

Section I

Text and Context

Chapter 1

Realism, modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism

Atonement was published in 2001: almost at the turn of the millennium, untroubled by the upheaval that was created later that year by the 9/11 attacks that made their way into one of Ian McEwan's subsequent novels, *Saturday*. The 2005 novel set in London starts with the overall sense of fear initiated by the 2001 terrorist attacks. Considered in relation to 9/11 as historic marker, *Atonement* seems to belong to the end of an era rather than to the beginning of a new one. In many ways, it comes at the end of, and goes beyond the end of the postmodern episteme that in diverse degrees has characterised much of the fiction of the end of the twentieth century. Besides, the character of Briony as novelist in the making offers an overview of the changes that came over the novel in the course of the twentieth century.

Art and literature overall evolve in relation to past or existing trends and the British contemporary novel is no exception to this. Throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries the novel developed along the lines of realism, aiming to give a representation of life that feels as authentic as possible. Indeed, for Henry James, "the only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life" in "The Art of Fiction" (1888). One may also quote George Eliot's narrator in *Adam Bede* who declares her task is to "give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (qtd in Bradford 4).

This desire to mirror the real was marked by changes in writing, notably in the depiction of characters. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt thus explains that eighteenth-century novelists like Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson no longer introduced types but developed the psychological traits of characters whom they individualised by not giving them a historical or generic name and by trying to make them speak according to their social status. Such is the case of Richardson's *Clarissa* which Cecilia is reading in the first part of *Atonement*. Coincidence gave way to causality. Novelists gave a detailed presentation of the characters' environment. The plot was anchored in precise time and space. Victorian novels tend to be generally seen as the embodiment of the realist trend now associated with tradition. Often resorting to omniscience for their depictions, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Elisabeth Gaskell offer extensive portraits of society in their works. In a realist text, the reader is offered ordinary, so that he/she is invited to consider the fictional world in the same light as his/her own. Roland Barthes and the structuralists in the 1960s later exposed realism as an illusion, a mere set of conventions but this mode of writing had been challenged earlier by a new generation of writers.

At the turn of the twentieth century, modernists looked for and experimented with different ways to represent the real. First, they refused to turn the real into a neat arrangement and favoured instead impressionism and discontinuity. In Virginia Woolf's words in "Modern Fiction" in 1925:

The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel [...]. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?

Second, the depiction of the social environment and of social issues faded behind a focus on the individual and his or her experience. Third, as would-be novelist Briony considers doing in the first part of *Atonement*, modernist writers rejected usual practices, notably the overbearing Victorian omniscient narrator and developed new narrative strategies that allowed for shifting points of view.

Indeed, in modernist fiction, the life of the mind prevails over the storyline that tends to be rather limited. See for instance, “Eveline” in Joyce’s *Dubliners* or Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* that mostly follows the thoughts of two characters over a single day. The incipit to *Mrs Dalloway* illustrates this focus on the character’s thoughts:

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be coming off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach (3).

The rejection of traditional plot and character in favour of experimentation is a hallmark of modernism that appears in Briony’s first draft as a young adult. Her *Two Figures by a Fountain* is criticised as missing “an underlying pull of narrative” (312) and lacking in concern for her readers who still want to be told a story (314). McEwan points the finger at the somewhat elitist dimension of modernism generated by the emphasis on form. He has a fairly negative view of some aspects of modernism that informs the criticism displayed in *Atonement*:

It was modernism that promoted the notion of the artist as a sort of severe high priest who belonged to a small elite and was not going to ever have his pages dirtied and grubbied by the hoi polloi. I think it was a nonsensical view. Writers like Virginia Woolf saying, “character is now dead,” helped push the novel down some fruitless impasses. (Lynn 153)

Modernism did not replace realism and the two trends of realism and modernism or experimentalism continued to develop separately in the twentieth century, which placed ‘the novelist at a crossroads’. According to David Lodge in his famous 1971 essay, novelists were faced with the choice between the well-trodden road of realism and the new road of experimentalism, in the footsteps of the modernists, and the solution for some was to “*build their hesitation into the novel itself*”, in what Lodge called the “problematic novel” (22).

