

WRITING AS REPARATION: BIOGRAPHICAL TRAUMA WRITING IN IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze biographical trauma writing in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). In this novel, the narrator and protagonist Briony Tallis decides to become a nurse during The Second World War, as some kind of personal penance. Her auto fictional writing, nonetheless, reveals a possibility to repair her past trauma. The text addresses, more remarkably, the therapeutic properties of autobiographical fiction writing, having as references current assumptions both on trauma theory and life-writing.

KEYWORDS: Women writing of war trauma, Life-writing, Trauma theory, Literature and psychoanalysis, Battle of Dunkirk

A ESCRITA COMO REPARAÇÃO: A ESCRITA BIOGRÁFICA DO TRAUMA EM REPARAÇÃO, DE IAN MC EWAN

RESUMO

Este artigo busca analisar a escrita biográfica do trauma no romance *Reparação* (2001), de Ian Mc Ewan. Nessa obra, a narradora e protagonista Briony Tallis decide tornar-se enfermeira, durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial, como uma espécie de penitência pessoal. Através de sua escrita auto ficcional, entretanto, advém uma possibilidade de reparar seu trauma do passado. O texto aborda, mais especificamente, as propriedades terapêuticas da escrita biográfica do trauma, à luz de pressupostos da teoria do trauma e de narrativas de vida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Escrita feminina do trauma de guerra, Narrativas de vida, Teoria do trauma, Literatura e psicanálise, Batalha de Dunkerque

INTRODUCTION

What is possibly known as Ian McEwan's masterpiece, *Atonement*, written in 2001, has ever since been the study object of creative writing courses in several countries. In these matters, its narrative inventiveness (oscillating from narration in first to third persons) merits emphasis, as well as the author's sagacity in creating characters that live complex life dramas. Many are the critics who compare the English author's style to that of Ernest Hemingway, known for his short, often minimalist phrases, invested with poetic density and endowed of rigorous lexical choices. However, a third, and equally ingenious, aspect of this narrative has been the least studied: the ability of writing so as to scrutinize deep emotions and its therapeutic value to the traumatized subject

who tells his/her life story. The purpose of this article is to analyze such attributes, with emphasis on doing justice to the latter aspect.

The novel is divided into four parts and such fragmentary feature is quite significant, having in mind that it is the narrative of a traumatic event. The first part is fully narrated in the third person. The story is set on the wealthy estate of the Tallis family in Surrey (Greater London) on a hot summer day in 1935, shortly before the outbreak of the Second War. Briony Tallis, the protagonist of the given part and the narrator of the subsequent sections, is then 13 years old. She's the youngest daughter of a wealthy family; a teenage girl who possesses a lot of curiosity and imagination, as well as an early talent as a writer. Briony performs the plays she writes for her family, and from such peculiar behavior one can think of the motivations that would lead to the performativity of her adult writing.

The play, at that moment, portrays the trajectory of the character Arabella, constructed in a fictional way and, at the same time, biographically inspired in Briony. The identification between the author and her protagonist becomes increasingly prominent throughout the narrative. Also described in Part I is Briony's older sister, Cecilia, who is in love with Robbie Turner, the son of the family maid. He lives with his mother in a small house set up inside the Tallis property. Robbie is described as an intelligent boy, one of great character and who attends Medical School in Cambridge thanks to the financial aid dispensed by Cecilia's father.

In fact, the two sisters are in love with Robbie, though Briony nurtures a platonic love for him, whereas Cecilia is the only one who has her love returned. It may be observed, albeit undeclared in the narrative, that both sisters contend for Robbie's love. Two events trigger Briony's disaffection towards Robbie, though: the first is when Turner, who is in love with Cecilia, sends her a note containing an erotic message through Briony. The young writer, endowed with both curiosity and imagination, cannot resist the urge to open the envelope and read the lines, which makes her deeply upset. The second event happens at a given day as Briony enters the library and witnesses a scene of physical love between Cecilia and Robbie. Given the intensity of witnessing the primeval scene, and raptured by *Urphantasiën*¹ evoked by the coitus scene, her first reaction is to think that Robbie is attacking his sister. In

