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Literature and Visual Arts (20th-21st Centuries)**

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# Remembering Atonement in *Atonement*

*Se rappeler l'expiation dans Atonement*

Sara Thornton

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## Guilt and the Victorian House

- 1 The Tallis home is a quintessentially Victorian home, not so much in its architecture as in its atmosphere and in the conventions of daily life practiced within it. It is part of a tradition of such houses, lost in time, but on the brink of change: Satis House in *Great Expectations*, Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre*, the exposed edifice of *Wuthering Heights*, the crumbling houses of Mrs. Clennam in *Little Dorrit* or Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, Poe's House of Usher, and even the home of Mrs. Dalloway, still a Victorian house even in the 1920s, with her narrow virgin's bed at the very top.
- 2 Each of these houses has its attic or upper rooms, its mad men and women or gender-fluid mad persons. Each, in its own way, showcases an act of atonement. Rather than enumerating the similarities between the houses and mistresses of Victorian literature and the Tallis home I would like to consider the way the house offers a setting for archetypal forms of guilt and atonement that have always haunted literature and still haunt it today. Robbie Turner is a scapegoat for the Victorian class system carrying the suffering of a generation; Emily and Briony are female vectors of guilt and atonement, a type already well known to consumers of literature and its visual adaptations. McEwan himself displays his own guilt and atonement as a modern writer fighting to get out of his own particular attic room by creating (and destroying) the Tallis home, his own Bleak House.
- 3 I would like to begin with a quote from a 1966 thriller written by George Sims called *The Last Best Friend*. The novel is the story of an atonement on the part of the hero, Balfour, a London art dealer who doggedly seeks out the truth behind his best friend's mysterious

suicide. One scene in which the attic of a Victorian House figures prominently in a dream recounted by the hero particularly struck me:

'Guilty !' Balfour started up in a cold sweat from a vivid and humiliating dream. The verdict boomed and echoed in his ears. In the dream he had been searching through a large Victorian House which looked as if it had been shut up for years with sunlight coming through heavily dust-marked windows, and the stale-smelling rooms full of grimy furniture which had to be moved around laboriously for him even to advance a little way from the doors. The stuffiness was enervating and it seemed as if the supply of air was gradually being exhausted. When he had reached the top floor the search became more urgent, though he had still not understood its purpose. Opening a series of attic doors he found it was now twilight and the gloomy small rooms, there, were cold and damp. Then he heard a hurdy-gurdy grinding out a waltz and clambered up on a chair to one of the tiny awkward windows to look with difficulty on a group of men, women and children being shepherded along a narrow street : as he stared down Max Weber and Sam Weiss looked up and waved gaily, shouting some words he could not hear. From his vantage point he alone could see that at the end of the street a train composed of closed goods wagons waited for them [...] In a panic, unable to think, he had charged at the locked front door to find that it opened into a small, crowded court room with someone calling out in a deep-sounding voice '*Wieviel Stück ?*' over and over again, despite the answering repetition '*650 pieces in 12 wagons*'. (Sims 53)

- 4 In the dream, Balfour fails to save his friends and only hears 'the train slowly chugging out of the station' (Sims 54). He is looking out from the upper floors of a high Victorian House reminiscent of Miss Havisham's Satis House, not only as it appears in Dickens' novel, but also in David Lean's film *Great Expectations* of 1946. Pip, played by John Mills, has to negotiate the dusty rooms crowded with heavy upholstered furniture; this is a typical gothic trope of the exploration of a shuttered, neglected room which is found in many Victorian novels including Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Balfour is frantic but cannot get out of the Victorian house in time to warn his friends. Next, we see his London flat with white walls, plain blue carpet and very little furniture and few possessions—an antidote to this heavy past. Paradoxically, since he is an art and antiques dealer, Balfour has a horror of people's clutter and the constant auctioning off of the possessions of the dead.
- 5 In the light of this trope of the house which blinds and disempowers, I would like to consider how far literature is haunted by the guilt of not waking up in time from what Walter Benjamin in his *Paris-Capital of the Nineteenth Century* has called the dream of the nineteenth century: the era in which we are all soporifically trapped. Benjamin was writing of course on the eve of fascism in the 1930's, a moment when his readings of the nineteenth century became particularly poignant signalling as they do the end of an era already half-destroyed by the First World War. Briony's story, like Balfour's, is the story of looking out from the Victorian house, trapped in a ruin from which she must escape, but failing to do so in time. Her story is the story of that slow awakening. What she sees from the upper windows of the house is the scene which allows her to later accuse Robbie and send him to the war. The novel is the story of her slow descent from the dream-like top of the house where rehearsals take place and fictions are born and the reaching of an outside world and the light of truth just before her death. All that is left at the end of the story, of course, is Briony's writing, 'nothing but a mass of typewriting', as the narrator says at the end of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* of 1897 (Stoker end note). None of it can change anything; no authentic documents remain, just the fictionalised trace of an event, an emotion, a moment in print.

