

*Introduction*  
*The Cracks in the Vase and the Lies in the Soul*

[W]e creatively misremember [...] we try to repair something from the past when it's actually far too late – a kind of absurd, unrealistic ambition to try and put back something that fragmented a long time ago.

Kazuo Ishiguro (2001)

An eighteenth-century Meissen vase stands baking in the late afternoon sun. A young woman surveys it intently, scrutinising its surface with triumphant eyes. A few hours earlier, she had taken the vase in her arms and walked through the French doors of her home to a fountain in the grounds. On the way, she had been intercepted by a man who made her feel uncomfortable. Once childhood friends, now they were not quite strangers; and he had lingered, engaging her in small talk as they had moved closer to the basin from which she intended to fill the vase. He had taken a comment she had made the wrong way, and his retort had wounded her deeply. Perhaps it had been a desire to make amends which had prompted him to grab the vase as she had begun lowering it into the water? He had meant to be helpful. But between their forceful grasps, a section of the lip had given way, splitting into two pieces which had fallen into the basin. 'You idiot!', she had cried, chastising his clumsiness; but there had been an undeniable air of satisfaction emanating from him as he had taken in the destruction they had wrought together. She had acted first. Stripping down to her underwear before he had so much as unbuttoned his shirt, she had plunged into the fountain and retrieved the shards while he had waited, dumbstruck. Now the same heat which had parched her sopping clothes and undone the watermark left by her body on the basin edge had worked its magic on the vase also. With the pieces reassembled and the glue dried, all that remained of their foolishness were

three fine lines in the porcelain. She had done well. No one need ever know.<sup>1</sup>

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Readers might recognise the scenes summarised above. They are taken from Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement*, and together they record the impressions of Cecilia Tallis as she breaks and then promptly repairs a priceless vase one hot summer day in 1935. At their heart, we find a young woman who has grown up sheltered from violence and loss, both bored and comforted by the sense that the course taken by her life will be entirely predictable. Cecilia, indeed, senses the radical, regenerative potential of the struggle in which she finds herself engaged before the fountain, and is tempted, momentarily at least, to embrace those new existential and experiential possibilities that promise to emerge from its wreckage. Dramatic, destructive, and somewhat overdetermined, McEwan's handling of the clash between Robbie and Cecilia serves to put readers in mind of possible geopolitical equivalents to the couple's tussle – especially given the emotional and ideological questions it raises for all involved. When considered in light of the unsettling effect this confrontation shall have upon the sensibility of Cecilia's naïve younger sister, Briony, as she watches on from her nursery window, the incident can be read as a meditation on what experiencing war or conflict from either the home front (Briony) or from the midst of the fray (Cecilia) may do to the human mind, how it places new and unexpected pressures upon a person's sense of self and understanding of the world around them. In broader terms still, we might observe how attentive McEwan's war-torn novel is to the danger that violence, whether it be enacted on a micro- or macrocosmic scale, poses to traditional or long-harboured imaginative forms, especially those used to help bring a messy, contingency-driven world to order. These imperilled imaginative structures are internal and psychological, yet *Atonement* professes that they also find much needed expression both *within* and *as* works of art.

To say as much in a novel written at the close of the twentieth century was of course to say nothing new. Thanks to the growth of trauma studies in the years since 1945 and the insights of psychoanalysis (buoyed by discoveries made in the wake of two world wars), the claim that violent conflicts not only imperil the physical world but also threaten minds and

<sup>1</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2002), 22–31, 43 (29).

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mind-forged constructions is now accepted across disciplinary categories, influencing everything from post-war relief efforts and policy-making to literary criticism and historical studies. What is unusual about the early chapters of *Atonement*, however, is the claim made about the impact that this domestic skirmish actually had upon the imaginative life of the Tallis sisters. The tale McEwan tells is not the one we expect – or at least not that which, as students of twentieth-century literature and culture, we have grown accustomed to reading. Cecilia and Briony's reactions to the breaking of the vase after all not only register the threat that such incidents pose to the aesthetic, cultural, and behavioural values upheld by their class and society; they are examples of individuals who refuse, upon consideration, to succumb to it.

