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## Ways to Err in Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*

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**Abstract:** Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam* is woven around friendship and errors that people can make in life and in art. The novel itself, rightfully perceived as different from the others the author has written, can be considered a deviation from norms. The paper will tackle the types of error that can be identified in the novel as well as the discrepancy between authorial intention and art consumers' perception.

**Keywords:** *British literature, error, narrative devices, judgemental errors, moral errors, plagiarism*

Ian McEwan's novel *Amsterdam* was awarded the Booker Prize in 1998, which came unexpectedly for both the writer and his readers. Was it an error? The writer admits he worked with pleasure and the book came easily and naturally to him, unlike the previous novels and the ones to come which required much labour:

It was a real pleasure to write *Amsterdam*. If I had to characterize my mood, I wrote in a state of glee. It was a very different kind of writing experience from *Enduring Love*, which was full of almost nightmare intensity – which in itself was exhilarating. But this had a quality of...I kept thinking, "If nobody else likes it, I don't give a damn, because I really am having fun." (*Interview in Jordison, 2011*)

McEwan's statement is a way to imply that a good book is generally associated with hard and difficult work, whilst the writing of *Amsterdam* breaks the pattern of the artist's 'suffering' during the process of creation as a result of the alienated identity he has to deal with or of the effort lying behind the right verbal vesture. The unusual 'state of glee' made him indulge in a sort of guilty pleasure and erroneously assume that readers might not like his novel.

### 1. Ways to err

Erring implies deviation from a generally accepted path or from accuracy and can be considered intrinsically unintentional as more factors, some of which uncontrollable, contribute to the undesired outcome.

According to Chris Forsythe et al., “error is the product of the dynamic interaction between a human and the system or task to achieve a specific goal in a specific context” (Forsythe et al., 2014: 168). The authors identify three factors underlying error: intention, cognitive and neurophysiological mechanisms and context (Forsythe et al., 2014: 168). It is admitted that there may be an intention that precedes an act and any deviation from it may be considered a mistake. If there is no prior intentionality, the error is seen as a slip, a term tracing back to Freud’s “slips of the tongue” (1901), or a lapse, according to Reason (1990), Norman (1983), and Forsythe et al. (2014). Error is also related to the way in which the brain processes the information it receives, a process depending on more variables such as “visual perception” and “spontaneous fluctuations in the oscillatory activity of neural circuits” (Fox et al. 2005), and on factors like fatigue, age or emotions. These factors also determine the accuracy or lack of accuracy with recalled memories. Being palimpsestically stored, as it is known from Bergson’s philosophy, memories can be recalled with erroneous contextual details or only partially recalled. Similarities between parts of the context, lack of interest in it or emotions often cause errors in recalled memories. As Forsythe et al. show in their example, the name of a person whom you have not seen for a long time may be “mistakenly retrieved”: “In this situation, memory is accessed on the basis of the context in which you had known the person, but there were other people with the same context and in recalling the context, the wrong name is triggered” (2014: 170). On the other hand, the context within which the memory is recalled or the human acts may affect the correctness of the decision one makes, the lack of information or partial processing due to time pressure or emotions lead to deviation in decision making or accidental misunderstandings of the information. Therefore inner and outer factors contribute to human decision making and erroneous choices.

Considering the wide range of errors and error generating situations and contexts, various taxonomies have been proposed on the grounds of psychoanalysis and behavioural and management studies, among which the above mentioned distinction between mistakes and slips/lapses, and the four types of human errors in administration and management that are related to their origin as shown by Meister (1971) (quoted in Forsythe et al., 2014: 178): operating errors, design errors, manufacturing errors and installation/maintenance errors. Considering the moment when the error occurs, three other types have been identified: the *preinitiator human error* which happens “before the beginning of an accident sequence”, the *initiator human error* which contributes to the initiation of an accident sequence and

the *postinitiator human error* which happens after an aggravating incident. (IAEA 1996 in Forsythe et al., 178)