- 6 *Atonement* is a novel about writing and being trapped in narratives. There is nothing ‘outside the text’ as literary theory and philosophy has often told us. *Atonement* posits that we are all mad women and men, deluded inmates of the Victorian asylum of representation, writing stories which like many Victorian novels now span the world and have become a global phenomenon. We are confined in an ontological attic, hoping for a happy ending, a *Downton Abbey* denouement. How ghastly as a first-time reader to realise that Robbie and Celia never actually lived their idyll in the cottage by the sea, and even worse that they are just figments of Briony’s and McEwan’s imagination, an effect of language (not even McEwan’s or Briony’s own for they are spoken by the ambient language of their time, mere scribes for all the narratives flowing around them). We know all this for sure and yet like Briony, we look down from on high from the attic and spread our fantasies and prejudices out onto the passing scenes. We just can’t help it. It is madness to stay there however. Is it time to leave the Victorian fantasy of realism, industry and empire and to atone for all the horrors committed in the name of a Victorian ideal that had to be financed, protected, made durable at the expense of others in terms of class and race. Perhaps, thinks the reader of McEwan’s novel, it is time to atone for the whole of the nineteenth and twentieth century and for their many disasters big and small.

## The Trouble with Atonement

- 7 Let us consider for a moment the nature of the atonement or more particularly the protestant atonement at work in McEwan’s story. Atonement is a lifelong act of paying back into a spiritual economy and has always been a notoriously unpopular doctrine for the middle classes who began to reject it as soon as capital started to be amassed in the mid-eighteenth-century and indeed even before this when capital meant not industry but the riches of silks and spices, cotton and cocoa brought back from overseas. Atonement is an old-fashioned doctrine, anachronistic even, and quite out of kilter with modernity as divers works of theology constantly suggest. It seems mystical, ancient, and barbaric almost. A heavy theological notion that even the Church has trouble selling to its faithful. It is interesting that late in his career McEwan should turn to this word and notion. I would like to consider why, and why atonement is linked to the attic of the Victorian house.
- 8 Firstly, what is atonement? It is a reparation or expiation, it can be an annual ceremony of confession and atonement for sin. Its synonyms are compensation, recompense, payment, repayment, redress, restitution, indemnity, indemnification, expiation, penance, redemption; we veer from the world of theology to finance. Strictly speaking, Christian theology defines atonement as the reconciliation of God and mankind through Jesus Christ and his suffering. We need to consider here the theological difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. To caricature for a moment, we might say that for Catholics, the Church itself plays a key role in beckoning individuals to salvation, through the sacraments. For Protestants, however, salvation and truth are attained by the individual via her or his reading of the Bible; atonement is thus an individual question heavy with consequence for the self. It is unappealing, difficult to manage, too far from comfortable middle class lifestyle, too costly, radical, barbaric since linked to blood sacrifice, the body of Christ given up like a lamb to the slaughter. One’s own body swims into view when atonement is conjured up, along with sackcloth and

ashes. Two books found at the British Library in London attest to this problematic nature of the doctrine. Firstly, *Evangelical Principles. A series of doctrinal papers explanatory of the positive principles of evangelical churchmanship* written by Edward Garbett and secondly, Herbert Maynard Smith, *Atonement*. One was written in 1875 (5 years after the publication of Dickens's last novel) and in the other in 1925 (the same year as the publication of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*). The two moments might represent the Victorian novel and the modernist novel, yet the works tell very similar stories.

