Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan’s Atonement

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In his review of Atonement for The Times Literary Supplement, Robert Macfarlane observes that “the question of how the past is represented in language has become the central obsession of British fiction over the past three decades” (23). I would argue that the tendency has been far more marked in the 1990s and the early 2000s, when British novelists have engaged with the past in ways that have little to do with the traditional forms of historical fiction or with the self-conscious parody of the historiographic metafictions of the previous decades. The complex reassessment of the Victorian past undertaken by A. S. Byatt in Possession (1990) and continued, with a slant toward the impact of Darwinism, in her Angels and Insects (1992), by Graham Swift in Ever After (1992), plus Hilary Mantel’s vivid imagining of living during the French Revolution in A Place of Greater Safety (1992) or Beryl Bainbridge’s reconstruction of Samuel Johnson’s relationship with the Thrale family in According to Queeney (2001) are just a few examples that bear out Byatt’s comment about “the extraordinary variety of distant pasts British writers are inventing, and the extraordinary varieties of forms in which these pasts have been constructed” (On Histories and Stories 36).

The attraction of the past has proved so strong that it has reached writers long known for their immersion in the present and the creation of self-enclosed fictional worlds. Ian McEwan’s novels of the 1990s marked a departure from the suffocating atmosphere of his early fiction, which is best symbolized perhaps by the body of the mother encased in cement in The Cement Garden (1978) or the surreal quality of the unnamed city of Venice in The Comfort of Strangers (1981).
Perhaps it was inevitable that, as he grew older, McEwan would leave behind the
cool analysis of incest, sadism, and abjection that had gained him notoriety and
would explore the power of evil in twentieth-century European history.

In the introduction to the edition of his television plays, McEwan spoke of his
intention to write about World War II:

Three years later I read The People’s War, a social history of World War II,
and resolved to write something one day about the war. I come from an
Army background and although I was born three years after the war ended,
it was a living presence throughout my childhood. Sometimes I found it hard
to believe I had not been alive in the summer of 1940. (The Imitation Game
15–16)

An event in the summer of 1940, the retreat of the British Expeditionary Army
to Dunkirk, features in Atonement, but the story the novel tells is far more com-
plex and nuanced than a mere fictional account of one of the great military dis-
asters in British history. The epigraph, the well-known moment in the conversa-
tion between Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey in which
the young man tells Catherine how unfounded her surmises about General Tilney
have been, relates to Atonement in two ways. In an interview with Jeff Giles in
Newsweek, McEwan says that in his notebooks he called Atonement “my Jane
Austen novel” (Giles 94); and in a long conversation focusing on The Child in
Time, Enduring Love, and Atonement, he makes explicit the connection embed-
ded in the epigraph:

What are the distances between what is real and what is imagined? Cather-
line Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey, was a girl so
full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her when
she imagines a perfectly innocent man to be capable of the most terrible
things. For many, many years, I’ve been thinking how I might devise a hero
or heroine who could echo that process in Catherine Morland, but then go a
step further and look at, not the crime, but the process of atonement, and do
it through writing—do it through storytelling, I would say. (Reynolds and
Noakes 20)

The Jane Austen connection is thus twofold. On the one hand, Briony Tallis, like
Catherine Morland, is a heroine whose perception is distorted by literature and an
imperfect knowledge of the world. On the other, in the first part of Atonement, set
in 1935, the country house as a literary motif makes ironic intertextual allusions
to Mansfield Park (the rehearsal of a play that finally is not performed, Robbie
Turner’s fleeting interest in landscape gardening, the sexual predator from Lon-
don) and to twentieth-century works of fiction such as E. M. Forster’s Howards
End and Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited. Thus, in his exploration of the gap
between what is real and what is imagined, McEwan deploys a variety of stylistic
devices and narrative techniques that give the novel its multilayered texture.
Hermione Lee put it this way in her review of Atonement for The Observer:
Atonement asks what the English novel of the twenty-first century has inherited, and what it can do now. One of the things it can do, very subtly in McEwan’s case, is to be androgynous. This is a novel written by a man acting the part of a woman writing a “male” subject, and there’s nothing to distinguish between them. (Qtd. in Reynolds and Noakes 185)