When we first meet Cecilia, it is as a figure in motion, running down a path with flowers in her hand and a head full of impatience at the veneer of 'timeless, unchanging calm' encasing the surrounding countryside (19). She appeals to us, in short, as ripe for the kind of transformative encounter that only love or war can provide. The damage inflicted upon the Meissen vase does initiate something of the change we long for: yielding momentarily to the impulsiveness for which she will later become renowned, Cecilia strips down to her underwear in broad daylight before a man for whom she harbours a passion. McEwan does not, however, have this well-to-do young woman run headlong into the arms of the working-class Robbie Turner, a man who sends poems to *The Criterion* and has flirted with Bolshevism – '[n]ot quite, not yet' (372). As she walked to the fountain, Cecilia had been reflecting not only on her own tiresome lot, but upon the backstory of the heirloom in her hand. The vase had been given to her Uncle Clem for gallantry during the Great War, and yet had managed, unlike the man himself, to 'surviv[e]' the horrors of the Western Front intact (24). Surveying the newly maimed object, Cecilia had sensed 'all the years backed up behind' the recent history of her uncle's ownership, stretching 'back to the genius of Horoldt, and behind him to the mastery of the arcanists who had re-invented porcelain' (29). And it is this great uninterrupted tradition, or at least the illusion of its persistence through and beyond times of war, that McEwan's heroine cannot bear to have broken – or indeed, *to have broken with*. The currents of modernity might have swept Cecilia towards Robbie and the vase towards its impending destruction; but something else, a powerful network of instincts and learned behaviours, had drawn her back into the house to reassemble the shards.

Watching the confrontation between Robbie and Cecilia from her nursery window similarly might have turned the budding authoress Briony Tallis into a latter-day Virginia Woolf. From childhood, this thirteen-year-old had been enamoured with traditional literary forms and storied histories, especially those which dispensed moral judgement and imposed order through the mechanisms of conventional plots (7). The shock provided by both her sister's exposed flesh and those terrifying sexual feelings she rightly perceives in Robbie does lead Briony briefly to acknowledge some hard-won truths. She intuits that human psychology and the business of being conscious are tricky, complex things; other people's minds are bafflingly separate, as alive to the world as our own and yet apt on occasion to take even the keenest observer of their idiosyncrasies by surprise. An immediate consequence of this newly acquired insight is the momentary overwhelming of Briony's mind by a vision of a new, impressionistic kind of novel:

She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. (40)

Unlike his young heroine, however, McEwan's interest is not in the motivations behind the adoption of high modernist experimentation, but in the ends to which someone who desires to have the world 'just so' might go to avoid yielding to the state of brokenness with which she suspects that kind of artistic and intellectual commitment might be synonymous (7). Instead of allowing herself to be derailed by what she sees from the window, the young Briony elects to revert to form (in both senses of the phrase). In the hours that follow, she will incorporate the same violent and bewildering events which had exposed the limitations of her faith in heroes, villains, and just deserts into that very representative scheme. This has especially disastrous consequences for Robbie, who is imprisoned for rape on the strength of Briony's fabricated testimony.

The thirteen-year-old Briony had held her convictions about art, morality, and human behaviour together beyond their long-overdue shattering through a combination of imagination, self-serving fictions, and downright lies. Yet by the end of the novel, we discover that the adult Briony has been guilty of similar falsehoods when reconstructing the story of her war-ravaged past. *Atonement* concludes with an epilogue, set in 1999, where

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we learn that what we have just read is a draft of a semi-autobiographical novel penned by Briony near the end of her life. Robbie and Cecilia never lived together as we had been led to believe, for both had died in 1940: Robbie during the evacuation from Dunkirk and Cecilia in the Blitz (370). Unable to countenance not giving her wronged lovers their well-deserved happy ending, Briony had instead provided an account of the couple's unlived lives: the future they might have had together had they not numbered among the Second World War's many millions of victims.

