

WAR AND PEACE IN IAN MCEWAN'S ATONEMENT

DR. CATHERINE BROWN

Atonement literally means at-one-ment – making two things which were formerly separated, at one with each other. It's a rare, formal word, of ecclesiastical resonance – and a big, solid word, which rhymes with stone, as though turning the novel into a lasting monument of Robbie's innocence. Yet the novel *isn't* an atonement of Briony's guilt, as she herself confesses. For the duration of writing the novel McEwan's working title was *An Atonement*, but a friend convinced him to drop the article. 'An', despite being the indefinite article, nonetheless refers to a particular case, whereas the absence of any article at all renders it an abstract concept, and does not assert that an actual example of it has been achieved. This is a novel, then, which explores the concept of atonement, without itself necessarily constituting one.

It's a good title – but as I read the novel I couldn't help thinking of the title of a different novel (albeit mistranslated from Russian into English) which would also have worked as well: *War and Peace*. That title would have underlined one of the most puzzling questions which the novel raises: what is the relationship between the first and last sections, which are set in peacetime England, and the central two sections, which are set in war?

War and peace is one of several binary opposition around which the novel is organized: guilt and innocence, childhood and adulthood, misery and happiness, imagination and fact, ignorance and knowledge, literature and medicine, art and life. Each of these binaries illuminates all of the others, but war and peace is as good as any to start with. And, as with the other binaries, there isn't as sharp a distinction between the two parts as at first appears.

Reading the book for the first time without having seen the film or been told the plot, the beginning of Part Two, which recounts the retreat to Dunkirk, comes as a shock. The taboo word of Part One is 'cunt', which is admittedly strong taboo – but it is Robbie's, not the narrator's, word, and it gets a lot of attention. Its use is one of the factors which drives the plot. On the second page of Part Two we find the word

‘crap’. After catching sight of a boy’s leg in a tree, Robbie has to ‘get ahead, out of sight, so that he could throw up, or crap, he didn’t know which.’ (192) ‘Crap’ is less strong than ‘cunt’ – but here it is used casually, and receives no attention. Suddenly we are in a time and place which has no time for social niceties. There is a glut of obscenity and horror, which makes the events of the summer’s day in 1935 appear trivial in comparison.

And yet, on a second reading of the novel, we realize the extent to which the war was portended in the first part. Jack Tallis is involved in the Ministry in the preparations for war. Marshall is banking on the war, and makes a huge profit from it when it comes. The First World War, commonly understood as having led to the Second, is remembered in the vase given to Briony’s Uncle as a reward for valour in the French trenches. Witnessing the breaking of this vase is one factor in Briony’s accusation of Robbie, without which he would probably have enlisted as an officer and therefore might not have died. Had Robbie not gone to prison, Cecelia would not have broken off contact with her family, and might not have lived in London near the tube station in which she dies. During her walk in St James’s park, Briony thinks that ‘now she understood how the war might compound her crime.’

In Britain there was a half-way stage between peace and war, which was called the ‘Phony war’. It was the period between the declaration of war in September 1939, and the Battle of Britain which happened soon after the retreat from Dunkirk in the summer of 1940. The account of Briony’s nursing is of this period, which explains why when she and Fiona walk in St James’s park, ‘Children who seemed to have escaped evacuation ran about on the grass [...] It was hard to believe that barely a hundred miles away was a military disaster’. But it is during this walk that the war comes to London. Indeed, the part of the Second World War which McEwan chooses to focus on in *Atonement* is precisely the retreat, when the war came home to Britain. Indirectly, through the billeting of evacuees, the war even comes home to the Tallises. Their fountain, and vase – both connected with the inception of a private tragedy – are broken, indirectly, by the war. Cecelia’s room in London reflects the war in the pale vertical stripes of its wallpaper which rhyme with pattern of the pyjamas clothing the leg which Robbie finds in a tree – the novel’s most powerful indicator of war’s horror.