Atonement is structured in three parts and a final, much shorter section titled “London, 1999.” The point of view, crucial in a story that so dramatically foregrounds perception, is shared by four characters in part 1, set in the Tallis family’s country house in Surrey during the summer of 1935. Part 2 records the retreat to Dunkirk from the perspective of Robbie Turner, now a private in the British Army; in part 3, the action is simultaneous to that of part 2, as we follow the preparations to receive the casualties from Dunkirk in a London hospital where Briony is a probationary nurse. The three parts are narrated in the third person, and at the end of part 3 the identity of the narrator turns out not to be what the reader (at least this particular reader) had expected. The final section is told in the first person by Briony Tallis, and the time is now fifty-nine years after the events narrated in parts 2 and 3.

The central consciousness belongs to a writer and, in part 1, to a thirteen-year-old girl. If we accept (and I do) Hermione Lee’s point about the presence of the history of the English novel in Atonement, part 1 appears as a rich depository of motifs and narrative techniques. As a young girl who cannot understand the world of adults, Briony descends both from Jane Austen’s Catherine and Henry James’s Maisie, although the country house motif points to Austen as the central influence at work. The use McEwan makes of the country house is ironic: the Tallis family background is anything but distinguished (the grandfather had kept an ironmonger’s shop and made the family fortune with patents on padlocks and bolts), and the house itself is not only ugly but something of a fake, from the derelict island temple that echoes the original Adam-style building to the portrait in the dining room that depicts an aristocratic family with no connections to the present owners of the house.

When Hermione Lee observes that in Atonement “historical layers of English fiction are invoked—and rewritten” (184), she has in mind Austen and E. M. Forster’s novels of social misunderstanding; she also detects echoes of Elizabeth Bowen in part 1 of the novel (qtd in Reynolds and Noakes 185). (Incidentally, Bowen is mentioned in part 3 as one of the critics who offers advice on Briony’s novella.) The use of an Italianate fountain as the site for an apparently trivial moment in the lovers’ story may contain an allusion to the Italian fountain in Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited. If this is so, it would be another ironic reversal because the country house that gives title to Waugh’s novel is the ideological, aesthetic, and emotional center of the novel. When the lovers in Brideshead Revisited meet by the fountain near the end, we witness a crucial moment: the first stirrings of guilt in Julia, which will eventually lead to her return to the Catholic faith and her parting from Charles.
The dinner scene in part 1 may recall the long dinner party in the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, although the contrast between the hostess (and the food) in each novel is more marked than the similarity. The cluster of intertextual connections in part 1 (to which we can add the love relation across class lines in L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*) is part of the rich verbal texture of the novel and engages the reader’s literary memory. The presentation of Briony’s nascent literary imagination allows the reader to follow her development (at times unsuspectedly) from folk tales, written when she was eleven, through melodrama to modernist and finally realist fiction:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktale, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. (Atonement 41)

Briony’s writing, of which we see samples at different points in *Atonement*, foregrounds issues of genre and narrative technique. In fact, the wealth of covert literary allusion in part 1 and its leisurely pace signal a departure from McEwan’s previous fiction that is not fully accounted for by his avowed indebtedness to Jane Austen. I think we must look for a connection at a deeper level than that of the epigraph from *Northanger Abbey* or the introduction of the country house motif. If the style and subject matter of *Atonement* surprised readers and critics, the narrative technique is no less novel, precisely because it is rooted in the tradition of the English novel. As David Lodge observes:

In *Atonement* (2001), Ian McEwan, who has tended to favour first-person narration in his previous novels and stories, seems to be telling his story in a rather old-fashioned way, entering into the consciousness of several different characters and rendering their experience in third-person discourse that makes extensive use of free indirect style. (86–87)

I part company from Lodge when he claims that the introduction of the first-person epilogue turns the novel into a postmodernist metafiction (87). It is true that the reader discovers on the last page of part 3 that he or she has been deceived about the nature of the narratorial voice of the novel, but to my mind the metafictional element lies not so much in this jolt to the reader’s trust as in the subtle deployment in part 1 of narrative forms developed by the English novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a development that is mirrored by Briony’s own evolution as a storyteller.