¹ On this Freudian concept, Laplanche and Pontalis clarify that "From an early age Freud sought to discover real archaic events capable of providing the ultimate foundation of neurotic symptoms. He ascribes the expression "original scenes" (*Urszenen*) to these real, traumatic events, whose memory is sometimes worked through and disguised by fantasies. Among them, one will retain in the psychoanalytic language the name of *Urszene*: the scene of parental intercourse, to which the child would have attended. It should be noted that these primitive events are called the *scenes*, and that Freud aims at first to identify among them the typical scenarios and in limited numbers" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2008: 174 – my translation).

her vision as a desiring child, she thinks there is a sort of bodily struggle between them. Later, Briony's disaffection would be displaced towards the fantasy that he had sexually abused of her cousin Lola. Indeed, Briony's disaffection and sadism for Robbie compel her to formally accuse him of assaulting her Scottish cousin and file a claim against him to the police. As a result, Robbie is arrested in November 1935.

ALL IS FAIR IN LOVE – AND WAR?

The second part of *Atonement's* narrative is defined by the impact of Cecilia's words as she said goodbye to her beloved, before he was seized by police officers: "I will wait for you. Come back." (McEwan, 2002: 212). Cecilia had possibly foreseen that the apparent simplicity of the farewell phrase would later work for Robbie as the only words of hope that would keep him alive.

From prison, Robbie goes to war in an attempt to relieve his sorrow and become a free man some day, when he would meet Cecilia again and stay with her forever. He serves the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) as a soldier during the Battle of Dunkirk (1940), also known as Operation Dynamo. After being trapped by a German *panzer* division, over three hundred thousand Allied soldiers (among them British and French men) were near-miraculously rescued by a fleet of merchant marine boats, along the English Channel, the canal that separates England from France, in a short span of ten days.

War represents, to Robbie, an opportunity to "wipe clean" his past and to be able to begin a future with Cecilia. The war would turn out to bring his "reparation," even though he was an innocent man in the first place. Similarly, years later, Briony would refuse to go to Cambridge University and decide to become a voluntary war nurse, as some kind of personal penance. It may be noted that both Briony and Robbie's "reparations," albeit motivated by different causes, had in common the view of war as a sacrifice ground. War represents, to both characters, the possibility of atonement required in order to obtain a better future, thus freeing them from the heavy burden of guilt they carry.

In France, Robbie begins a long walk towards the sea (that is, towards the English Channel), in order to be able to take a vessel that would carry him, alongside with his companions (cables Mace and Nettle), back to England. Robbie is obstinate in reaching the coast and ignores the wounds that afflict him. Disheartened and consumed with hallucinations, he recalls Briony's story - when, back in childhood, she threw herself into the river, simulating she was getting drowned so he would dive in the lake to save her. At that moment she had declared her love for him. Equally present in Robbie's memory are Cecilia's farewell words, as follows:

Arithmetic be damned. *I'll wait for you* was elemental. It was the reason he had survived. It was the ordinary way of saying she would refuse all other men. Only you. Come back.

He remembered the feel of the gravel through his thin-soled shoes, he could feel it now, and the icy touch of the handcuffs on his wrists. He and the inspector stopped by the car and turned at the sound of her steps. How could he forget that green dress, how it clung to the curve of her hips and hampered her running and showed the beauty of her shoulders. Whiter than the mist. It didn't surprise him that the police let them talk. He didn't even think about it. He and Cecilia behaved as though they were alone. She would not let herself cry when she was telling him that she believed him, she trusted him, she loved him. He said to her simply that he would not forget this, by which he meant to tell her how grateful he was, especially then, especially now. Then she put a finger on the handcuffs and said she wasn't ashamed, there was nothing to be ashamed of. She took a corner of his lapel and gave it a little shake and this was when she said, "I'll wait for you. Come back." (McEwan, 2001: 340)

It should be noted that, to a soldier, whose life was in constantly vulnerable and near-death conditions, those words represented so much more than an ordinary "I love you". To Robbie, the greatest proof of love was to think Cecilia would be waiting for him.

Part III, albeit fully in the third person, ends with the signature of Briony Tallis' initials, dated from 1999, in London. It presents descriptions of Briony's arduous routine work as an intern nurse at a military hospital - attending wounded soldiers during the war, neatly clearing the ward and having to put up with her head nurse's strict orders.

