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# *Blank Verse the Mantrap upon Chesil Beach*

or if you prefer rhyme:

## *the novelist's curse*
## *of writing blank verse*

Ian McEwan is very unusual in combining seriousness as a novelist with best-seller status. "Seriousness" . . . that is, the power of making stories that hold the attention and show some understanding of what matters in life. His novella *On Chesil Beach* (2007, paperback 2008; all page refs to paperback; "more than an event. It is a masterpiece"[1]) is one of the worst tales I have ever read all the way through. Nobody without the powers of a novelist could write anything so bad ("irresistible subtlety, tact and force"[2]). The action obeys the classical unities and could have borrowed the title of the Pope-Gay-Arbuthnot farce *Three Hours after Marriage*, being a very detailed and slow-moving narrative of the traumas of a couple on their wedding night, interspersed with flashbacks about how they came to be there. It is mildly pornographic, arousing the sexual interest about what exactly Edward will do to Florence, but that is not the reason for the severity of the judgement.

The story is just incredible. This has of course nothing to do with probability, nor would it be a defence to say it was based on an actual event. Hardy's excuse for *Life's Little Ironies*, that they are found all the time in newspapers, is irrelevant if the reader is unconvinced. The falling in love moment (pp. 47–8 with frequent cross-references) does not seem possible even at first reading, given what we have been told about the two characters. They wouldn't have had the confidence and initiative to form an acquaintance as narrated. For instance Florence, a serious and talented violinist, would not have ignored Edward's musical stupidity. But then people do fall unpredictably and strangely in love. I just don't believe that this couple did. But if they did, the *dénouement* is incredible. A couple in love wouldn't have instantly flown apart as the novelist asserts. Occasionally a novelist will tell us something so unconvincing that he has to be accused of an extraordinary kind of lying. (Naturally this is a mark of genuineness; with the Mills-&-Boon school nobody is enough engaged for the question to arise.) Further, even in this short tale there are sub-plots, the stories of Florence's and Edward's families; and the story of Edward's brain-damaged mother and consequent family circumstances is much better done, but only shows up the incredibility of the fable, to which it is irrelevant.

Then, when we are given the real deep experience, the novelist becomes unintelligible. When Edward is told that his mother is brain-damaged the effect is somehow to enhance his individuality. That's my phrase: McEwan's is:

> A sudden space began to open out, not only between Edward and his mother, but also between himself and his immediate circumstances, and he felt his own being, the buried core of it he had never attended to before, come to sudden, hard-edged existence, a glowing pinpoint that he wanted no-one else to know about. (p. 72)

We are not told that the sensation was painful enough for him to seek medical advice. A couple of pages later this is referred to as an intelligible experience: ". . . but now he was consciously acting a part, and doing so fortified that newly discovered, tough little core of selfhood." Then "It never occurred to him that the separateness he felt, which was both painful and delicious, could be shared by anyone else." Well, he was right. It couldn't be shared because it had no existence.

Another trouble is the novelist's notion of the late 1950s and the early 1960s. He generalises like a bad social historian, as if *everybody* suddenly became liberated in the latter decade from age-old religious and moral taboos. Edward's attitude to his frequent masturbations has nothing individual about it at all. McEwan himself was growing up at that time. Why didn't he rely more on memory? From memory I can assure anybody that *life at the time wasn't like this*.

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[1] Karl Miller in *TLS*; all quotations from reviews are as on the cover of the paperback edition.
[2] *Financial Times*

The present purpose, however, is not to do the reviewers' duty for them ("Written with a fierce pursuit of the truth . . . what a confident tour de force . . . ."[1]) but to demonstrate beyond contradiction why at a basic level the tale is not "exquisitely crafted"[2]. It is very badly written in one particular elementary way. The novel is usually defined as prose fiction of a certain length. *On Chesil Beach* has so much verse in its prose as not to qualify. Literary criticsm of course can never *prove* anything, so it is pleasant to be able to demonstrate something incontrovertible. Only the possible sense to be made of the blank verse is disputable: there is no doubt that it is there, as in the beginning and end of the first quotation, above.