The use of free, indirect speech in rendering the consciousness of the characters’ is, of course, a narrative device pioneered by Jane Austen; McEwan introduces a further refinement when he gives two consecutive versions of the same event. The first version comes in third-person narration and thus has authorial
sanction; the second is filtered through Briony; and because it is a misreading of what the reader has just seen, it anticipates the crucial moment when Briony will commit her crime and send an innocent man to prison.

Cecilia has been arranging wild flowers in a valuable vase that she is to take to the guest’s bedroom. She decides to get water from the fountain and on her way there meets Robbie Turner. The two young people have known each other since childhood (Robbie is the son of the Tallis family’s cleaning lady) and both have just come down from Cambridge, where they moved in different circles. There is a new awkwardness between them that Cecilia attributes to class resentment. Once they reach the fountain, Robbie tries to help Cecilia by taking the vase from her; she holds on, with the result that a section of the lip of the vase is broken off and falls to the bottom of the basin. The vase has great sentimental value for the family, particularly for Cecilia’s father, because it had been given to his only brother, killed in the First World War, by the mayor of a small French town in gratitude for having saved the lives of a number of its citizens. Robbie begins to unbutton his shirt, but before he can go further, Cecilia strips to her underclothes, climbs into the water, retrieves the pieces, and walks away from him.

In the next chapter, the point of view shifts to Briony, who is worried about the way the rehearsals of her play are going. She looks from one of the nursery’s windows and sees her sister Cecilia and Robbie standing by the fountain. Briony first reads the scene according to her experience of folk tales: as a young man of humble origins aspiring to the hand of a princess. She immediately begins to make mistakes when she interprets Robbie’s gesture as a command that Cecilia dared not disobey. The transition in Briony’s imagination from romance to realism is marked at this moment by a terrible irony whose full impact the reader will discover much later:

Briony had her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong. (39, emphasis added)

Briony’s perception of Robbie as in some undefined way threatening her sister is reinforced when she reads the sexually explicit message that he sends to Cecilia by mistake and later when she finds the young man in the library engaged in what she takes to be an assault on her sister. The narrative order is reversed here: we see first the abrupt end of the scene by Briony’s coming into the library, and in the next chapter, while all the characters are having dinner, Robbie remembers what had happened a half hour before in the library and thus contradicts Briony’s interpretation.

The reader is made aware of the perils of perception and, at the same time, of the narrative devices through which literature encodes experience. We see indirectly a wonderful example of this when in part 3, Briony, now a probationary
nurse in a London hospital in 1940, receives a letter of rejection from Cyril Connolly, editor of the prestigious literary journal *Horizon*. From Connolly's comments, the reader realizes that Briony's novella is a fictionalized account of the fountain scene in part 1, written in the high-modernist style.

Connolly praises Briony's work and singles out an image that in fact had appeared on page 38 of *Atonement* (something that the reader can only notice in retrospect). The reader also will need a careful second reading of the novel to perceive that Connolly's corrections concerning the provenance of the vase and the square in Rome, where stands the fountain after which the one in the Tallis country house is modelled, have been silently incorporated into the body of *Atonement*, but he complains about the feeble characterization and lack of development in her novella. The critic's comments contrast with Briony's own views on modern fiction, conveyed in free indirect style a few pages before: "A modern novelist could no more write characters and plots than a modern composer would a Mozart symphony" (281). Connolly compares Briony's method of presentation with Virginia Woolf's and adds that Elizabeth Bowen has taken an interest in the novella and saw in it traces of *Dusty Answer*, Rosamond Lehmann's first novel. Briony's writing is thus placed in the tradition of the British female novel of the 1920s and 1930s.