- 9 In 1875 Garbett is already trying to save the doctrine of atonement that appears to be in crisis. He tries to deflect attention from the idea of a single body which suffers for sin by underlining that Jesus suffered all his life and not only on the cross, forsaken as he was, lumped in with the sinners. Yet again and again, laments Garbett, we tend to focus on the sin in the flesh as it appears at the moment of the crucifixion: 'vicarious suffering and substitution [...] Christ made a full and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world' (Garbett 76). He continues: 'The life of Christ, as well as the death of Christ was an atonement'. Jesus came to atone for the sinners and 'make Him willing to pardon'. But Garbett cannot deny that atonement is first and foremost concerned with 'the infliction of a penalty on Christ' (Garbett 73) since God 'delivered him up for us all' (Garbett 75) and 'God made him to *be* sin for us' (Garbett 77). Like a punching ball we might ask? An unpleasant image of bodily pain swims into view which Garbett realises is the source of the problem but which, he feels, must not turn us away from atonement. It seems we must resist siding with rationalists who believe that if God is eternal love then no act of atonement is needed. In McEwan's *Atonement*, Robbie plays the part of such an embodied, walking sin, available to '*be* sin' for the Tallis family for whom he becomes a maniac, a rapist. He must carry the deeds of others and be crucified. He submits quietly at first like a lamb to the slaughter.
- 10 Herbert Maynard Smith's *Atonement* of 1925 wages the same war against those who find the notion of atonement, as a doctrine of the crucifixion, unacceptable. Smith complains in the following way: 'an atonement, we are told, by our gifted journalists, is alien to the modern mind' (Smith 2). The 'modern mind' is that belonging to the educated middle classes:
- If the ordinary public schoolboy 'on the classical side' is examined on heathen mythology and Bible history, he is almost certain to acquire more marks in the former subject. The ordinary undergraduate is more likely to pass an elementary examination in Aristotle than in St. Paul. An ordinary clubman may have inaccurate knowledge of evolution, but he has none at all on the subject of the Atonement. (Smith 2-3)
- 11 Smith seems to complain that for many people atonement is something for other people to do, ordinary people, 'the publican, the sinner and the harlot' who find 'a new life and extended freedom after laying down their burdens at the foot of the cross' (Smith 2). These are proper sinners of the authentic, simple, salt-of-the-earth kind who are used to suffering for their sins. In the fashionable circles, however, atonement is considered 'alien' and therefore, it would seem, needs to be outsourced to other people. Journalists and privileged schoolboys know classics but not the Bible, laments Smith; the clubman knows evolution better than theological doctrine. The notion of a fallen humanity does not exist for them and they do not seek redemption because they are not aware of the consequences of sin; They simply 'change their expectations to meet a widening field of knowledge': the doctrine is not so much explained as 'explained away' (Smith 2). We might note that the 'widening field of knowledge' is open to the middle

classes but not to the working classes who it is suggested, for want of a better idea and a better life, remain devout and still practice atonement. ‘The man in the trenches knew his need of God’ says Smith, his need to recognise sin and gain redemption, but not a banker ‘served and comforted at his club’ (Smith 3). How might Paul Marshall, the very public schoolboy imagined by Smith also ‘served and comforted’ in his privileged role as a moneyed entrepreneur (and whose intent is to make ‘Amo’ *chocolate* bars to be bought by the government and shipped to soldiers) possibly imagine atoning personally for any sin? The only religion left on the Tallis estate is bestowed by the heathen Temple, vestige of a bygone era, and which bestows only ‘a faintly religious ambience’ (McEwan 73).

