

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION

Nick Bentley

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this sense poststructuralist criticism appears as biased in that it is in its own interest to suggest that criticism is unending. Poetry, on the other hand, comes to represent for Roland a form of language that might provide access to a kind of truth. This is similar to the position put forward by Vico, whose book, of course, contained Ash's drafted love letters. The poetic truth of romantic love is thereby passed on to Roland from Ash, and serves to make him question other forms of truth on which he has previously relied.

The plot of the novel, especially in its closing sections, also raises questions about the pursuit of literary criticism. Pursuit is an apt word in this context as the chase section at the end of the novel replicates the desire to disclose secrets and to track down meaning from a series of previously hidden events and associations. The novel turns self-consciously into a kind of literary detective fiction in the closing sections, and in detective fiction, the desire to know is the driving principle; as Maud says: 'We need the end of the story' (p. 498). This desire, however, is only partly satisfied. By the end of the contemporary story, Maud knows about her genealogical relationship to Ash and Christabel, but the epilogue upsets this sense of closure. For Maud and the other contemporaries it is assumed that Ash never knew his daughter, May, had survived, but the encounter between them in the epilogue (which remains unknown to the contemporaries) suggests that Ash did in fact realise that his daughter was still alive, despite the fact that Ellen felt it right not to pass on Christabel's final letter to him on his deathbed. This suggests that however far it is possible to interpret a text or an author's life there is always a supplement, an extra space in which the analysis can be pushed. In this way, then, the novel seems to agree partly with a poststructuralist approach to reading – that the meaning of a text can never be fully achieved and that a piece of literature will always remain open to further interpretations.

IAN MCEWAN, *ATONEMENT* (2001)

Atonement is McEwan's eighth novel, and like *Waterland* and *Possession* is interested in the relationship between history, memory and writing. One of the ways in which this is achieved is by using

a metafictional frame. Unlike other classic framed narratives, however, such as *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Turn of the Screw* (1898), the framing does not become apparent until the novel's epilogue. The metafictional turn that McEwan provides at the end of the text forces the reader to reassess the events of the preceding 350 pages. The central character is Briony Tallis, who at the opening of the novel is a thirteen-year-old girl who has ambitions to be a writer. The surprise of the ending is in part produced by the use of a third-person narration for most of the text, which on first reading creates an ironic distance, for example in Part One, towards Briony's over-romanticized emotional and aesthetic responses to the events she observes. The model for this form of narrative irony is taken from Jane Austen, and the epigram to the novel is from *Northanger Abbey* (1818), an illusion that combines a reference to the style, as well as the country house setting and the dangers of imposing an overly romanticized view of the world onto reality. McEwan has commented on his reasons for the allusion to Austen's novel as one of the guiding principles in *Atonement*:

Catherine 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 in writing – do it through storytelling, I should say.¹⁷

It is only later discovered that the three main parts of the novel are in fact an account written (and re-written) by Briony herself when she is much older, substituting the ironic narrative with one that is, in fact, closer to a kind of autobiographical novel whereby an external narrator comments on the beliefs and behaviour of an earlier self, a narrative framework that, for example, operates in traditional *Bildungsroman* novels like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). The whole novel then

is, as McEwan suggests in the quotation above, an attempt to atone for actions by writing about them, and by turning them into a narrative.

The novel is divided into three parts, the first of which is set on a single day in 1935 at the country estate where Briony and her family live, including her father, who has a position in the government, her mother Emily, her sister Cecilia, and her brother Leon, as well as Robbie Turner, the son of the cleaning lady, who has been financially supported by her father after Robbie's own father absconded. On the day the events of the first part take place the family are being visited by their cousins Lola, and the twins Jackson and Pierrot whose parents are going through a divorce. After misreading the first stages of a love relationship between Robbie and Cecilia, Briony mistakenly accuses Robbie of attacking Lola by the lake in the grounds of the country house. She has observed Lola's attacker in the half-light and because of her feelings toward Robbie at this time mistakenly assumes that he is the culprit.

This first part is a kind of novel within a novel and is referred to later in the book as a fictional story, *Two Figures in the Fountain*, which Briony has sent to Cyril Connolly, a real historical figure who was the editor of *Horizon*, a literary magazine that began just before the Second World War.¹⁸ The letter Briony receives from Connolly provides the first clues that the first part of the novel is in fact the re-written version of that story, as it includes the changes that Connolly has suggested such as correcting the reference to the location of the Bernini *Triton* (p. 18, p. 314).¹⁹ Connolly's letter also provides a certain amount of irony in that he suggests that the girl narrator of the story should influence the relationship of the adults in some way: 'Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion' (p. 313). The letter also suggests that Briony's style 'owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf'. This reference to the modernist techniques of Virginia Woolf has been alluded to by Briony previously in her thinking about becoming a writer: 'She had read Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* three times and thought that a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and that only fiction, a new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change' (p. 282). These bold claims for modernism in fiction are partly treated ironically here, as it is the detachment

of art from real life that Briony fails to see at this point. Only later does she recognize the shortcomings of her adopted style: 'Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness?' (p. 320). It is apparent, however, that Briony never completely drops her modernist style as there are passages in Part One that are similar to Woolf, for example, the action takes place over one day, a technique that Woolf uses in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). In addition, some of the detailed description in Briony's internal monologue resonates with Woolf's style, for example, when she ponders the physical operation of bending her finger and the relationship her mind has to her physical actions (pp. 35–6).