The war also leaves its mark on the novel's post-war world. The last section starts not at Briony's flat in Regent's Park, nor at Tallis Towers, but at London's Imperial War Museum, to which the Marshalls have just given a donation, and where McEwan did much of his research for the novel. On her way there in the taxi, Briony sees the tower block which replaced St Thomas's Hospital, which 'took a clobbering' during the Blitz. The war, then, is not confined to the central sections: it is present throughout the novel. A phenomenon which seems to split the novel in two, in fact unifies it. But it also serves other functions.

Throughout the novel, 'war' is presented as opposed to literature. When Briony is at the beginning of her nursing training, she doesn't read much news, but writes in her notebooks instead. What she writes are not factual accounts, but distorting, fictionalizing accounts of her daily life. Then one day she happens to clear away a newspaper, and sees a sentence about the retreat from Dunkirk. 'Perhaps she was the last person in the hospital to understand what was happening. [...] Now she saw how the separate news items might connect, and understood what everyone else must know and what the hospital administration was planning for.' In other words, her devotion to literary creation and imagination is directly implicated in her ignorance of the war. The war archetypally represents the real – not only because the kind of painful experiences to which it gives rise have great solidity, nor only because such experiences disrupt the leisure which is necessary to the creation of fiction, but because the Second World War, and the retreat of the British army from Dunkirk, actually happened – whereas the assault of a sixteen year old girl called Lola in 1935 did not. The war not only *is* the truth, but Briony's experience of it brings home to her the truth of what happened on that night in 1935, and of the implications of her accusation of Robbie. Her first urgent work as a nurse is to bear half the weight of a dying man; this is also a metaphor for the burden of guilt which she assumes around the same time. Cyril Connolly, an important publisher and editor of the 1940s, tells Briony not to worry about writing about the war, claiming that artists are 'wise and right to ignore it and devote themselves to other subjects. [...] Your work, your war work, is to cultivate your talent, and go in the direction it demands. Warfare, as we remarked, is the enemy of creative activity.' The novel agrees with the last point – but suggests that in fact this may be a good thing.

For this reason, war is allied to medicine – a profession on which it makes considerable demands - and ‘literature’ and ‘medicine’ form another of the novel’s binaries. Robbie and Cecelia take degrees in English literature, as did McEwan, but both of them then turn to medicine; he in his ambition to become a doctor, she in becoming a nurse. They both have Gray’s *Anatomy* (a standard anatomical textbook in England) in their rooms alongside their books of poetry, and for both of them the *Anatomy* eventually assumes greater importance. The practice of medicine relies on the empirical observation of data such as a patient’s symptoms, and therefore privileges sense perception over speculation. Unfounded speculation is as dangerous in medicine as in a legal case – and such speculations cause great harm in the novel. They include Robbie having assaulted Lola, Danny Hardman having assaulted Lola, Briony having been in love with Robbie, and the RAF clerk having been responsible for the failure of British air support in northern France. The retreat from Dunkirk being orderly and glorious is a myth embedded deeply in British post-war culture, which flourishes on ignorance of the facts of the case. One of this novel’s purposes is to present those facts, based as closely as possible on documentary evidence, and so to disabuse its British readership of a fantasy, just as Briony is disabused of hers.

Nonetheless, Briony does not give up her writing for a lifetime of nursing. There is a moment ‘when she saw what nursing might be [...] She could imagine how she might abandon her ambitions of writing and dedicate her life in return for these moments of elated, generalized love’, but this ‘imagining’ is itself a delusion. On the contrary, imagination can itself be used in the service of reality - particularly in the communication of emotional truth. Cecelia and Robbie communicate their feelings to one another using references to literature in their letters, in order successfully to evade the prison censor. Briony Tallis was not actually *in* France with Robbie, and therefore possesses only the evidence of Nettle, and Robbie and Cecelia’s letters to one another, as a basis for the second section of the novel – but she uses her imagination to fill in missing details in as realistic a manner as possible, to communicate as far as possible the reality of the retreat to Dunkirk. This section of the novel is therefore a form of novelized biography of the order of Solzhenitsyn’s *Lenin in Zurich*, which uses all of the available evidence about Lenin during this period as a basis for extrapolating probable but unknowable detail. The aim of such a technique is to communicate the

reality of Levin's lived experience, in a manner as far as possible within the spirit of the facts.