- 12 Atonement is a rather protestant or even Calvinist concept which means making up for something—trying to purge and change the world through some personal, fleshly effort. Taking something of the self to make good a lack in the world. A pound of flesh but given up willingly to make up the shortfall, the gash, the wound. It is a pay-back, a sort of check or tally. We are back to the spiritual economy again. And indeed, back to the economy *tout court*. The theologians cited above suggest that modern society sees it as expedient to let the working classes pay. It is not for the upper classes to atone, to make the blood sacrifice of Jesus. Might we consider therefore that in McEwan’s novel Robbie pays with his flesh, his person, while Briony pays only with her writing. Her imminent death at the end of the novel does not convince the reader of suffering and no real atonement is truly offered up despite her intended letter ‘a new draft, an atonement’ (McEwan 349). Robbie is ‘flayed’ much as Briony is seen ‘flaying’ the nettles (a term associated with an act of contrition) early in the novel as an act of ‘self-purification’ (McEwan 74) but not of atonement.
- 13 The last work of theology we will consider is an American twenty-first century one—from the country where Christian theological thought still thrives within evangelism. Ralph F. Wilson’s *Lamb of God: Jesus’ Atonement for Sin* discusses the doctrine of substitutionary atonement where the body of another bears the brunt of the punishment. ‘Classic Protestant Liberals’<sup>1</sup> as Wilson calls them (the equivalent of Smith’s ‘modern mind’), take issue with the doctrine of the Atonement. They naturally tend to reject dogma and to prefer human experience and reason to divine revelation, the anthropocentric to the theocentric. God is seen to be immanent in the world, working through human experience that is at odds with the idea of Jesus’ death on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. The latter notion of sacrifice comes from the Old Testament system of animal sacrifices to atone for sin, all part of a primitive practice of appeasing the wrath of an angry god. Such atonement therefore depicts a violent, bloodthirsty deity which seems antithetical to the God of whom Jesus speaks in the New Testament as loving and forgiving. Wilson asks for a reconsideration of the doctrine of atonement which has had a bad press and needs to be rethought in a more enlightened framework. Such reasoning takes us back to both Garbett in 1875 and Smith in 1925 in which punishing one person for the sins of others is already seen to offend polite society. We might also posit that the ‘modern mind’ does not wish to be confronted with either self-sacrifice or with those who society in fact regularly sacrifices. We might add that for Protestants the idea of the body of Christ is metaphorical and not actual and that suffering to obtain graces or merit is an alien concept. In the Catholic perspective, baptism means not just metaphorically being part of the Body of Christ, but actually *being* the body of Christ and therefore sharing in Christ’s suffering.

- 14 How strange then that McEwan should return to such a cumbersome, primitive and even atavistic theological doctrine which as we have seen has prompted so much controversy. We have looked at 136 years from 1875 to 2011, but the debate of course goes back much further and still continues today. How does this affect literature? Has the repressed tradition of atonement as animal sacrifice resurfaced in fiction to plague the ‘modern mind’? Is it always there in the novel as a primitive background made of wars, suffering bodies and minds and burned down mansions,<sup>2</sup> shattered reputations and chipped vases that haunt the respectable houses, salons, parties and weddings of the upper classes?<sup>3</sup>