The literary memory embedded in Connolly's critique of Briony's novella involves a revision of modernist fiction from the standpoint of the late 1930s (Connolly's) and late 1990s (McEwan's through his surrogate narrator). Although this episode appears in part 3, it is in part 1 that works of English literature are woven into the narrative texture and characters comment openly on literary matters, from Robbie's disagreement with Leavis's valuation of English literature as "the most vital pursuit of an enquiring mind" (91) to Mrs. Tallis's disparagement of literature as an academic subject. We may conclude that literary memory is central in part 1 because the story focuses on the present, whereas the characters' past is not yet determining, as it will be in the other sections of the novel. Part 1 contains scattered references to Hitler and the need for rearmament, but the story it tells is firmly centered on the emotions, the terrible consequences of mistaken perceptions, and the shaping of a writer's imagination.

The leisurely pace and rich verbal texture of part 1 gives way in part 2 to a more straightforward narration. The time is 1940—five years after the events of part 1—and the point of view is Robbie Turner's, now a private in the British Expeditionary Forces in France. Here, McEwan draws on the historical memory of a military disaster that came to symbolize in the national imaginary the determination to fight on and on his own family history (his father had taken part in the retreat to Dunkirk). Little narrative space is left for ironical allusion and reimagining the literary past; and the emphasis is on objects, bodies, and the physical sensations of hunger, thirst, and fear. While Robbie and his two mates struggle to survive on the road to Dunkirk, his memories of the past five years acquaint the reader with what happened after the dramatic ending of part 1.
The action of part 3 is roughly simultaneous to that of part 2, but the central consciousness is Briony's and the setting is London. These two sections of Atonement have much to do with the reappraisal in the novels of Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Martin Amis, and McEwan himself of what Byatt calls "their fathers' war" (On Histories 12). Reappraisal is not perhaps the correct word because none of those writers offers a novel interpretation of the Second World War. What McEwan does in Atonement is to present, through research into the circumstances of a particular episode early in the war, the influence on two individuals (Briony and Robbie as the victim of her crime and the lover of her sister) who were closely related in part 1 and now are very differently positioned: Robbie fighting for his life in France and Briony training as a nurse in a London hospital.

The detailed account of Briony's life at the hospital shows the extent of McEwan's research into the medical and nursing practices of the period. But no amount of research could have achieved what I regard as one of the highlights of the novel: Briony's experience of nursing the casualties of the retreat. The description of what shrapnel and fire can do to the human body is not new in literature, but in part 3 of Atonement McEwan offers a rare combination of precision and a compassionate lack of sentimentality that has few precedents. When Briony glimpses the interior of bodies through the terrible wounds the soldiers have sustained, "she learned a simple, obvious thing she had always known, and everyone knew: that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended" (304). The story of the dying French boy-soldier to whom Briony speaks in her school French is impressive and needs no justification for its inclusion in Atonement. Another episode connects at a deeper level with the plot of the novel. Briony extracts with foreclos the pieces of shrapnel embedded in an airman's leg and explains to him the danger of their sinking into his flesh and carrying the infection into his bloodstream and, thus, into his heart or his brain. Again, we do not grasp the full significance of this until much later.

The emotional impact of this section should not obscure those elements in part 3 that link the different strands of storytelling. We discover the identity of Lola's rapist, not so much of a surprise, perhaps, as the striking revelation on the last page of part 3. I have no doubt that the pages dealing with the nursing of the wounded in Atonement will become a classic of the literary representation of the aftermath of war; nevertheless, if we look at the novel as a whole, part 3 is also the section in which the reader has access to crucial information concerning not only the past (what really happened on that fateful night back in 1935) but also the future, although in this latter case vital information is withheld until the end of the novel.

The last section, "London, 1999," is told in the first person by Briony, who speaks on a momentous day: it is her seventy-seventh birthday, and her doctor has just told her that she is suffering from vascular dementia; sooner or later she will lose her memory and then control of all intellectual and physical activity. Before leaving London to attend a birthday party organized by her family, Briony goes to
the Imperial War Museum to return material she has been using in writing her last novel. On her way to this repository of national memory, Briony passes houses that she and several members of her family have formerly inhabited: “Beyond a certain age, a journey across the city becomes uncomfortably reflective. The addresses of the dead pile up” (355).