There are two elements which require further attention to uphold the demonstration in this paper: the relation between accident and error and the negative connotation the concept of error hosts. Although both imply an undesired outcome, they may also echo the emergence of an idea in the writer's imagination, which is generally perceived as an accidental, unintentional occurrence sometimes leading to an error in the sense of deviation from the initial plan. There may be accidents such as slips from the initial plan which are recognized as potentially artistic deviations and preserved in the work. Irina Mavrodin (1982) referring to the artisan's work considers the errors occurring in the "manufacturing process", as artisans are known to create serial products, happy accidents which sometimes render the product more interesting and different, ensuring its uniqueness and artistry. Recognised and assumed errors/accidental deviations or hazards may be exploited as fruitful turning points by an artistic consciousness. There are, however, situations when accidents do not provide the artist with productive moments/ideas, which explains why Mavrodin considers that "only an artistic consciousness can identify and seize hazard as a gift and an inexhaustible source renewing the work, while hazard has no artistic quality in itself." (Mavrodin, 1982: 165)

The above theories provide a grid helping to the identification of various types of errors in Ian McEwan's novel which is a tragicomedy woven around errors acting like narrative engines. The novelist shows his surprise at the unexpected experience he had while writing the novel especially because he did not intend, anticipate or hope for critical recognition. The outcome, a 'felicitous error' considering the McEwan's expectancy, was largely debated, yet definitely set among the author's best novels. While some of the critics, among whom the ones who decided the novel deserved the prize, showed much appreciation for the book, considering the narrative devices and the easiness the author had put in it noteworthy, there were critics who could not understand why such a novel was rewarded, implying an erroneous decision on behalf of the judges, and considered it the worst McEwan had written. The plot was criticized for being too simple, "preposterous", "characters have no character" and "there is nothing to grasp in them", "the sly winking tone is irritating" (Jordison, 2011, *The Guardian*), etc.

The novel with an unusual making is built around accidental events leading to unexpected ways of processing and around emotions eventually generating erroneous decisions, actions and results. This is precisely what

McEwan wanted to do: a novel that could be read in a short period of time, even a sitting, a tragicomedy having the structure of a play, devoid of descriptions and therefore dynamic and easy to read, including moments of suspense, conflict and paradoxes whose presentation was deceptively clear, characters with disputable character, anti-models that paradoxically pass for models. The novel had emerged from a context full of joy and of positive and detached thinking and got under the lens of exigent, even carping critics, who found a fault where the author thought he had put a strength. Its emergence can be compared thus with the movement from the protective womb of the author's imagination to the outer world, where, unprotected, it had to meet the readers' expectations and find its place. Within the novel several types of mistakes, slips and lapses can be detected, among which errors of judgement, moral and ethic errors, as the protagonists do not hesitated to err while taking great care not to do it. McEwan creates an amusing contrast between the characters' apparently powerful and self-confident personality and the uncontrollable situations and contexts which make them drift along the novel while scattering their lives with errors.

## 2. Errors of judgement

Errors of judgement are related to both the contexts within which the decision is made and to the result of the decision which is different from the intended or expected one. In between the moment of the decision and the result various factors, some of them uncontrollable, act and deviate the intended course of events, annihilating a cause-effect relation. According to Forsythe et al., it is rather a "reversed causality (i.e. reasoning from effect to cause)" (2014: 166). McEwan's *Amsterdam* tells the story of two friends who meet at the funeral of a common friend, Molly, and who, impressed by her sudden death which was supposedly a result of her mental decline, make a vow to assist each other in euthanasia if they go the same way:

"Just supposing I did get ill in a major way, like Molly, and I started to go downhill and make terrible mistakes, you know, errors of judgement, not knowing names of things or who I was, that kind of thing, I'd like to know there was someone who'd help me to finish it ... I mean, help me to die." (McEwan, 2005: 49)

Clive finds the context in which Molly died so embarrassing and is so much affected by the way people perceived her that the intensity of his feelings determines him to draw his friend, Vernon Halliday, into the deal. His decision is emotionally made and is based on the analysis of Molly's life



and death. Her death is seen as an error contextually determined and poorly managed, but it constitutes the environment causing Clive and Vernon's decision and a series of unforeseen results which make their judgement of the situation be erroneous. They neglect precisely the contextual limits which hinder them from having a more detached perspective upon the event and the uncontrollable flow of future events in their lives. Their decision also shows insufficient knowledge of each other and of themselves in moments of crisis. In the economy of the narrative, when they entrust their lives to each other the reader expects an accident, an error which might bring the death of at least one of them. Time plays the well-known trick of changing the evolution of the characters, of twisting their lives so as to turn them into enemies who dispose of each other's life.