This creative counterfactual narrative was born from Briony's sense of guilt, and a belief that to be made happy and immortal in art might offer some consolation to the untimely dead of war: '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' (371–2). The reader, however, suspects that she may have been motivated as much by aesthetic considerations as benevolent ones. Paraphrasing the conclusion of her book as that in which 'my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love' (371), Briony reveals that an allegiance to poetic justice is still conditioning her writings in old age: 'I have not travelled so very far after all.' (370) The Second World War, like the couple's sexually charged tussle over the Meissen vase, had exposed the fallibility of Briony's belief that traditional novelistic plots and binary notions of morality could ever fulfil the demands of 'realism' (371). Yet a contention that McEwan has his novelist lay before us in this epilogue is that perhaps those who have lived through the worst of war and conflict do not want 'realism' from literature – especially not of this 'bleakest' kind (371). How could untimely deaths, moral failings, and irredeemable cruelties 'constitute an ending?' Briony asks us. 'What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account?' (371). Perhaps the works of literature most attentive to the psychological needs of such population groups are therefore those which acknowledge, both at the level of content and at the level of form, that people often want to be deceived, and to be allowed to believe, if only briefly, that violence and loss have not managed to change their world irrevocably. What follows is not an attempt to provide a definitive answer to this question. Rather, this book takes as its foremost interest the fact that the textual trace of this contention, its inscription at the very heart of McEwan's novel, comes in the form of a consolatory speculative counterfactual: that evoking Robbie and Cecilia's unlived lives.

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*Twentieth-Century Literature and the Aftermath of War* is about the relationship between the glue that McEwan's Cecilia applies to those broken shards of porcelain and her sister's many and various authorly 'offenses against reality' (356). Which is to say that I am interested in the connection between the impulse, often experienced in the aftermath of mass violence, to continue to draw upon and rebuild pre-existing (if imperilled) imaginative structures, and the ethical and formal complexities of those works of twentieth-century literature which took this psychological compulsion seriously. At the heart of this project is an acknowledgement of how often post-war writings find themselves registering what Patricia Waugh calls the human 'need to make meaningful narratives out of broken histories' in order to survive such devastating events on an existential level.<sup>2</sup> But I also explore how, for psychological writers in particular, integrating this impulse into their work raised challenging ethical questions relating to mind-forged consolation and literary form. In what follows, readers will encounter post-war writings from across the last century, each attuned to the value of form and continuity in an age of destruction; all, however, are also haunted by the possibility that literature may find its integrity compromised should it function solely as a source of consolation for the bereaved and bereft.

Focusing upon twentieth-century prose works by Henry James (1843–1916), Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973), and Kazuo Ishiguro (1954 –) as case studies, this book seeks to shed light on an understudied strain within modern literature, whose practitioners are united in their acknowledgement of the existential and emotional demands placed upon fiction in the aftermath of war and conflict. The formal, stylistic, and ethical complexities of this tradition arise from its authors' desires to account for, and to probe literature's challenging ties of kinship with, the two orders of reparative imaginative act I am calling 'unlived lives' and 'lives unlived'. Unlived lives, examples of which we have already encountered in *Atonement*, is a phrase I borrow from Elizabeth Bowen. It refers to those forms of speculative counterfactual thinking which allow individuals to perpetuate in their imagination lives that have not been lived – either on account of an untimely death brought about by war, or because an opportunity was foreclosed or forsaken some time in that violent past.<sup>3</sup> Lives unlived, on the other hand, is a phrase denoting those acts of

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Waugh, 'Kazuo Ishiguro's Not-too-Late Modernism', in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (London: Red Globe Press, 2011), 13–30 (16).

<sup>3</sup> For an example of the former see *WL*, 45 and of the latter see 'Mysterious Kôr', in *CS*, 821–34 (834).

