

Who's afraid of influence?

In his latest book *Atonement* Ian McEwan brings the British novel into the 21st century, says Geoff Dyer

Saturday 22 September 2001 *Atonement* - Ian McEwan

The twists and turns of Ian McEwan's fiction are built on a knack for sustained illusion. When he writes "a glass of beer" we do not just see it; we are willing to drink from it vicariously. The ballooning accident (imaginatively derived from footage of an actual incident) that opens *Enduring Love* is a spectacular example, but the ability to make the invented seem real animates every page of his work.

The novels' psychological acuity derives, always, from their fidelity to a precisely delineated reality. Needless to say, the more disturbing or skewed that reality (in the early stories and novels, most obviously), the more finely McEwan attunes his readers to it. Moral ambiguity and doubt are thereby enhanced - rather than resolved - by clarity of presentation. This is why the themes of the novels (with the exception of the enjoyably forgettable *Amsterdam*) linger and resonate beyond the impeccable neatness of their arrangement. McEwan is, in other words, a thoroughly traditional original.

Atonement does not feel, at first, like a book by McEwan. The opening is almost perversely ungrIPPING. Instead of the expected sharpness of focus, the first 70 or so pages are a lengthy summary of shifting impressions. One longs for a cinematic clarity and concentration of dialogue and action, but such interludes dissolve before our - and the participants' - eyes.

Unlike Martin Amis, say, or Salman Rushdie, McEwan is an invisible rather than a flamboyant stylist. Even so, the pallid qualifiers and disposable adverbs (a "gently rocking" sheet of water, the "coily drooping" head of a nettle) come as a surprise. The language used to distil the scene - a gathering of the Tallis family at their country house on a sweltering day in 1935 - serves also as a wash that partially obscures it.

Various characters come and go but the novel, at this point, seems populated mainly by its literary influences. Chief among these is Virginia Woolf. The technique is not stream of consciousness so much as "a slow drift of association", "the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen". The book later contains a critique of its own early pages - or at least of the draft from which they derive - in the guise of a letter from Cyril Connolly, editor of *Horizon*, who advises that "such writing can become precious when there is no sense of forward movement". The requisite propulsion is provided by the unexpected intrusion, as it were, of two other novelists from the interwar years.

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Cecilia, the eldest daughter of the family in whose house we are imaginatively lodged, was at Cambridge with Robbie, the son of the Tallises' cleaning lady, whose education was funded by Cecilia's father. They become aware, on this sultry day, of some kind of current - animosity? irreconcilable attraction? - passing between them. Robbie tries to articulate this in a letter, at the bottom of which he scribbles the naked truth: "In my dreams I kiss your cunt." He discards that draft and intends to send another, blander one but, in keeping with Freud's analysis of

such slips, accidentally sends the shocking letter to Cecilia via her adolescent sister, Briony, who opens and reads it.

The consequences of the go-between blundering in like this are liberating and incriminating in unequal measure. What Lawrence called the "dirty little secret" of sex besmirches the Tallises' world, or - as Lawrence insisted - reveals how besmirched that world really is. It is as if Mellors from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has gatecrashed the exquisitely rendered world of Mrs Dalloway. Or as if the contents of McEwan's stories had been explicitly daubed on the walls of Brideshead.

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Another crisis soon follows, this one imported from EM Forster's *India*. Cecilia's young cousin, Lola, is sexually assaulted in the grounds of the house. Lola does not know by whom, but Briony - an aspiring writer - compounds her earlier transgression by convincing her and everyone else (except Cecilia) that Robbie is the culprit. Unlike the incident in the Marabar caves, this one does not end in a retraction and Robbie, the proletarian interloper, is convicted.

In the second section of the novel, the pastel haze of the first part gives way to an acrid, graphic account of Robbie's later experiences in the British rout at Dunkirk. McEwan is here playing more obviously to his strengths. The highly decorated novelist deploys his research in an effective if familiar pattern of narrative manoeuvres. Refracted through Robbie's exhausted, wounded view of history in the making, the retreat unfolds in a series of vividly realised details and encounters. In the atrocious context of battle, Briony's apparently motiveless crime is rendered almost insignificant. "But what was guilt these days? It was cheap. Everyone was guilty, and no one was."

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In similar fashion, the partial democratisation of Britain that results from the social upheaval of war is prefigured by Cecilia's turning her back on her family and allying herself with Robbie, the working-class graduate (whose smouldering sense of grievance and displacement would be vehemently embodied on the postwar stage by Jimmy Porter).

Part three shifts back to London, where Briony is training as a nurse, struggling to cope with the influx of casualties from Dunkirk. McEwan's command of visceral shock is here anchored in a historical setting thoroughly authenticated by his archival imagination. The elliptical style of the opening part has no place in these pages, as the graphic horrors of injury, mutilation and death pile up before Briony's eyes. She loosens the bandage around a patient's head and his brain threatens to slop out into her hands. Does this devotion to the victims of war wash her hands of her earlier guilt? Does her atonement depend on Robbie's survival? Or can it be achieved through the eventual realisation of her literary ambitions - through a novel such as the one we are reading? Who can grant atonement to the novelist, whose God-like capacity to create and rework the world means that there is no higher authority to whom appeal can be made?

It is a tribute to the scope, ambition and complexity of *Atonement* that it is difficult to give an adequate sense of what is going on in the novel without preempting - and thereby diminishing

- the reader's experience of it. Suffice to say, any initial hesitancy about style - any fear that, for once, McEwan may not be in control of his material - all play their part in his larger purpose.

On the one hand, McEwan seems to be retrospectively inserting his name into the pantheon of British novelists of the 1930s and 1940s. But he is also, of course, doing more than this, demonstrating and exploring what the mature Briony comes to see as a larger "transformation... being worked in human nature itself". The novels of Woolf and Lawrence did not just record this transformation; they were instrumental in bringing it about. McEwan uses his novel to show how this subjective or interior transformation can now be seen to have interacted with the larger march of 20th-century history.

While John Fowles was working on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he reminded himself that this was not a book that one of the Victorian novelists forgot to write but, perhaps, one that they had failed to write. A similar impulse underwrites *Atonement*. It is less about a novelist harking nostalgically back to the consoling uncertainties of the past than it is about creatively extending and hauling a defining part of the British literary tradition up to and into the 21st century.