Critics tend to agree that realism, with its concern for depicting societal and cultural changes in rather linear narratives, remained the dominant form of the two but what actually developed in the following two decades is what Lodge called “crossover fiction” in “The Novelist today: still at the crossroads” in 1992. Lodge then notices that “relatively few novelists are wholly and exclusively committed to fabulation or the non-fiction novel or metafiction. Instead they combine one or more of these modes with realism, often in a startling, deliberately disjunctive way” (9). John Barth had already advocated this hybridity in “The Literature of Replenishment” in 1980:

A worthy programme for postmodernist fiction, I believe, is the synthesis and transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed as modernist and premodernist modes of writing. My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents (70).

Philip Tew, looking back on British writing emerging from the mid-1970s, confirms that it is characterised by “creative hybridity” (Tew 2007, 1). Barth’s definition of postmodernism in fiction is a simple one for “a tricky concept” (Bentley 31), “an increasingly vexed issue” (Tew 2007, 20) that is also a key one for the contemporary novel. Postmodernism implies a reconsideration of the real. Jean-François Lyotard’s understanding of the ‘postmodern’ as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Bentley 32) was highly influential in novels that set about to challenge official versions of history. Poststructuralist thought was very influential too, pointing out that language was a self-referential system and anything but transparent:

Postmodernism gives up on language’s representational function and follows poststructuralism in the idea that language constitutes, rather than reflects the world, and that knowledge is therefore distorted by language, that is, by historical circumstances and the specific environment in which it arises (Bertens 6).

Realism thus underwent strong criticism in the 1950s and 60s: it was denounced as an artifice relying on a set of conventions. In Roland Barthes’s words, “*aucune écriture n’est plus artificielle que celle qui a prétendu dépendre au plus près la nature*”

(Tew, 2007, 95). These ideas made their way into the novel, as shown in John Fowles's famous narratorial intrusion in chapter 13 of the narrative set in 1867 in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1970):

This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word (Fowles 97).

When looking at postmodernism in Britain, it is appropriate to make a distinction between hardliners or radical postmodernist writers like Christine Brooke-Rose and B. S. Johnson who moved away from narrative and "mainstream postmodernists" – among whom Ian McEwan might rank –, "who have chosen to incorporate experimental techniques in their novels without jettisoning realism" (Gasiorek 199).

Readers tend to be blind to the conventions of realism as "Realism offers itself as transparent" (Belsey 51). Indeed, realism tends to promote make believe and to play on the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief". Postmodernist novelists, on the other hand, unmask and point to realist conventions while still sometimes using them. Having lost originality as its aim, postmodernist fiction self-consciously rewrites or transposes stories through intertextuality, pastiche or parody – elements that foreground a link with past texts without subservience. Postmodern novels feature a certain amount of playfulness in the way they engage with their reader who is invited to participate in the reconstitution of the narrative or de-construction of masternarratives.

Metafiction features largely in postmodern narratives in order to expose fiction as a construction. Metafiction, as defined by Patricia Waugh in 1984, refers to "fictional writing which consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). *Atonement* owes its metafictional dimension to the novelist-character

and to the metanarrative placed at the end. Other postmodern techniques that challenge the realist claim to a seamless description of the real include “the disruption of the linear flow of narratives and the relationship between cause and effect; challenging the authority of the author; the use of events and characters drawn from fantasy; self-reflexively drawing attention to the language that is being used to construct the fiction; the use of parody and pastiche, and more generally a scepticism towards fixed ideologies and philosophies” (Bentley 34). As will be pointed out later, a number of postmodernist novels like Graham Swift's *Waterland* and Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* thus evince a concern for historiography, history and its representation.

Critics have been pronouncing the demise of postmodernism for a while now. “The postmodern moment has passed” (181) writes Linda Hutcheon in the epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism* in 2002. This translates as yet into another approach – that some call “post-postmodernism” (Jeffrey Nealon) in the early twenty-first century. Looking at twenty-first century fiction, Peter Boxall notices an attempt to grasp the texture of the contemporary real, “a new attention to the nature of our reality” that leads to the emergence of new kinds of realism (10-11). In their introduction to *The 2000s*, Bentley, Hubble and Wilson distinguish three strands in fiction writing that mirror the interrogation regarding postmodernism:

novelists who continue to use narrative techniques associated with postmodernism but who have reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions; those who have attempted to return (or continue) to work in a broadly realist mode as an implicit rejection of postmodernism; and those who have self-consciously returned to modernist techniques as a way to return to a pre-postmodernist aesthetics (17).