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imagination which allow people to retrospectively cast as ‘counterfactual’ or ‘fanciful’ lived experiences that they did in fact have. (This dual focus is encapsulated in the word ‘unlived’, which as an adjective evokes lives that are all potential and as a verb speaks of those which must be retroactively undone.)<sup>4</sup> In both cases, the motivation behind these imaginings is the pursuit of continuity between their pre- and post-war lives by a character – or, in the case of autobiographical writings, the author. Sometimes, surviving and overcoming what Paul John Eakin calls ‘the fissure in the fiction of continuous identity wrought by the trauma of the war’ requires an individual to continue to live as though the war dead were still alive, or to remain psychologically in touch with the people they themselves might have become in a lifetime of peace.<sup>5</sup> On other occasions, this feat demands a retroactive recasting of a person’s memories and lived experiences, so that who they are in a post-war present appears continuous with and related to the version of themselves they construct in the past.

Put more simply, unlived lives and lives unlived are life-giving fictions or imaginative constructions which can be glossed in Waugh’s terms as ‘the necessary lies we tell ourselves in order simply to survive psychically’.<sup>6</sup> What they strive to mitigate, indeed, is not only wartime losses, but the notion that living through such devastating conflicts – and those profound societal changes that they often bring in their wake – necessitates the complete overhaul of previous convictions, imaginative forms, and senses of self. Part of my contention is that unlived lives and lives unlived have an important relationship with the formal properties of those texts that construct or seek to describe them – dictating narrative structures and often making subtly disruptive (but stylistically compelling) demands upon syntax. Yet I shall also argue that recognising the prevalence of these imaginative acts offers insight into the history of violence and imaginative resistance that was played out over the course of the twentieth century and within many of its most psychologically astute works of literature.

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Almost exactly a year after the end of the Great War, Katherine Mansfield wrote to her husband, John Middleton Murry, to complain about Virginia

<sup>4</sup> Laura Marcus has made similar observations about Virginia Woolf’s use of the word ‘unwritten’. See *Virginia Woolf*, 2nd edn (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Becomes Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 95.

<sup>6</sup> Waugh, ‘Not-too-Late’, 16.

Woolf's new novel, *Night and Day* (1919). What Woolf had written, Mansfield told Murry, was 'a lie in the soul. The war never has been, that is what its message is':

[T]he novel cant [*sic*] just leave the war out. [. . .] It is really fearful to me the 'settling down' of human beings. I feel in the *profoundest* sense that nothing can ever be the same [,] that as artists we are traitors if we feel otherwise: we have to take it into account and find new expressions [,] new moulds for our new thoughts & feelings.<sup>7</sup>

One way to read the scenes with which I began would be to see them as accounts of what Mansfield calls 'the "settling down" of human beings': our startling ability to go on just as before, and to live and to write as if such challenging and transformative events 'ha[d] never been'. The analogy is close, yet a little imprecise. McEwan's heroines do not ignore the effects of what is presented to us as a traumatic, epoch-shifting incident. Rather, like Ryder, the pianist narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1995 novel *The Unconsoled*, they appear to have discovered that the same act of violence which had 'threatened to undermine [their] imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it', thus rendering radical psychological, cultural, and aesthetic reappraisals unnecessary.<sup>8</sup> Mansfield's famous letter is nevertheless instructive for teasing out what is striking about the character of Briony Tallis in particular – who, unlike her older sister, is an artist, and one who shall return to the traditional structures which had governed her childhood imaginings at the end of her bereavement-filled life. For it reminds us that when read as an allegory for the relationship between violence and the creative imagination in the twentieth century, Briony's personal history is noteworthy for the story that McEwan does not tell with it: that of the straightforward advent and adoption of the kinds of conceptual overhaul typified in Ezra Pound's modernist battle cry 'make it new'. As self-conscious an exploration into twentieth-century literary history as *Atonement* may be,<sup>9</sup> McEwan does not present us with a direct relationship between Briony's awareness that her violence-dominated world has exposed the fallibility of those ideals she cherishes and her willingness to abandon such intellectual and artistic convictions.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Mansfield, 'Letter to John Middleton Murry 10 November 1919', in *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 82–3 (82).

<sup>8</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), 16.