Part Two continues this stream of consciousness style in the account of Robbie's experiences in France during the retreat of British troops to Dunkirk in the spring of 1940. That the modernist style continues suggests, once the metafictional twist is discovered, that it is indeed Briony who has also written this section, based on letters she has received from a Mr Nettles, who is presumably the character with the same name that accompanies Robbie across Northern France. It is through imagining Robbie's experiences that she begins to atone for the suffering she has caused him. Part Two also serves to debunk the myth of the heroic 'victory from defeat' that was imposed on the events surrounding Britain's withdrawal from France in the early parts of the Second World War. The events described in this section show a ramshackle and defeated army that is a mixture of heroic and more ambivalent acts of self-preservation. It also offers a parallel with Briony in its description of Robbie's feelings of guilt at abandoning a Flemish woman and her child he encounters during a Stuka attack, during which both are killed. When he reaches Dunkirk, Briony has Robbie considering whether to return north to 'ask the Flemish lady and her son if they held him accountable for their deaths' (p. 263). Eventually, however, he decides to try and get back to England to continue his relationship with Cecilia. His last words, 'you will not hear another word from me', are left ominously open, given what is later suggested about his fate in the epilogue (p. 265).

The third part provides a narrative of Briony's experience during the war in which she begins to assuage her guilt over her wrongful

accusation of Robbie. Her experience of being trained as a nurse culminates in the events in the hospital when she first encounters the wounded returning from France, one of whom, she speculates might be Robbie (p. 298). The moment of atonement is actually displaced onto an eighteen-year-old French boy, Luc, who Briony comforts as he slips towards death. Luc is delirious and in her attempt to console him Briony accepts the fiction that she is his fiancée. Unlike the events in Part One, a fiction imposed upon reality is seen to have positive effects in that it eases the boy's death. It is after this event that Briony meets up once more with Cecilia and Robbie, and although the latter castigates her, she recognizes that she has experienced a certain amount of the suffering war causes: 'It was a pathetic form of comfort, that he could not know what she had seen' (p. 342). This final encounter represents a form of atonement, although one that is not fully achieved due to the fact that neither Robbie nor her sister will ever forgive her, and finally banish her from their lives. It is significant that in watching Cecilia and Robbie kiss, Briony 'had no wish to leave yet' suggesting that this moment is what she has needed to bring some kind of closure to her guilt, and in observing their kiss knows that her actions have not resulted in a complete break between the two lovers.

With the metafictional turn, however, it remains ambiguous how much of this Briony has romanticized and this introduces one of the central questions the novel asks: what are the ethical implications of fictionalizing the world? In Part One, much attention is paid to the way in which Briony, in her childlike way, is keen to miniaturize the world by imposing fixed and ordered narratives upon it. We are given an early indication of this in the neat and ordered way she arranges her toys, where, 'cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice – suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders' (p. 5). This desire to control is associated with the power Briony wishes to exert over the world around her and finds a perfect outlet in the stories she writes whereby, 'Her passion for tidiness was [. . .] satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so' (p. 7). For Briony, frustration is caused by the fact that real life contaminates the purity, wholeness and order that can be obtained in her fictions and her first indication of this is when she attempts to stage her first play 'The Trials of Arabella'. In staging a play, she is forced to co-operate

with others, and in doing so loses the control she craves over her creation. In dealing with her cousins Lola, Jackson and Pierrot she is subject to the ungovernable inconsistencies of real people who have their own anxieties and agendas. This experience alerts Briony to the possibility of the *otherness* of people, and the thought that she is not unique in having an inner life. As she muses to herself:

Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face [sic]. Did everybody, including her father, Betty, Hardman? If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance. (p. 36)

This marks a transition for Briony as she recognizes the complexity of the world and it marks a moment on her move towards maturity. For Briony the real world is complicated and muddled and will not behave like her miniature worlds. This is an unsettling feeling but it also involves a sense of the excitement of 'real' living. This culminates in her inability to understand the events she observes between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain. The intimation of an adult world where actions take on meanings that cannot be comprehended fully represents an adolescent crisis for Briony to which she reacts by trying to impose her own narrative on the events. This fictional misreading of the real situation is exacerbated in her observation of the lovers in the library. Unfortunately, the narrative she imposes is drawn from her romanticized imagination, which fixes the main actors in simplified roles: Cecilia as the victim in need of protection and Robbie as the villain. The frustration at not being able to control the world in the way that she can control her fictions, therefore, carries the seeds of her misinterpretation of Robbie's relationship with Cecilia and the catastrophic outcome. As she tries to explain it to herself 'what she saw must have been shaped in part by what she already knew' (p. 123).