Every day, at the end of her long work journey, Briony writes in her diary, as elucidated in the following passage:

She began her journal at the end of the first day of preliminary training, and managed at least ten minutes most nights before lights-out. Her entries consisted of artistic manifestos, trivial complaints, character sketches and simple accounts of her day which increasingly shaded off into fantasy. She rarely read back over what she had written, but she liked to flip the filled pages. Here, behind the name badge and uniform, was her true self, secretly hoarded, quietly accumulating. She had never lost that childhood pleasure in seeing pages covered in her own handwriting, it almost didn't matter what she wrote. Since the drawer did not lock, she was careful to disguise her descriptions of Sister Drummond. She changed the names, it became easier to transform the circumstances and invent. She liked to write out what she imagined to be their rambling thoughts. She was under no obligation to the truth, she had promised no one a chronicle. This was the only place she could be free. (McEwan, 2001: 359-360)

It may be also seen, in the following passage, that Briony exposes her strong sense of guilt over the harm she inflicted on Robbie and her sister Cecilia. The form of "reparation," which Briony imposed upon herself in the form of punitive nursing, was no longer enough, as follows:

On this first really fine day of May she sweated under her starched uniform. All she wanted to do was work, then bathe and sleep until it was time to work again. But it was all useless, she knew. Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination in tutorial she had relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college lawn, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgiveable. (McEwan, 2001: 367)

It is interesting to note that both in Robbie's choice to be a soldier and Briony's in becoming a nurse, the two professions demand a high price to be paid through the punishment they impose on themselves, since such occupations bring them closer to war, hence, to the imminent risk of death.

Briony's guilt becomes more evident as she attends her cousin Lola's wedding with Paul Marshall, the same man who had molested her in real life, a few years earlier. Briony assumedly writes a letter to Cecilia, saying that she would like to render a new statement to the police, thus validating Robbie's innocence.

But any reader's expectation of having a happy outcome falls apart in the fourth and last part, entitled simply as "London 1999". It is narrated in the first person by Briony, who is then seventy-seven years old.² After discovering that she has a neurological disorder (vascular dementia), which will gradually and irreversibly weaken her memory, she decides to write her autobiography. She can only publish it, though, after everyone in the story is dead, in order to prevent the wealthy couple (Lola and Paul Marshall) from prosecuting the publisher.

REPARATIONS AND REPAIRS

In the final part, or what is seemingly the Afterword, it is revealed to readers that Robbie Turner died of septicemia in Bray Dunes on June 1, 1940, a few days before the end of the battle of Dunkirk, also referred to as Dunkirk Evacuation, or Operation Dynamo. And that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham underground station³ - and that she never saw the two of them that year. Briony also announces that the letters exchanged by the two lovers are now in the archives of the Imperial War Museum library, in London.

The reasons that led her to revise her auto fictional work are finally disclosed. She states that:

No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous,

² That is due to Briony's 77th birthday celebration, to which occasion the family gathers in the old Surrey mansion. The play she had written as a child is staged again. It is my belief that such re-enactment alludes to the Shakespearean tragedy Hamlet, in which the tormented prince decides to stage a metaplay, in order to break the harrowing silence and bring awareness to those who watch it.

³ It refers here to the German bombing of London's Balham underground station, which occurred in real life on October 14, 1940. Among the hundreds of civilians who came to this station in search of shelter, it is estimated that over sixty were killed.

fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love. The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or to be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. I've been standing at the window, feeling waves of tiredness beat the remaining strength from my body. The floor seems to be undulating beneath my feet. I've been watching the first gray light bring into view the park and the bridges over the vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness. I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration... Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible. (McEwan, 2002: 479-480)

One can see that writing represents to Briony an attempt to repair Cecilia and Robbie's love story, which had been destroyed by her childish attitude. Such a deed costs her the high price that her sister, not her, stays with Robbie in the end. "Reparation", as a religious term, evokes the idea of sacrifice, as well as that of reconciliation. But the writing works provide Briony with more than that: they emerge as a possibility of reconstructing a masochistic self, charged with guilt. Briony's redemption may come through a generous act to herself, which is only made possible through her auto fictional writing.

CONCLUSION

The therapeutic properties of auto fictional writing have been the object of discussion by the specialized critique of both life-writing and trauma theory domains. This becomes possible, for the most part, because writing allows traumatized subjects to rediscover their roles as agents of their own history.