## Class and Scapegoating

- 15 Inside the Victorian house we find primitive spaces that are very far from the light of modernity. Skeletons in cupboards inhabit this gothic hinterland. Robert may be a brilliant young student and future doctor mentored by an enlightened employer; like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), his main role is to be a vehicle for the atonement of the sins of the household that welcomed him. Mr. Earnshaw brings the orphan Heathcliff back from Liverpool to his home and gives him the name of a dead son. Robbie is treated better than Heathcliff for Jack Tallis educates him just as Magwitch educates Pip in *Great Expectations* (1861). Magwitch makes a gentleman of Pip and thereby redeems himself through the body of another in the eyes of society, atoning for his convict sins. Likewise, as with the flower girl in Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1914) or the monster in *Frankenstein* (1818), the body of another is used to atone for the sins of society allowing the master, to use Hegelian terminology, to gain redemption through his slave. In *Atonement*, the figure of Jane Eyre has become a young man, a servant promoted above his rank rather like Julien Sorel in Stendhal’s *Le rouge et le noir* (1830). Jack Tallis’s act of atonement for the sins of his socially privileged class and for his own sins as an unfaithful husband takes the form of a ‘hobby’ to raise up a lowly child.<sup>4</sup> Robbie is educated yet shunned in the end by the family. If the son of the charwoman is welcomed into the house and cherished by the father much as Heathcliff cherishes Earnshaw, Robert’s person, and indeed body, are finally sacrificed to cleanse the crime of upper-class Paul Marshall against Lola.
- 16 It seems that the atonement at work around the character of Robbie is the very unpalatable Old Testament form we heard about previously; it is a blood letting which the Victorian middle classes and present-day liberal protestant humanist Christians have found so barbaric. Perhaps McEwan returns to this bitter controversy, to the utter violence of atonement to wake us up in some way from our complacent slumbering within our Victorian homes. As we turn a blind eye to the misery of industry, war, and extermination, impeded as we are by the dusty furniture of the mind, McEwan forces us to confront some sort of truth. Robbie is resented and as soon as blame can be placed and the *parvenu* rejected—it is done. Hands are washed, gazes averted.
- 17 In Robbie, we find the sacrificial victim of the house of bleak England that has ignored and even repressed class struggle, the mess of the two world wars, the Empire and colonisation. The ‘solemn single note of the quarter hour’ of Big Ben (McEwan 283) is of course the Woolfian ‘hour irrevocable’ (Woolf 4) and sounds like a death knell with its ‘leaden circles’ for those caught in its maws or toils. There is a party at end of the novel like the party at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway* where the last words are ‘For there she [Clarissa Dalloway] was’ (Woolf 255); Clarissa, like Briony, is a survivor like most members of their class. Yet Septimus Smith and Robbie are sacrificial victims, chosen for their

expendability. McEwan shows us that the British have not woken up from the dream of the nineteenth century and that they are still upstairs looking down. They are in the attic, the place where all the old objects are kept, the 'cemetery of decathected object-choices' as Leo Bersani has described them.<sup>5</sup> Among bones and cadavers the British remain, within a constitutional monarchy and the confines of the nation state, within a dream of Empire. The likes of Robbie must still pay for the sins of others. We continue to sacrifice the bodies of others to atone, to cleanse ourselves. In Lean's *Great Expectations* the orphans at the Workhouse look like concentration camp victims with their shaven heads, hollow eyes and striped prison clothes. The death of Miss Havisham and the pulling down of the curtains at the end of the film let light and hope into her ruined house; both are gestures of sorts to atone for the horrors of the second world war. The atonement is also for the horrors of the industrial processing of human beings at the mid-nineteenth-century at the worst moment in humanitarian terms of the industrial revolution.<sup>6</sup> Lean's vision prepared for and was part of the climate of regeneration associated with the Festival of Britain of 1951.<sup>7</sup>

## Atonement and Regeneration?: Emily and Briony

- 18 Emily lies immobile in her room at the top of the house and senses the household :
- [...] many hours of lying still on her bed, had distilled from this sensitivity a sixth sense, a tentacular awareness that reached out from the dimness and moved through the house, unseen and all-knowing. Only truth came back to her for what she knew, she knew [...]. [She] beamed her raw attention into every recess of the house. There was nothing, and then, like a lamp turned on and off in total darkness, there was a little squeal of laughter [...]. She would track down Cécilia and make sure she had arranged the flowers as instructed [...]. She would soothe the household [...] a troubled sparsely populated continent [...]. She could send her tendrils into every room of the house, but she could not send them into the future. She also knew that, ultimately, it was her own peace of mind she strove for; self-interest and kindness were best not separated. [...] Rather than risk drawing the curtains just yet, she turned on the reading light, and tentatively began the hunt for her dark glasses. (66-71)
- 19 She senses the troubles within her own house but also within the house of England (her husband's unpleasant tasks for the government, the unfairness of gender relations), but does nothing. Her husband is unfaithful and roves while she is left at home with the servants and children and is an ailing woman lying prostrated by migraine attacks. She does not run the house but *feels* the house. Emily is a Havisham figure: her condition and her husband's absence stop all the clocks and she remains quite still accepting her cuckold state. She has little true insight into the truth of her household; she absorbs affect through the walls but has no logical and linear narrative to help her tell a complete story—she simply picks up on strife or harmony among a group of people between whom she can barely differentiate.
- 20 Like Miss Havisham she is a disturbed and confined woman, aware of sound and movement in her remote prison. Emily uses Briony to put into action the desires she herself has repressed or cannot act upon: Briony must make entertainment through narrative, write down and keep note, chase away intruders, the intruder who is Robbie. Emily is also like Bertha Mason whose alter ego, Jane Eyre, writes and draws and loves and reconfigures the world, a sort of 'Bertha Havisham'. Like Jane Eyre, Briony is the