The novel, then, shows how romanticized accounts of real events can lead to dangerous misinterpretations. It is not only Briony who is susceptible to such misinterpretation; Cecilia and Robbie also fail to read the signs correctly in their relationship with each other. The organization of Part One into three stream of consciousness narratives emphasizes this process. One example is the way Cecilia and Robbie interpret differently a recent occasion when Robbie has removed his shoes and socks to enter the house. For Cecilia:

Robbie had made a great show of removing his boots which weren't dirty at all, and then, as an afterthought, took his socks off as well, and tiptoed with comic exaggeration across the wet floor. Everything he did was designed to distance her. He was play-acting the cleaning lady's son come to the big house on an errand. (p. 27)

Robbie on the other hand sees the occasion differently:

That was the day he had first noticed his awkwardness in her presence. Kneeling to remove his work shoes by the front door, he had become aware of the state of his socks – holed at toe and heel and, for all he knew, odorous – and on impulse had removed them. What an idiot he had felt, padding behind her across the hall and entering the library barefoot. (p. 84)

The discrepancy in these passages show how cultural codes are employed differently in the way in which people interpret each other's behaviour. For Cecilia, Robbie's actions are placed in a framework of a recognized cultural narrative: the resentful class-conscious parvenu in the aristocratic house. It is partly Robbie's status as a kind of class-crossing cuckoo that contributes to the willingness the Tallis family show in accepting Robbie is Lola's attacker. As Cecilia writes to Briony, 'I'm beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity' (p. 209). It is not only the Tallises that are susceptible, Robbie himself makes similar cultural presumptions in his (and Cecilia's) amazement that it is the wealthy, upper-class Peter Marshall who turns out to be the villain, and not Danny Hardman, the son of one of the Tallises's servants.

As Robbie reflects, once he discovers the truth, 'we owe an apology to Able Seaman Hardman' (p. 347). As Brian Finney has argued, one of the novel's themes is to show how the characters are suspect to the imposition of cultural fantasies, and that events serve to shake them out of their presumptions about others, whereby they are, 'expelled from the world they have constructed in their private fantasies into the unforgiving narrative of history, from narratives they concoct for their personal satisfaction to narratives concocted for them'.²⁰

The novel also hints that Briony's naming of Robbie as Lola's attacker has a subconscious motivation. This has to do with a scene that occurred before the day described in Part One, but only later referred to as one of the memories given to Robbie in Part Two. An occasion is recalled when Briony was ten and before Robbie had gone off to university in which she had jumped in the estate's lake as a test to see whether Robbie would save her, after which she tells him she loves him. Robbie's subsequent rejection of her is seen as a potential, and perhaps repressed cause of her later keenness to denounce him, and it is perhaps significant that it is by the same lake that the attack on Lola takes place. Briony's repressed fantasy of a relationship with Robbie returns unconsciously when she sees Lola attacked several years later. The older Briony seems to understand that what was motivating the thirteen-year-old girl was the unconscious reaction to the rejection by Robbie of her adolescent romantic attraction to him. This is why the motivation is left out of the earlier text. It is only when Briony remembers this event that she can identify it as a cause for her attitude towards Robbie and show the way in which memory affects the interpretation of past events (see also p. 342 and pp. 231–2).

The importance of memory and its relationship with recording the past is a theme that returns in the epilogue. It is set in 1999, and we learn that Briony, now aged seventy-seven, has been diagnosed with vascular dementia, which means that her memory will progressively wither away along with 'language itself' (p. 355). This reveals the imperative behind her writing of the events contained in what we have previously read, which we now know represents the task set to her by Robbie to write down: 'Everything that led up to you saying you saw me by the lake'.²¹ The initials and date at the

end of Part Three suggest that this is the final draft of this letter of atonement: 'BT / London 1999' (p. 349). The three parts, then, are all part of Briony's attempt to atone for her actions and their consequences, but they are also an attempt to produce a written record of what happened.

