with it: "I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end." (McEwan 2007: 371–372)

We must remember that the object of this delayed confession is an unpublished novel and that this testimonial is significant for Bryony alone. Since, for legal reasons, her manuscript cannot be published before her death, in the novel the writer does not have to face and stand the trial of a real reader.

In the film, on the contrary, Bryony's novel *Atonement* has already been published and it has been a success: the real public has responded favorably to it. As she turns 77, the fictitious author is introduced as the famous guest of a TV interview. Under these circumstances the writer does not seem afraid to disclose the cruel truth and the burden of her guilt. This time, however, the context of her plea is quite different: a face to face broadcast statement, where the *reporter stands in for the real reader*. This is why her discourse is less hesitant, her voice no longer falters and her points are made very neatly.

The fracture between the two competing parts of the narrative has been devised by Ian McEwan for another purpose, too. The writer manipulates the ending of his novel in order to help his *Story* fit into a particular pattern of conventional reading expectations. Bryony is torn precisely between the two polar opposite temptations identified in most narratives by Paul Ricœur: to unveil the merciless truth or to console her readers, fulfilling their most cherished desires. In McEwan's narrative the meanings retrospectively unraveled by the *Counter-story attempt to over impose a particular genre* both to the novel and to the film.

What genre choices are the readers of the book and the public of the film being presented with, in his case?

The possible genre tag of Bryony's narrative seems to move between two polar opposites: a *cruel bleak realist story*, on the one hand, and a *romance with happy ending*, on the other.

The *Counter-story* extensively elaborates on the inconveniences of the first but it does not mention, among the risks of the second, melodrama, as a current generic side effect. Hollywood film studios created a very successful subtype of melodrama: the so-called *handkerchief film* (*Love Story*, *Titanic*, among many others.) However, both Ian McEwan's novel and Joe Wright's film astutely bypass these risks.

One explanation for this might be the atypical romance involved. The reader would find it hard to fit this plot into the canonical pattern of a love story. We could even conclude that there is no real love story at all. What one might call the basic romance consists of cherished memories and day dreams, nourished by the lovers' numerous letters, strictly supervised by censorship and desperately reread or remembered by Robbie.

The second explanation is the discretion and the ambiguity concealing the death of the two. The verbal narrative discourse of the novel "shows" us the night of Robbie's last day, near Dunkirk. However this is done in such a way that we do not fully grasp the information we are presented with and its dramatic effect is purposefully spoiled: "'I won't say a word' he said, though Nettle's head had long disappeared from his view. 'Wake me before seven. I

promise, you won't hear another word from me.'" Only in retrospect, "you won't hear another word from me" takes on literal meaning and becomes prophetic.

Cecilia's death does not come in for a single word in the verbal *Story.* A brief and dry statement is however allotted to the successive deaths of the lovers in the verbal *Counter-story*: "Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1949; […] Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station." (McEwan 2007: 370) It is true that in the film's *Counter-story* we witness her death. However, the images are iconographically and symbolically over processed, and this rather hieratic information does not necessarily call for tears or a handkerchief.

If her astute narrative maneuvering does not push the *Story* either towards bleak realism or towards melodrama, what is the genre pattern that Bryony sets her fiction against? She openly admits that the gap between imagination and reality can be overlooked and, above all, romance is the routine: "Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of *daily romance*." (McEwan 2007: 38) Every word of this is brimming with significance and worth a closer look. This "leap across boundaries" reveals the structural norm of this ideally free world, whilst "the daily romance" is its outcome. Careless with normal boundaries, Bryony's alter ego in his ideal world is also emancipated from moral responsibility, reward, guilt and punishment. In a nutshell, this might be the ex-centric genre pattern which can give acceptability to Bryony's literary production and, last but not least, to Bryony's life.

3. Counter-story as Meta-story

In the wake of the considerations above, we are entitled to infer that in McEwan's novel one of its parts, the *Counter-story,* becomes a coherent reflection on the genesis of the other, the *Story,* on its *discursive build-up* and, last but not least, on its *readers* and their potential patterns of reception. Aside from its role in the overall design of the novel as a whole, the *Counter-story* is also assigned by its author an overt meta-narrative task.

The *Counter-story* enhances the meta-narrative potential of the *Story* itself, retrospectively pointing to a series of clues that the unobservant reader has probably ignored.

For example, in *Part Three*, the novella *Two Figures by a Fountain*, an early literary attempt by Bryony submitted to the literary magazine *Horizon*, holds an obvious self-reflexive function in McEwan's novel. It recalls a tense and confusing scene between Cecilia and Robbie, with powerful consequences for the development of the plot, and misinterpreted by the young girl, who witnesses it through a nursery window. We cannot *read* Bryony's novella. However, we

have been granted the privilege of reading *the comments* of the literary magazine, which approves of the text, though will not publish it. For Bryony, the reading of the editors' comments and especially of the paragraph above is both an incriminating finger, pointing towards her unfortunate involvement in the drama, and a merciless evaluation of her guilt. For the reader, it plays an essential part as an insightful, retrospective hint on the plot.

In the terms coined by Lucien Dallenbach (Dallenbach 1977) Ian McEwan's *Counter-story* can be seen as a manifold *mise en abyme*, which turns back on the *Story*, on the process of writing it and the norms that govern it, on the implied patterns of its reading and its genre expectations in a particular cultural context.

In the film, both the temporal economy and the specific devices of the visual discourse are less prepared to discharge such a complicated duty. To compensate for this lack, the visual *Counter-story* is more biting. Its fictitious author boldly takes centre stage – which means in front of the TV cameras – and makes audacious statements.

She admits that the novel *Atonement*, which she recently published, discharges a sour autobiographical burden. She also confesses straight out that, in spite of this, she has discarded what the public usually calls "the truth" and that she had sound reasons to do so.

Although they adamantly contradict the bare truth revealed by the elderly Bryony Tallis, the closing images of the film show the never fulfilled, idyllic encounter between Cecilia and Robbie on a beach in Wiltshire. Briefly alluded to by the author in the deceitful ending of her novel, they reveal and emphasize the generic code which lies beneath her fictional "lie". As regards the verbal *Counter-story*, it has limitless capabilities to emerge as a canny meta-narrative device. McEwan's novel confirms that the narrative *device* called voice can be manipulated as a manifold tool devised by an author deeply interested in his own craft of fiction. McEwan's fractured narrative highlights the tortuous road to turning a *fabula* into a narrative *discourse*: the story of a storytelling.

4. Concluding Remarks

In his novel *Atonement* Ian McEwan creates a strategic split of his narrative. The most efficient tool of this emphatic undertaking is the narrative voice.

As Ricœur contends, of all narrative strategies and devices "the voice" most openly targets the receiver. Not only in McEwan's novel but also in the fictional Bryony Tallis' novel called *Atonement*, the narrative negotiation with the reader through "the voice" involves a struggle between the *Story* and the *Counter-story*.

The overall outcome of this feud is the meta-narrative aspect of the novel. Both Ian McEwan and Bryony Tallis successfully manipulate the fracture in the narrative in order to comment on and to evaluate their literary creations for the benefit of their readers.

In *Atonement* a fractured narrative discourse articulates two segments that fight, contradict and argue with each other about which is the truth and which is the lie. Ian McEwan's novel overcomes the teleological fate of the narrative which has caused so much theoretical ink to be spilled over time, by performing its own meta-fictional and self-reflexive role.

Monica Spiridon
monica_spiridon@yahoo.com
Universitatea din Bucureşti
Facultatea de Litere
Str. Edgar Quinet nr. 17
Bucureşti
ROMANIA

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