The birthday party is held in the old Tallis country house, now the luxurious Tilney hotel (a last reference to Northanger Abbey). Briony experiences a haunting retrieval of the past. A third-generation family member recites the prologue for The Trials of Arabella, which she had written fifty-four years earlier, and the grandchildren of her brother and her cousins perform the play whose rehearsal she had given up at thirteen. Early the next morning, Briony reflects that just as the war had frustrated her plan to redress some of the consequences of her crime, she cannot achieve atonement as a novelist because there is no higher form to which she can appeal or that can forgive her: “It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all” (371).

When McEwan calls Atonement “my Jane Austen novel,” he knows that she is the last writer readers and critics would have associated with him. I have already traced the debt to Austen in the novel. But Austen’s historical and ideological context is long gone; and her fiction, like that of the other writers Atonement engages with at different points, is part of the multilayered texture of a work infused with late twentieth-century issues and values. Although it is right to see Atonement as McEwan’s masterpiece to date and a breakthrough in his career, we should not overlook the continuities with his previous fiction. The claustrophobic atmosphere that McEwan explored in his early stories and in The Cement Garden, what Kiernan Ryan has called “the blighted Eden of adolescence” (19), started to give way to a new awareness of the recent past in The Innocent (1990) and Black Dogs (1992), just as the emotional bleakness of the early works was transmuted into the warm celebration of family love in The Child in Time (1987). In his analysis of this work, Slay perceives both the mapping of new fictional and emotional territory and the connection with early themes: “for underlying much of the brutality, violence, and chaos of McEwan’s canon is a subtle yet prevailing optimism” (217).

We see this qualified optimism in the moment of revelation that June Tremaine experiences in Black Dogs after her terrifying encounter with the beasts:

A malign principle, a force in human affairs that periodically advances to dominate and destroy the lives of individuals or nations, then retreats to await the next occasion; it was a short step from this to a luminous countervailing spirit, benign and all-powerful, residing within and accessible to us all; perhaps not so much a step as a simultaneous recognition. Both principles were incompatible, she felt, with the materialism of her politics, and she left the Party. (19)

June’s moment of recognition in Black Dogs takes place in France in the after-
math of the Second World War and is connected with the activities of the Gestapo during the Occupation, but "the malign principle" manifests itself in the novel in the more ordinary cruelty of a father's mistreatment of his son during a meal in a restaurant. It seems to me that here, as in The Child in Time and The Innocent, McEwan is drawing parallels between historical and private experience. D. J. Taylor, for one, thinks that he is more successful in the private realm, at least as far as The Child in Time is concerned:

As an examination of the way in which families function, the novel [The Child in Time] is masterly. As an examination of the way in which people formally react to political contingency it strikes me as fundamentally flawed. (59)

I believe that in Atonement McEwan achieves the welding of historical experience and individual lives that had perhaps eluded him in his novels tackling the effects of Thatcherism on British society (The Child in Time), Anglo-American relations during the early cold war years in Berlin (The Innocent), and the fall of the Berlin Wall (Black Dogs), which had been prefigured at the end of The Innocent. Although, in part 1, the manifold allusions to the history of English literature (mostly, but not exclusively, fiction) foreground the complex cultural processes that account for the ways in which characters react to and interpret a shocking assault on a young girl, in part 2 we witness history in the making, before it becomes part of the national mythology, and history as it involves an individual for whom the reader feels strongly.

History and fiction mingle again in part 3 when Briony nurses the casualties of a war that will thwart her plans of atonement. The first-person postscript brings together the historical, private, and fictional strands: Briony finishes the last version of her novel, returns to the Imperial War Museum the documents that have helped her in her research, and attends the birthday party at which a play is performed that she had written sixty-four years earlier. The sense of an ending is more poignant because Briony has just been told that she is going to lose her memory.

The brilliant narrative technique of Atonement does not fully explain the critical acclaim that greeted the novel, or the nature of the experience it provides. The intelligent deployment of literary devices is not self-conscious but part of a story of love, death, evil, and a child's incomprehension of the world of adult emotions. It is a strong story, and in telling it the author creates three strong characters, Briony and the lovers. With truly Austenian irony, McEwan triumphantly does what Briony at eighteen thinks a modern novelist cannot do: write characters and plots.

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