

*THE CONCEPTS OF “ABSOLUTE” AND “RELATIVISM” IN IAN McEWAN’S
ATONEMENT*

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Abstract: The concepts of “absolute” and “relativism” have been and still are two of the most difficult, if not down-right impossible terms to define. From philosophers to clerics, the majority of thinkers have tried to delineate the two notions, which seem to go hand in hand. Since they are mile stones in contemporary culture and trends of thought, they certainly have an impact on present-day literature as well. The following paper tries to point out the various circumstances in which the absolute and relativism influence Ian McEwan’s novel “Atonement”.

Keywords: absolute, relativism, literature, trend of thought, literary persona

Although the title of the present paper might seem quite doubtful, we would like to reassure the reader that it is in no way our intention to offer an elucidation of the two concepts. Their significance is much too broad, which is emphasized by the great number of thinkers who have endeavored to clarify the meaning of the absolute and relativism for over two thousand five hundred years. Nevertheless, our target is to highlight the effects of these two constructs on Ian McEwan’s novel “Atonement” or rather on the main characters.

As we were researching the topic of the Absolute, we came across an astute mental view point, which we would like to use as the starting point to this paper. It belongs to Hegel who thought that the Absolute must not be understood, but felt and seen. What is more, he believed that the individual is capable of acknowledging the Absolute and that the absolute idea is the only true object and content of philosophy. For Hegel the Absolute is existence, the all knowing truth and truth itself. In a nutshell, Hegel defined it to show that succeeding philosophical perspectives are actually relative when referring to the absolute idea. It stands at the basis of any philosophy for Hegel. It includes all the elements and transitions. The Absolute

Idea, or “World Spirit”, plays the same kind of role for Hegel as a deity: “History is the Idea clothing itself with the form of events” (Hegel, 346). What is more, he focuses on the Absolute Idea, which he defines as the unity between the theoretical and the practical idea. The former is the concrete concept of the world, while the latter is the action expressing the concept. It is by now becoming clearer that the abstract notion of “Absolute” is not as abstract as it might seem. In fact, according to Hegel, it represents the basis of truth and of philosophical thinking.

In his essay on the Absolute and Relativism, Umberto Eco offers a pertinent guideline for defining and clarifying the two terms. It goes without saying that one concept is difficult to define in the absence of the other one. The title itself suggests, if not more, at least a morphologic relation between the two. Umberto Eco himself states that the notion of Relative was the first to come to his mind when thinking of the meaning of the Absolute. He points out that in today’s modern society relativism and the relative have become a trend of thought, which is why, today more than ever before, the terms should be used cautiously.

In fact, Eco compares the notion of Absolute to the way in which people conceive the idea of God, of a deity. According to dictionaries on philosophy, *absolutus* refers to everything that is limitless and independent and which functions according to its own reason, thus encompassing both its cause and its explanation. This definition is indeed quite similar to the broader and holistic acceptance of what some would call “God” nowadays, the one who is, “*ego sum qui sum*”, although Eco deems it as utopian by reason of its improbable and rather precarious nature: it might just as well not exist or disappear like everything else. The author brings forth a very relevant thought, namely that human beings rely on the existence of something lasting, imperishable and that certain something is the Absolute, but this Absolute can be transcendental, as the biblical divinity, or immanent: “*Fiind ființe contingente și, ca atare, meniți să murim, avem o disperată nevoie de a crede că ne-am putea ancora de ceva ce nu piere, adică de un Absolut. Acest Absolut însă poate fi transcendent, precum divinitatea biblică, sau imament.*” (Eco, 30)

Eco continues his idea by stating that the individual belongs to the Absolute, that he is an integrated part of this infinite process of self-knowledge, growth and development. According to him, it is in the Absolute and through the Absolute that human beings identify themselves with God. But, at the same time, it is impossible for any human being to articulately define or even understand the Absolute, as he himself belongs to it. Eco’s and Hegel’s understanding of the relation between the human being and the Absolute are divergent.