mistress of recording, insisting, sketching, copying, and transmitting. Briony is also Estella who goes out into the world to rewrite her mother's story—to 'beggar' the men with whom she plays and to avenge male fickleness. One woman lies and suffers in the dark, a prisoner of her own body and mind, while the other does things, creates and rewrites. Emily's antennae or tentacles reach her daughter and whisper a narrative to her: the former senses the horror—the latter acts on it. Briony, *sous influence*, misinterprets the signs and like the reader attempts to grasp the meaning of the marks on her cousin's arm. Emily is a failed Mrs Dalloway. She does not buy or arrange the flowers herself and cannot regenerate her household—but like Mrs. Dalloway she tries to prepare a party. Briony must weave a narrative to make up for the shortfalls of reality; she creates different scenarios such as Arabella's neatly linear narrative to compensate for the shattered nature of existence and its lack of logic, its cruelty and absurdity. Robbie is a pawn in both their games, moved around, a sacrificial victim, tying up loose ends and saving the day although not in the way he imagines. *Atonement*, as we discover, is the novel Briony has been writing between 1940 and 1999 but no amount of writing can help reach the necessary post-atonement moment of 'regeneration'.

- 21 Atonement is one doctrine, 'regeneration' is another. Atonement prepares the ground for it. In *Evangelical Principles* the table of contents lists 'The Rule of Faith', 'Sin', 'Atonement', 'Justification', 'Regeneration', and 'Sanctification', in that order. Garbett underlines the idea that after atonement one can be born again, and be literally re-generated into the world: 'It is that inward change of heart and character which the Holy Ghost produces in a man when he becomes a true Christian, —a change so complete that no word could be chosen more fit to express it than the word Regeneration or new birth' (Garbett 127). According to Garbett it is both personal and universal: 'accompanying and instrumental to Salvation' and involves 'the washing of Regeneration, and renewing of the holy ghost (Titus iii, 4)'. It also brings to pass the 'new order of things which will prevail at the second advent of Jesus Christ' (Garbett 126). He quotes the Gospel of Matthew: 'In the Regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit on His throne (Matt.xix.28) [...]'.  
 22 We see little true regeneration in *Atonement* either in personal or societal forms. If there is some sweeping away of the Victorian cobwebs in commercial terms in the form of the new business opportunities of the war in chocolate and sugar and cocoa empires, the novel focuses more on the bankruptcy of ideals and the end of civilisation. Robbie complains of 'A dead civilisation. First his own life ruined, then everybody else's' (217). The same sins are committed as in all wars: sending boys to trenches or boys into RAF planes on crutches, terrified, unable to cope. Future generations, grandsons, try to atone without knowing what they are atoning for—all they know is that there is a great sin which has been committed and left unatoned. There is no opportunity for regeneration in the novel, as the prerequisite act of atonement is never performed. If Robbie's social ascension made possible by Jack Tallis might be seen as a sign of society regenerating itself, that possibility is soon quashed by imprisonment, class prejudice and war.  
 23 Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) looks at the uneasy way in which soldiers of the First World War were cared for and given therapy to 'regenerate' them for further combat. The last words of novel are the words on the file of the character, Sassoon: 'Nov 26, 1917. Discharged to duty'.<sup>8</sup> She also looks at the wasteland of British society even before the war: poverty, social injustice, violence, illness, stunted growth as the daily bread of the British working classes. Regeneration is not the same for one class as for another How can there be regeneration in a society in which the working classes seem to be 'a different

order of being' from the officers (Barker 143)?<sup>9</sup> This state of affairs is the same in 1935 for Robbie and nothing has changed.