Another error of judgement comes when Clive makes the decision to send Vernon the poisonous letter. The moment Clive writes the letter he admits his strong feelings will produce a letter that might be used against him in the future: "He compromised with a terse postcard which he would leave for a day before sending. *Your threat appals me. So does your journalism. You deserve to be sacked. Clive*" (McEwan, 2005: 138). In the morning he perceives the letter differently: "He took a walk to clear his head, and post the card to Vernon which today read like a masterpiece of restraint" (McEwan, 2005: 140). The contexts within which Clive acts are different: while in the evening he sees his letter as a weapon in the hands of his enemy, the next morning, due to his having drunk too much, he does not see it as being so dangerous. The decision in the evening to postpone the gesture is reasonable, but the distorted perception of the text in the morning leads to an error of judgement. By sending the letter he challenges Vernon who acts in accordance, as Clive initially expected.

### 3. Moral errors

Moral errors derive from the deviation from moral principles while assuming to have a moral life. Clive and Vernon, both absorbed by their mission: the former as a musician and the latter as an editor, fail to obey moral principles several times. Clive decides to take a journey meant to bring him the creative energy he needed to finish the *Millennial Symphony* and walks along a route in the Lake District. Prisoner of the inspiring atmosphere and solitude and writing down the fragments which came from "the murmur of a voice" (McEwan, 2005: 84), Clive forgot to be human and help people in need. Although he sees a man and a woman having an argument he decides to be absent: "I am not here" (McEwan, 2005: 85). He

witnesses an attempt to rape, but he fails to help the woman, as he is inspired and has to jot down the notes that are coming to his mind, and also fails to tell the police about it. He finds himself in between an outer call and an inner one. The choice he makes is a feature of his lack of character showing his selfishness and egocentrism which are however disturbed by a weak voice of his superego. It is the description of the struggle between the two and of the woman's voice that make the reader know Clive's awareness of the seriousness of the event. His decision and comments are defying of moral norms:

He was crossing out notes as fast as he was setting them down, but when he heard the woman's voice rise to a sudden shout, his hand frozen. He knew it was a mistake, he knew he should have kept writing, but once again he peered over the rock. She had turned to face in Clive's direction now. [...] He lay on his tilted slab, pencil between his fingers, notebook in his other hand, and sighed. Was he really going to intervene? He imagined running down there. The moment at which he would reach them was when the possibilities would branch: the man might run off; the woman would be grateful, and together they could descend to the main road by Seatoller. Even this least probable of outcomes would destroy his fragile inspiration. [...] Their fate, his fate. The jewel, the melody. Its momentousness pressed upon him. [...] What was clear now was the pressure of choice: he should either go down and protect the woman, if she needed protection, or he should creep away [...] to find a sheltered place to continue his work – if it was not already lost. [...] It was as if he wasn't there. He wasn't there. He was in his music. His fate, their fate, separate paths. (McEwan, 2005: 86-89)

The text is ironic and illustrative of absolute selfishness when Clive considers it a *mistake* to peer over the rock although he knows it would have been correct to intervene and invents childish excuses and interpretations of the situation: "if she needed protection." Although it would have been a moral duty to support the woman's statements by telling the police about the rape, Clive chooses again self-protection and non-involvement for the sake of art and imagines this exonerates him. He will be harshly criticised by Vernon for his immoral decisions.

Fancying his responsibility as an editor and having the chance to publish several pictures of the Foreign Secretary taken by Molly, pictures in which Garmony wears woman underwear and clothes, his friend, Vernon, ignores Clive's advice not to taint the memory of the woman in the name of their friendship. Clive, this time, is sensitive to a moral issue, which he could not adhere to when the woman in need was unknown. The impact of