Nevertheless, both are relatable. On the one hand, humans can understand the Absolute, not through analysis and thought, but through emotion (Hegel's point of view on the Absolute which shouldn't be understood but felt). On the other hand, humans are part of the infinite mechanism which is the Absolute and are thus incapable of defining the phenomenon objectively. Nevertheless Nicolaus Cusanus's believe that "dues est absolutes" is as possible an alternative today as it was back in the fifteenth century. One of the main difficulties in defining the concepts of absolute and relative is naming them, finding correct denominators. With an imagination as wild as the human one, the gap between conceiving the abstract and naming it or granting it a significance becomes wider by the day.

The reason why the novel of our choice is *Atonement* is clear for at least one reason: Briony's playing with the fantasy world and the real world is another angle of the reciprocal relationship between the Absolute and the Relative. Her auctorial supremacy and freedom stand for the Absolute, but then again, her sovereignty stands under the sign of the Relative, since, towards the ending of the novel, she admits to not being able to muster the bravery of her own gloom: "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. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them...Robbie and Cecilia still alive, still in love...It's not impossible. But now I must sleep." (McEwan, 372)

The two concepts of Absolute and Relativism are a significant mile stone in the novel, especially reflected in the figure of the main character, Briony. One significant side of the story is her trajectory from a young aspiring writer with an overdose of imagination to actually becoming a novelist. As a child, the line between fantasy and reality is so blurry that she swears to have seen Robbie commit rape on her cousin. Although he did not commit the crime and Briony herself did not clearly see what was happening in the benighted back yard of her house, she convinced herself that fantasy and belief equalled reality and truth. Clearly, Briony is driven by a powerful imagination in which she believes. But this shows that truth can be somewhat of a relative concept. From law courts to the most private of a matter, truth is far from being an absolute issue. Everybody believes in truth, but truth carries a different meaning for each individual. Can truth be considered absolute? Is there an absolute truth? If the Absolute is limitless and independent is truth a part of the Absolute or is truth Absolute itself?

In his essay on the Absolute and the Relative, Eco enumerates methods of using a word and bestowing it with meaning. In what follows, we will shortly analyse two of these points in relation to what McEwan's main character, Briony, defines as truth and fantasy and relate these elements to the values of Absolute and Relative. The first step towards using and assigning meaning is possessing instructions for recognising the possible object, situation or deed. Truth and fantasy are definable. We know that truth means reality, anything in conformity to fact or actuality. But what are the instructions for recognising the truth? There is no set of instructions for recognising the truth, or at least not for recognising it on the spot. For Briony truth is her imagination; she firmly believes in the reality of her own mind's eye and acts accordingly. Young Briony's system of recognising the truth is drawing on her own fantasy. For some this would be a case of disarrangement of values. Nevertheless, if Eco's position is correct and humans are unable to understand the Absolute, which they are part of, they cannot understand truth in its all-encompassing nature.

The second step in Eco's guide to using words is making use of a definition or a classification; and his example is the different classifications of the word murder, which could mean manslaughter, premeditated murder, and so on. In Briony's case, who willingly or not devastates her sister's and Robbie's destinies, truth is classified into two very different segments: her truth, or rather her fantasy, and the truth of the outer world. She only grows to understand the impact of believing in one's own truth and disposing of exterior truth towards the end of her life. Self and otherness can make the concept of truth hard to define, since it is categorised so differently. If we were to take Hegel's theory for granted and humans were truly capable of understanding the Absolute by sensing it, thus coming closer to a God-like state, then humans would be the creators of truth. This is precisely what Briony does; she is the sole creator of absolute truth, her own Absolute. That the line between Absolute and Relative is fine when it comes to truth and personal destiny is what she will find out at the end of her life. She does classify truth, but her absolute classification of values turns out to be relative, subjective and converting with time. There are no absolute values. Even the value of truth changes with time.