As the authors themselves acknowledge, these categories may of course overlap and Ian McEwan for one certainly encompasses the first and the third category. Indeed, *Atonement* has a metafictional dimension which is used to reflect both on modernist modes of writing and on ethical questions.

With its depiction of the Dunkirk evacuation and of wartime London following pre-war superficial tranquillity, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* takes part in the major revival of history observable in the novel since the 1980s and 1990s. It can be

noted that, when shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize, McEwan's novel was beaten by Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* that revisited the colonial past through the life of Australian bushranger Ned Kelly. A major trend, if not *the* major trend, in the British novel at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, is indeed the return to the past to the extent that "it has been argued that this historical turn has spread from its experimental beginnings to colonize the mainstream novel" (Wilson 145). This remarkable revival in historical fiction is visible in the creation of the Walter Scott Prize in 2009 for a type of fiction that is critically recognised and commercially successful, regularly adapted for the screen as McEwan's *Atonement* was by Joe Wright in 2007 or, more recently, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) by the BBC in 2015. In Leigh Wilson's words, historical fiction now "wins literary prizes, is the primary choice of book clubs, dominates bestseller lists and is snapped up for film and TV adaptations" (145).

This return is all the more remarkable as the genre was "eschewed by most of the modernists, and when practiced, always parodied" (Wilson 145). Parodying James Joyce, Malcolm Bradbury sums up: "In the Twenties History was a fool that knew nothing, a nightmare from which the artist was trying to awake" (210). In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), the history of Great Britain is the mere backdrop to the eponymous character's adventures over the centuries. In her *Between the Acts* (1941), the past comes to the characters in the form of a play, foregrounding the distance between the two.

The return to the past as a main concern in British fiction can be dated from the 1980s. This return may be achieved through straightforward historical novels but very often it is akin to Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, that is, fiction which is both historical and self-reflexive.

This re-introduction of history in fiction was originally marked by "experimentalism" when historiographic metafiction put forward and illustrated historian Hayden White's idea that the historian selects, organises facts and turns them into a narrative in the same way as a novelist does. The writing of the documents considered as authentic is in fact marked by time and ideology, and the reading and putting together of facts into a narrative is the same as fiction, the past is a textual narrative that can be deconstructed and questioned. We only access the past via its textual remains that are narratives first and foremost and

subject to the same rules as the writing of fiction. Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* shows a narrator confronting his own writing of somebody else's past. In *Atonement*, Briony believes that her narrative of the past will remain as the past. The past often returns shrouded with doubt, not a given but the object of a quest by characters in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Graham Swift's *Waterland* and *Ever After* (1992), A. S. Byatt's *Possession, a Romance* (1990). The inclusion of history in fiction is self-reflexive. A novel like A. S. Byatt's *Possession, a Romance* (1990) foregrounds the textuality of history by including excerpts from diaries, biographies, letters, i.e. factual documents that are, in some cases, revealed to be the objects of a construction by its fictional author. Similarly, in *Atonement*, the past is not independent nor neutral but the object of a reconstruction which the reader is invited to take part in (especially in Part One) or is told about, as in the last part that purports, to a certain extent, to separate what is true from what is invented.

Some of these novels may focus on more disturbing moments in the past, recent or not, including colonialism and its legacies. Rather than the usual ordinary characters, historiographic metafiction focuses on what Hutcheon calls the "ex-centrics", the stifled or forgotten voices of history like women, ethnic groups and homosexuals. For instance, Sarah Waters's neoVictorian trilogy centers on lesbian heroines. McEwan's pages on nursing and nurses during World War II in *Atonement* can be read in this light: in his own words, "The home front is a small subsection, and of this, nursing is a negligible fraction. Surely, historians have neglected their duty." (McEwan "An inspiration")

With time, the return to history that took place in historiographic metafiction may have lost its edge and become less experimental as it became more mainstream. What at least remains in "neo-historical fiction" (Rousselot) is a form of questioning that often emphasises the process of construction in order to challenge a monolithic view of the past. Moreover, in Rousselot's words, "Although set in the past, neo-historical fiction is [...] very much aimed at answering the needs and preoccupations of the present" (5). With a 77-year-old writer painstakingly writing up the past, *Atonement* literally enacts the permanence of the past in the present. Finally, some periods feature prominently, among which the predominating Victorian era, the Edwardian period up to the First World War and the Second World War which features in *Atonement*. The Dunkirk retreat or