Redemption as derived from the agency role is studied vehemently by Leigh Gilmore (2001), for example, who works more actively within both lines (trauma theory and writing of life) regarding the autobiographical question in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, insofar as this contributes to empower and invest traumatized subjects with the role of agents. She explains:

For many writers, autobiography's domain of first-person particularities and peculiarities offers an opportunity to describe their lives and their thoughts about it; to offer, in some cases, corrective readings; and to emerge through writing as an agent of self-representation, a figure, textual to be sure, but seemingly substantial, who can claim 'I was there' or 'I am here.' (Gilmore, 2001: 9)

In the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, edited by Margaretta Jolly (2001), Gilmore admits:

Insofar as trauma can be defined as that which breaks the frame, rebuilding a frame to contain it is as fraught with difficulty as it is necessary. Trauma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories, both individual and collective. Placing a personal history of trauma within a collective history compels one to consider that cultural memory, like personal memory, may also possess “recovered” or “repressed” memories. In this context, the difficult articulation of trauma entails situating a personal agony within a social and cultural context, and articulating a spreading network of connections. This implicit evocation of a sense of shared experience goes to the centre of first-person accounts, however dissident and dissonant their voices, and the value they hold for understanding and reconceiving the relations among self, trauma, and history. (Gilmore apud Jolly, 2001: 828)

It should be noted that Gilmore does not merge individual memory with the collective one, not least with individual and collective history; she admits, nonetheless, the peaceful and necessary coexistence of both instances for the sake of the working-through of traumatic experiences through writing.

In fact, it can be said that autobiography may serve as a tribute to the individuals who narrate it and, why not say, to freedom of expression itself. It is this idea that Gilmore reinforces in concluding her research on the autobiographical genre: “In autobiography, a person, solid and incontestable, testifies to having lived. An autobiography is a monument to the idea of personhood, to the notion that one could leave behind a memorial to oneself.” (Gilmore, 2001: 12-13). Autobiographical genres, mainly auto fiction, or Max Saunders’ “autobiografiction”, seem to provide a remedy that justice has not been able to render traumatized subjects with. Maybe that was what Gayatri Spivak had in mind as she postulated, “autobiography is a wound where the blood of history does not dry.” (Spivak apud Appiah, 1995: 172).

Through auto fiction, imagination comes to aid the formation of a new identity, which facilitates working through traumatic experiences. This is precisely what theorist Celia Hunt claims in *The Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, edited by Margaretta Jolly (2001). She points out, more specifically, the therapeutic value of journal writing, by stating that:

Diary writing may also function in this way, providing the locus for an internal dialogue with an absent person, who becomes the implied reader or listener. Writing here provides a safety valve, enabling the writer to objectify uncomfortable feelings, but it may also provide a way of “holding” those feelings on one’s own or jointly with the other through imagination. (Hunt apud Jolly, 2001: 691)

Here the author employs narratological concepts, not only of an implicit listener but also of an implicit reader, being that the latter acts as a kind of compassionate listener. In an even more forceful way, however, the author alludes to the dialogue with the compassionate listener and the use of imagination, which allow, besides what is mentioned as an escape valve for those who write, the forge of a new identity.

Hunt (2010) also emphatically advocates the use of autobiographical creative writing as a means of insight and therapeutic benefit, in her article "Therapeutic Effects of Writing Fictional Autobiography". The same idea is shared by theorist Paul John Eakin (2008), in his book *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Eakin points out: "the ability to deliver coherent self-narrative is often accepted as a sign of (recovered) health and normality." (Eakin, 2008: 44). According to Eakin, therapeutic benefits are made possible once writing one's life confers identity to those who do so. He explains: "when it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely about the self, but rather in some profound way a constituent part of self." (Eakin, 2008: 25)

Finally, an analogy between the act of weaving and trauma writing becomes relevant. Both are repetitive activities that require planning, creativity, and imagination. The split pieces, once joined by (significant) stitches, seem to render a new meaning, a "new look" to the outfit. When women narrate their trauma stories they do so in a circular, cyclical way, assigning signifiers to life fragments that, when united, grant her with a new identity. Briony's restorative writing appears here as the female voice who (re) composed a love story that was fragmented both by childish sadism and the atrocities of the Second World War. An amend that time, alone, would be unable to make.

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