## McEwan's Atonement

- 24 Ian McEwan has been accused of the sin of plagiarism. It was said that he copied a wartime memoir called *No Time For Romance* written by Lucilla Andrews and published in London in 1977. McEwan admits to reading the memoir and using parts of it as research; he even thanks Andrews and references her memoir as a key influence on the conception of the book. The author insists he has done nothing wrong; like many writers and literary academics he understands the 'palimpsestuous'<sup>10</sup> nature of writing. As we know, Thomas Pynchon even came to the defence of McEwan in a letter sent to *The Daily Telegraph*<sup>11</sup> defending the writer and his influences, distinguishing influence from plagiarism. We may also cite *Touch Not the Cat*, a novel by Mary Stewart first published the year before in 1976 and one of her best-known works. Like many of Stewart's novels, the story has a supernatural element: Bryony (*sic*) Ashley has the gift of telepathy and is able to communicate subliminally with a man she thinks is her lover, but whose identity she is unsure of. She learns that her secret lover is a long-standing friend to whom she is related, the odd-job man and gardener at Ashley Court, Rob Granger, whom Bryony grew up with. She is saved by Rob and plans to emigrate with him. The narrative and characters have certain links with *Atonement*.
- 25 What is interesting here is not so much a particular act (or not) of plagiarism but the universal plagiarism that literature in general is guilty of. Gérard Genette posits that every act of writing allows the former texts that created it to show through like a palimpsest.<sup>12</sup> No writer is truly guilty of plagiarism because we are all, in a sense, writing the same novel again and again. McEwan perhaps wrote *Atonement* as his own act of atonement for the sin of not being within history early on in his career (we can think of *First Love*, *Last Rights* or *The Cement Garden* which were more resolutely postmodern since less anchored in history and ethics). As we know, he slowly returned to the more conventional form of the realist novel in which he continued to study 'remains', although no longer human remains. The remains he increasingly studied were the remains of an era, of the novel, the remains of a day, a time, as in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* which looks at guilt, inaction, a failure to act on the lessons of history and of life. As we wait for literary and spiritual regeneration we remain where we have always been: trapped in the Victorian attic, within a form of belatedness. Does *Atonement* ask us to enter history once and for all, to wake up just in time from the dream of the house and shout our warning to those below? Perhaps what McEwan allows us to do is to see the Victorian house as a ruin, albeit a powerful one, and to begin 'to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled'.<sup>13</sup>

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## NOTES

1. *Lamb of God* was consulted as an e-book with special focus on the essay in the Appendices entitled 'Classic Protestant Liberalism and the Atonement: A Plea for Reconsideration'. A summary of this essay by the author can be found at [http://www.jesuswalk.com/lamb/classic\\_liberalism.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/lamb/classic_liberalism.htm) and was last accessed on February 17, 2018.
2. See chapter 7, page 73 of McEwan's *Atonement* for a description of the Temple as a vestige of the 'original Adam House'.
3. The idea of damage and sin and responsibility for broken vases is seen not only in Henry JAMES' *The Golden Bowl* of 1904 but is also in Heinrich VON KLEIST's play *Der zerbrochene Krug* of 1808 in

which a judge named Adam must atone for breaking a family vase during his attempt to seduce a young woman named Eve. Madame de la Cruchecassée appears in 1848 in William Makepeace THACKERAY's *Vanity Fair* where the character in question has a tarnished reputation. Her honour and that of her family is no longer intact and she bears in her name the sin of philandering and sexual licence.

4. 'But really, he was a hobby of Jack's, living proof of some levelling principle he had pursued through the years. When he spoke about Robbie, which wasn't often, it was with a touch of self-righteous vindication' (McEwan chapter 12).