<sup>9</sup> See Hermione Lee, 'If your memories serve you well . . .', *The Observer*, 23 September 2002 (accessed online at [www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.bookerprize2001](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.bookerprize2001)) and David James, *Modernist Futures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 135–60.



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Organising its plot around the dual centres of the older novelist's attempt to atone, through fiction making, for her childhood sins, and Britain's attempt to occlude, through mythologising, the horrors suffered by its Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk, *Atonement* instead offers its readers the suggestion that individuals and nations often cling, in the aftermath of wars and genocides, to the very beliefs, governing narratives, and identities whose credibility has suffered most.

As Marina MacKay has remarked, in her epistolary critique of *Night and Day* Mansfield had been riled initially by Woolf's refusal to acknowledge the war 'explicitly', which is to say 'thematically'. As it goes on, however, the letter to Murry comes to argue that 'leaving the war in' was 'as much an issue of narrative idiom as of manifest content'; like many of her contemporaries, Mansfield believed that modernist form was 'something close to a historical obligation imposed by unprecedented recent violence'.<sup>10</sup> Here we see an early articulation of assumptions which, although most often applied to literary responses to the First World War, are nonetheless rehearsed throughout this particularly war-torn century. The first is the claim that representing the impact of modern mechanised warfare upon society demanded the forging of 'new expressions' and 'new moulds' for those 'new thoughts & feelings' produced in its wake. The second (related) contention is that the only kind of writing which can be said to have truly taken its horrors 'into account' is therefore that which displays overtly experimental aesthetics and charts a radical break with previous beliefs and ideals.

In recent times, critics have sought to dispel certain misconceptions associated with such viewpoints. Most prominent among these misconceptions was Paul Fussell's suggestion, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, that the First World War initiated a neat rupture between a pre-1914, optimistic, idealistic spirit (which found expression in more traditional forms) and a post-war, modern, ironic consciousness of the kind we see instantiated in literary modernism.<sup>11</sup> As Vincent Sherry notes, it is now widely accepted among scholars that 'the movement or energy that we label "modernism" was forming already and even altering itself in the years before the [Great] [W]ar'.<sup>12</sup> Sarah Cole's *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (2012) argues compellingly

<sup>10</sup> Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> See Vincent Sherry (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–12 (6).

for this point; yet despite undermining the prominence given to the Great War as *the* force shaping modernism, Cole's selection of texts only serves to perpetuate the view that when literary works treat the violation of bodies, minds, and ideals seriously, they find their structures and surfaces warped.<sup>13</sup> This assumption has indeed proved curiously persistent, and perhaps explains why comparatively little has been done within literary criticism to query the other side of Mansfield's assertion: that only in the more radical strains of modern writing do we encounter texts that take the impact of total war on bodies and minds sufficiently 'into account'. Whether an author has 'left war in' is still understood in many studies of twentieth-century literature in terms of their level of commitment to experimental aesthetics, or whether the work in question expounds the view that nothing in life or in art could – or indeed *should* – 'be the same' afterwards.<sup>14</sup>

This is not the case within cultural history, however: a reconceptualization of the field that has occurred thanks, in no small part, to the work of Jay Winter. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995), Winter sought to dispel what he saw as the 'unacceptable' suggestion that the Great War was 'the moment when "modern memory" [in Fussell's terms] replaced something else, something time worn and discredited [...] called "tradition"'. What was innovative about this argument was not just Winter's claim that traditional motifs and imaginative forms persisted at the centre of European cultural and emotional life in the years after the First World War. He also argued that they did so *because* of the 'universality of bereavement' during that time, not despite it:

The strength of what may be termed 'traditional' forms in social and cultural life, in art, poetry, and ritual, lay in their power to mediate bereavement. The cutting edge of 'modern memory', its multi-faceted sense of dislocation, paradox, and the ironic, could express anger and despair, and did so in enduring ways; it was melancholic, but it could not heal. Traditional modes of seeing the war, while at times less challenging intellectually or philosophically, provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> For a notable exception to this trend, see Edna Longley, 'The Great War, History, and the English Lyric', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature of the First World War*, 57–84.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5.