The act of writing, therefore, provides a further complexity to the relationship between memory and the actual events. The first part shows how language is a slippery medium, and suggests the way in which the desire to record memories accurately is frustrated by the fact that language is not transparent or impartial, but already carries with it cultural signifiers and connotations that affect meaning. At one point in her thoughts Briony shows this, whilst in fact saying the opposite:

By means of inking symbols onto a page, she was able to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's. It was a magical process, so commonplace that no-one stopped to wonder at it. Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them. There was no gap during which the symbols were unravelled. You saw the word *castle*, and it was there, seen from some distance, with woods in high summer spread before it, the air bluish and soft with smoke rising from the blacksmith's forge, and a cobbled road twisting away into the green shade. (p. 37)

The ironic distance towards Briony allows us to see what she cannot; that her use of words leads her not into a straight system of communication, 'to send thoughts and feelings from her mind to her reader's', but in fact generate a series of meanings that are either subjective or loaded with culturally determined nuances and connotations that are not implicit in the words themselves, for example, in the train of romantic thoughts generated by the word *castle*. This is the lesson that Briony has still to learn at this point; that words are not as straightforward as they appear.

The ending, however, emphasizes the ethical implications of the relationship between truth and fiction and turns the desire to romanticize back onto the reader. It is suggested that closure can only be achieved by turning life into art. The paradox of this suggestion,

however, is that this is the very approach that caused the problem in the first place. Although Briony achieves atonement for herself at the end, the novel itself remains less conciliatory, as we are left with the open ending, with the habit real life has of disrupting and destabilizing any attempt to impose order on it. There is, then, still an ironic distance in play at the end of the novel towards Briony. It is never fully explained whether the final meeting between Briony, Cecilia and Robbie ever took place within the realistic frame of the novel's events. However, as she states: 'If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book' (p. 360). Briony is still searching for a kind of emotional and aesthetic truth in her narrative, one that transcends mere facts. It is this impulse that persuades her to provide a wholeness to the story in the coming together of Cecilia and Robbie as the desired conclusion to a love story. The alternative circumstances she hints at, that 'Robbie Turner died of septacemia at Bray Dunes [and . . .] Cecilia was killed [. . .] by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground' (p. 370) is too painful to write. The novel, then, asserts that the redemptive power of fiction allows it a certain licence with the truth, if the consequence of that licence is to produce a life-enhancing work. As Briony explains, 'Who would want to believe that they never met again?' (p. 371). The assertion towards the end of Part Three that, 'it was fixed in the unchangeable past' may not be corroborated by the epilogue, but it supplies an emotional truth that allows Briony to come to terms with her guilt (p. 348). It is in the fixing of the romantic story that the past gains a crystallization that is not available in real life.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Traditional notions of history have been challenged by post-modern and poststructuralist theory. This has resulted in the pluralization of historical accounts, a focus on the inevitable bias of the agent constructing any historical text, and the role of language in writing about the past.
- An interest in the histories or 'genealogies' of previously marginalized communities and experience has shown how history is related to power relationships between people(s).

- Graham Swift is particularly concerned with the different ways of recounting the past, and in the relationship between social and political history and hidden personal and family narratives.
- *Possession* explores the relationship between nineteenth century and contemporary Britain in terms of the cultural forces acting upon individuals from both periods. Byatt frames this exploration in a self-conscious engagement with the genre of romance fiction.
- Ian McEwan is concerned with how writing transforms 'real' experience and the way in which a particularly romanticized view of the world can be both dangerous and soothing.

NOTES

1. Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Picador, [1983] 1984), p. 124.
2. Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 19.
3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 18.
4. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 110.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
6. Hayden White, 'Introduction to Metahistory', in *Literature in the Modern World*, 2nd edn, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 444–9.
7. Beryl Bainbridge, *Young Adolf* (London: Duckworth, 1978); Julian Barnes, *Arthur and George* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).
8. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 16–31.
9. Daniel Lea, *Graham Swift* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 76.
10. Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, [1984] 1992), p. 7. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
11. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism', trans. Régis Durand, in *The Postmodern*

- Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, [1979] 1984), pp. 71–82, p. 78.
12. Ibid., p. 81.
 13. Lea, *Graham Swift*, p. 82.
 14. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, ed. Anthony Grafton, trans. David Marsh (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1725] 2000).
 15. A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 56. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
 16. Katharine Tarbox, 'Desire for Syzygy in the Novels of A. S. Byatt', in *The Contemporary British Novel since 1980*, ed. James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 177–88, p. 177.
 17. Quoted in Peter Childs (ed.), *The Fiction of Ian McEwan: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p. 131.
 18. Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, [2001] 2002), p. 311. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
 19. She also decides on Connolly's advice to change the vase from being Ming, although she chooses Meissen rather than Sevres or Nymphenburg as Connolly suggests as alternatives (p. 24, p. 313).
 20. Brian Finney, 'Ian McEwan: *Atonement*', in *English Fiction Since 1984: Narrating a Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p. 93.
 21. The metafictional conundrum the novel sets up means that it can never be known whether this instruction was really made by Robbie or Briony has projected it on to him.