5. See Leo BERSANI's description of 'the moribund nature of the ego' and 'its status as a kind of cemetery of decathected object-choices', in *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (Bersani 93-100).

6. See Eric J. HOBBSAWM, *The Penguin Economic History of Britain Vol.3: From 1750 to the Present Day: Industry And Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) and Joan ALLEN and Alan CAMPBELL (preface by HOBBSAWM), *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011).

7. The festival of Britain took place on the South Bank in London in 1951 at the Royal Festival Hall and spread to all parts of Britain as part of a post-war drive for social and artistic renewal after the austerity of the war years. It was associated with an enlightened political left. See Becky E. CONEKIN, *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003); Barry TURNER, *Beacon for Change: How the 1951 Festival of Britain Shaped the Modern Age* (London: Aurum Press, 2011) and Harriet ATKINSON, *The Festival of Britain: A Land and Its People* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012).

8. Note the strange, almost oxymoronic, association of words; discharge is liberation while duty is constraint. The language of state and of medicine conspire to be able to continue to devour its young men.

9. Class mobility meant the loss of old certainties and one father in the novel complains that since his son's rise in society his son is 'neither fish nor fowl' (Barker 57). Time and space is fragmented along with minds and bodies: one character, Prior, shovels the remains of two soldiers into one sack at the Front while a trip to the seaside confirms the splitting of society. Prior says he felt he 'came from another planet' in comparison with the lower-class men he led (Barker 134). In a church Rivers sees 'the two bloody bargains on which civilisation claims to be based' (the crucifixion and Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac) (Barker 149).

10. A word coined by Gérard GENETTE and frequently used in his *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (Paris : Seuil, 1982).

11. By Nigel REYNOLDS, Arts Correspondent 12:01AM GMT 06 Dec 2006, last accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1536152/Recluse-speaks-out-to-defend-McEwan.html> on February 17, 2018.

12. See Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré*.

13. See Walter BENJAMIN, 'Paris –Capital of the Nineteenth Century' first published 1939.

## ABSTRACTS

This article looks at the way in which the archetypal Victorian house with its multiple repressed histories informs the novel *Atonement*. Questions of guilt, of not waking up in time from the dream of the nineteenth-century and failing to atone for the sins of the war and of class struggle

are central to McEwan's work of fiction. The view from the upper stories of the Victorian house affords a view of dangers past and of those to come but the Anglo-Saxon and protestant distaste for personal atonement means that action is rarely taken. Practices of scapegoating and averting the gaze are two strategies of avoidance that replace true atonement in the novel and prevent the important stage of regeneration. The article also looks at the post-war desire for renewal as it was expressed both in society (the festival of Britain of 1951 for example) and also in late twentieth century British literature. The case for McEwan's own need for atonement as a writer is also briefly made.

Cet article explore le paradigme de la maison victorienne au sein de *Atonement*, ses récits refoulés et la culpabilité d'une génération qui n'a pas su se réveiller à temps du rêve du dix-neuvième siècle (sommeil néfaste selon W. Benjamin) pour empêcher les horreurs de l'histoire. Si la vue du grenier victorien permet une vision d'ensemble des fautes du passé et celles à venir, le dégoût anglo-saxon et protestant pour l'acte d'expiation semble écarter toute action décisive. Trouver des boucs émissaires et détourner le regard sont deux stratégies d'évitement mises en scène dans le roman et qui empêchent la régénération (étape vitale qui intervient après l'expiation et grâce à elle). Cet article se penche enfin sur le désir de renouveau exprimé non seulement dans les projets d'après-guerre (le 'Festival of Britain' de 1951) mais aussi dans la littérature de la fin du vingtième siècle. Le chapitre termine avec l'expiation personnelle de McEwan en tant qu'écrivain.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Expiation, régénération, maison victorienne, roman victorien, folle, Dickens (Charles), Sims (George), grenier, culpabilité, classe sociale, sacrifice, guerre, vingtième siècle  
**Keywords:** Atonement, regeneration, Victorian house, Victorian novel, mad woman, Dickens (Charles), Sims (George), attic, guilt, social class, sacrifice, war, twentieth century

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