To make the point I shall quote a few lines set out as verse in the usual manner, not as they are printed in the book. Florence makes the mistake of leading Edward toward the bedroom so that for a few moments

she could breathe
and try to take possession of herself. (p. 33, end chapter)

The blank verse has the effect of repressing any possible impulse towards comedy. Of Edward's bad taste:

this was the music
that formed his taste, and even shaped his life. (p. 39, end para.)

The blank verse is trying to make us *not* think of "the thousand sordid images / Of which your soul is constituted".

For Florence, on the other hand,

The Hall became a kind of second home. (p. 42)

The audiences at this Wigmore Hall [my own pentameter, dear reader, is deliberate, as is that fourteener; rest assured that my other blank verse lines are meant as parody not in earnest] are

These fossils, with their knobbly shrunken skulls . . . . (p. 41)

Of Oxford, where the hero and heroine are about to meet for the first time,

This used to be his local capital. (p. 46)

—so *must* be solemnly significant. Not quite cowed by a college porter (that *is* an accurate period detail)

Edward decided
to buy himself a consolatory pint. (p.47)

—the pint rendered earnest by the blank verse. Florence is likewise adept at concealing her feelings from her family.

she simply left the room
whenever it was possible to do so . . . . (p. 50)

Florence's mother's political opinion, dignified by blank verse, is that the Soviet Union

had trampled
on human dignity and basic rights,
it was a stifling occupying force
in neighbouring lands . . . . (p. 53)

Looking back a month after falling in love, Florence is troubled by

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[1] *Sunday Express* [2] *Evening Standard*

> vague dread that she had been impetuous. (p. 59)

—given portentousness by bad blank verse. Just after the tale's climactic anti-climax, the blank verse naturally intensifies. Not to go on *ad nauseam* and having noted about seventy instances in this short book, and I'm sure there are more, may I just challenge anyone to find a worse sequence of blank verse lines in English literature than when Edward feels the

> beginnings of a darkening of mood,
> a darker reckoning, a trace of poison
> that even now was branching through his being. (p. 133)

Bluff! Nothing was branching anywhere! Lower down the same page, Florence has left him with the "disgusting taint of shame, and all the burden / of failure". Oh dear! poor chap! But cheer up, you'll soon get over it.

Far be it from me to suggest that the predominance of blank verse means that no other metres are tried. Still on p. 133 there is a fourteener. All fourteeners are bad but they needn't be as bad as this: She had done what she could

> to make the situation worse, and irretrievable.

The same chapter ends:

> He snatched his jacket from the chair and hurried from the room.

Tetrameters and heptameters can conjoin in mutual infelicity:

> How could he have begun to broach
> the matter of his own particular deformity,
> what could have been his opening words? (p. 141)

And are we then so serious? And try this for hexameter:

> "You carry on as if it's *eighteen* sixty-two." (p. 144)

The intriguing question with McEwan is whether he does it on purpose, or whether he thinks this is what serious prose now demands. There are parallels. I have elsewhere demonstrated the tracts of extremely bad blank verse in the prose of the Church of England's recent liturgy, *Common Worship*. My own view is the old one. The occasional blank verse will occur ordinarily in prose, and an occasional deliberate line as the cadence of a paragraph is all right—even Jane Austen does it. But prose and verse are different, it is a blemish in a prose writer when he drops easily into verse, and usually means he is trying to put something over on himself, i.e. a form of insincerity.

How does it happen to a genuine novelist? Dickens was well aware of ". . . the tendency to blank verse (I *cannot* help it, when I am very much in earnest) . . . ."[1] Actually it means, with some triumphant exceptions, that Dickens is as I said, in Lawrence's phrase, putting something over on himself. The verse is McEwan's way of disguising from himself the awkward fact that he has not grasped his own story.

I haven't read the reviews beyond those quoted on the paperback cover. Perhaps everybody has already noticed the blank verse. If not, that says as much about the present state of reviewing as the reviewers' grotesque over-valuation of the piece.

I haven't, either, read the later *Solar* yet. Is it the same? or is it writ in prose?

*I. R.*

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[1] Dickens in a letter 13 November 1846, cited Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, 1970, p. 172n1