By this time it is already clear that the Absolute and the Relative are impossible to grasp or even to understand fully. Nevertheless, in Eco's view it is not impossible to name or even to represent visually something that we cannot ponder. But these images that we create of things impossible to understand completely are far from representing the truth. They are merely, Eco

says, forms of imagining something impossible to perceive and they end up frustrating the thinker. It is out of this frustration that the contemporary civilisation resorted to what Eco calls “fabricating a delusive picture of relativism as a homogenous ideology”. One of the consequences of this phenomenon could be that cultural relativism results in moral relativism and that the idea that there are different ways of verifying the truthfulness of a sentence or a word makes the possibility of recognising the Absolute Truth questionable: “(...) relativismul cultural ar duce în chip necesar la relativismul moral și că ideea că există moduri diferite de a verifica adevărul unei propoziții ar pune sub semnul întrebării posibilitatea de a recunoaște un adevăr absolut.” (Eco, 44)

Driven by her own Absolute, her fantasy, Briony’s words send Robbie to prison and abort the chance of him pursuing his dream of becoming a medical doctor and marrying Cecilia. Eventually Robbie is sent to the army where he dies of blood poisoning and Cecilia, who became a nurse, dies as victim of the war. Briony, by now a real writer, reveals that she had been writing a novel about the incredible story that she, her sister and Robbie went through. But McEwan’s reader will soon find out that the apparent happy ending where Cecilia and Robbie reunite and Briony seeks atonement is nothing but a literary artefact. In reality, the truth of their destroyed lives is unbearable to the author herself, who despite her omnipotence is unable to depict the facts: “How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, that they never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn’t do it to them... I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism...” (McEwan, 371)

Nietzsche’s approach in his essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense, that there are no ideas, but only interpretations, highlights the possibility that there are in fact no absolute truths but only intangible fictions that we like to call truth: “What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation.” (Nietzsche, 250) Therefore, how can the reader blame Briony – the writer? If truth is a sum of metaphors, it is more than natural for the poet to interpret it at his or her will. Briony, the auctorial voice, the creator of the Absolute, tries to find spiritual atonement by offering a different destiny to her characters. The Absolute of real

destiny becomes the Relative and the Interpretable in the realm of literary creativity. In real life Briony's words caused misery, two broken destinies and the absolute end: death. The optimistic ending to her novel tries to transform the Absolute, death and tragic destinies, into the Relative, by reinterpreting the story and offering it a different ending.

The problem of the Absolute and relativity in *Atonement* is double sided. On the one hand there is Briony, character and writer, shade of the author and authority of her own. This is why the novel itself can be read on at least two levels: absolute and relativism in McEwan's novel and Briony's novel alike. McEwan's readers are deprived of a happy ending, McEwan does not make use of the Absolute of the auctorial voice and as a result does not offer Cecilia and Robbie an accomplished destiny. Briony however proves to be a more authoritative and potent literary creator and revelled in the game of interchanging the Absolute and the Relative, transforming relativity into absoluteness and vice-versa by steering Cecilia and Robbie's lives both in the real world and in her fictional one, in which she seeks atonement. Nonetheless the ending to Briony's novel can be interpreted not only as her way to propitiate herself, but also as a way of taking her own readers into consideration and offering them a satisfactory ending. By thinking of her readers, Briony expects the readers to judge her, but "readers can interpret, analyse, and criticize, but ultimately judgement relies on the existence of an absolute truth that actions may be measured against." (Robb, 5)

By creating Briony, McEwan produced a case of an author who through her creative force represents the Absolute, the writer being a creator of things independent and which can define themselves, and a juggler of destinies for whom truth is Relative and Absolute alike. Briony concludes by reasoning, it is when she mends the Absolute truth of Cecilia and Robbie's destinies that she becomes a true writer. It is through her final novel that she truly takes control of the destinies surrounding her, thus playing the role of the omnipotent authority in command of what is absolute and what is relative. Briony the author never ceases to have control, which is why the notions of Absolute and Relative are so significant in this particular novel. Briony fictionalized reality, which does not mean that her created reality is true, but the outcome was most definitely true. By writing the novel she fictionalizes reality once again and represents two instances: one of her playing the role of God, of the Absolute and another one, of a regular human being, that falls into the trap of the Relative. The Relative might be one of contemporary society's most common diseases, but so is the Absolute. But unlike Briony, regular individuals are not as privileged as to command what is absolute or relative.

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