Literature can also comment on the reality which it describes through its patterning. For example, the reader of *Atonement* is meant to notice that the Neoclassical church in which Lola and Marshall are married resembles the fake-Neoclassical temple next to which Lola has been assaulted by Marshall six years earlier. The proper names of the characters are meaningful (this reveals the novel as novelistic, even before Briony reveals the extent to which it is her own fiction): 'Briony' and 'Cecelia' 'Tallis' are archetypical upper-class names of the period; when Robbie is delirious and close to death, he perceives that 'His sugared almond tasted of her [Briony's] name which seemed so quaintly improbable that he wondered if he had remembered it correctly. Cecelia's too. Had he always taken for granted the strangeness of these names?'. 'Robbie Turner' is equally archetypal as a working-class name; 'Jack', Mr Tallis's name, belongs in the epithet 'Jack the lad' (a womanizer or wide-boy); 'Sister Drummond's' name reflects the fact that she drums discipline into her charges; 'Airman Young' is immature enough to swear out loud whilst he is being treated.

The novel is also alive with echoes of other literature in relation to which it situates itself, and which amplify its meaning. As the publisher to whom Briony sends her draft notes, the early section of the novel recalls Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. There are also echoes of *Jude the Obscure* (in Robbie's attempt to enter the class above him), *The Go-Between* (a young person troubled by the sexuality of older people), *Lolita* (sexuality across an age-gap), *Howard's End* (sexuality across a class-gap), *A Passage to India* (sexuality in an assault of doubtful facticity), and *Northanger Abbey* (a young girl making lurid interpretations of incomprehensible details around her in a country house; McEwan recalls that '*Northanger Abbey* was on my mind' during the planning of the novel).

Literature is also good at dealing with uncertainty. *Atonement*, even by its end, does not make it clear whether Lola was raped or just sexually assaulted, nor whether Lola knows that her assaulter was Marshall, nor whether it was Marshall who assaulted her in the house earlier that day. Literature can reflect and reflect upon the opacity of life, whereas doctors and lawyers can only confront and bemoan it. Another imponderable

of the novel is precisely how Briony intends it to be published. The reader can only assume that it is not how *Atonement* is itself published. Briony may well have intended it to have an introduction which explained its relationship to reality. *Atonement* was published in 2001. We are not asked to believe that Briony Tallis died in 2000 and wished her novel to appear in the following year under the decoy name 'Ian McEwan', with plaudits for McEwan's artistry in the back-cover blurb. At the level of the novel's presentation the connection between literature and reality again breaks down. Yet it is a break-down which is fully acknowledged in the novel itself. Whilst writing it, Briony asks herself whether a real sin can be atoned for in fiction. She comes to the conclusion that it cannot; all that she can do is to make the attempt. The relatively happy ending which she constructs for Robbie and Cecelia makes no difference to them themselves. Nor, in the end, does it make any difference to the reader. Having avoided 'the bleakest realism' in the novel's central sections, she exposes them as fiction in her last section, and thereby makes the lovers' deaths even more shocking. Has Briony therefore not only failed to atone for her crime, but committed a further indecency, in writing her novel? Or is that indecency exceeded by that of McEwan in playing a trick on the reader for most of the novel? If so, is that because McEwan's misdeeds are 'real' whereas those of Briony – even if greater in magnitude – are not real at all? The fact that there is no easy answer to this question indicates the extent to which art and life are mutually implicated. This is generally true, but this novel makes it explicit, and this is the justification both of Briony's career as a novelist rather than a nurse, and that of Ian McEwan.