

“What Are Novelists For?” *Atonement* and the British Novel

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This essay emerged from the intersection of two texts: a 2009 article by Alistair Cormack claiming that Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) was a rejection of postmodernism in favor of a return to F.R. Leavis’s “Great Tradition,” and the protagonist Briony’s closing question: “What are novelists for?” This essay criticizes the ongoing legacy of Leavis’s association of literature and moral improvement, an argument still being recycled today by critics like Harold Bloom and Martha Nussbaum, by tracing McEwan’s long history of interrogating this presumed ethical link in his fiction. Far from affirming Leavis’s position, McEwan’s work shows that some of humanity’s worst atrocities have coincided with its greatest periods of education and literacy. Rather than a moral phenomenon, the concluding section of the essay draws on the recent work of Nancy Armstrong, among others, to argue that the novel reflects the production of a peculiarly modern form of subjectivity that allows *Atonement*, by combining postmodern strategies with references to seminal texts from the British tradition (Richardson, Fielding, Burney, Austen, Woolf), to reveal the obscured roots of what gave birth to the novel in the first place.

Keywords: Ian McEwan; *Atonement*; British novel; F.R. Lewis; postmodernism

“¿Para qué sirven los novelistas?” *Expiación* y la novela británica

El presente ensayo surge de la intersección de dos textos: un artículo de 2009 de Alistair Cormack que afirma que la novela de Ian McEwan *Expiación* [*Atonement*] (2001) fue un rechazo del postmodernismo a favor de un retorno a la “Gran Tradición” de F.R. Leavis, y la pregunta final de la protagonista, Briony: “¿Para qué sirven los novelistas?” Este ensayo critica el legado actual de la asociación por parte de Leavis de literatura y mejora moral, un argumento que siguen reciclando hoy en día críticos como Harold Bloom y Martha Nussbaum, cuando investigan la prolongada tendencia de McEwan a interrogar este presunto vínculo ético en su obra. Lejos de afirmar la posición de Leavis, la obra de McEwan muestra que algunas de las

peores atrocidades de la humanidad han coincidido con sus mejores periodos de educación y alfabetización. Más que un fenómeno moral, la sección final del ensayo hace uso del reciente trabajo de Nancy Armstrong, entre otros, para argumentar que la novela refleja la producción de una forma de subjetividad peculiarmente moderna que permite a *Expiación*, mediante la combinación de estrategias postmodernas con referencias a textos seminales de la tradición británica (Richardson, Fielding, Burney, Austen, Woolf), revelar las raíces ocultas de lo que dio origen a la novela en primera instancia.

Palabras clave: Ian McEwan; *Expiación* [*Atonement*]; novela británica; F.R. Lewis; postmodernismo

In his essay “What Are Poets For?” (1946), Martin Heidegger argues that the task of the poet in the “destitute” time of modernity is to recover the remaining traces of the gods in order to prepare humanity for their return. “It is a necessary part of a poet’s nature that [...] the time’s destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him,” writes Heidegger and “[h]ence ‘poets in a destitute time’ must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry” ([1946] 1971, 94). A similar question confronts the reader in Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement* (2001). “What are novelists for?” asks Briony as she, like Heidegger’s poets, positions herself in relation to the divine, although not as an intermediary of the gods but as their effective replacement (McEwan [2001] 2003, 349). “[H]ow can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?” Briony wonders; “[t]here is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms” (350-351). This query runs through McEwan’s novel, a work that engages in a profound interrogation of what purpose in life is served by writing novels. “I read this novel as a work of fiction,” writes Brian Finney in his analysis of *Atonement*, “that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction” (Finney 2004, 69). Just as Heidegger’s poets must reassess the role of poetry in a destitute time, so too must novelists like McEwan reexamine the purpose of the novel in the context of (post) modernity, a task that requires a reconsideration of the very foundations of the genre.

1. THE GREAT TRADITION

In his essay “Postmodernism and the Ethics of Fiction in *Atonement*” (2009), Alistair Cormack sees Briony’s question as “surprisingly damning,” an open admission that the contemporary novel has lost its way (82). The object of McEwan’s critique, Cormack argues, is how postmodern fiction has overreached itself by confusing the lines separating imagination and reality. “*Atonement*’s metafiction is not there to present the reader with the inevitable penetration of the real with the fictive,” he writes. “Instead the novel serves to show that the two worlds are entirely distinct: there is the world of the real and there is the world of literature, and woe betide those who confuse the two” (82). The novel’s pointed references to Jane Austen, Cormack contends, are a confirmation that McEwan is contrasting the vitality of Austen’s realism to the “latter-day Jacobins” of postmodernism who “are guilty of making over-elaborate claims for the novel, and the literary imagination in general” (82). He concludes that McEwan returns to a “tradition of English empiricism,” with *Atonement* constituting an implicit rejection of postmodern strategies (82). For most critics, however, *Atonement* remains a postmodern novel that, for all its apparent return to realism, only plays at drawing a line between reality and fiction. Kathleen D’Angelo, for example, points out: “The reality that [Briony] renders as fiction is not a material reality; it exists only within the pages of the novel” (2009, 88-89). The very existence of Briony’s accusation that

Robbie Turner, a longstanding family friend in a budding new romance with Briony's sister Cecilia, attempted to rape her cousin Lola is open to doubt. Despite being the central pivot of the plot of *Atonement*, it does not appear in Briony's first manuscript, *Two Figures by a Fountain*, and it is entirely possible she invented it to give her revised story the "sense of forward movement" suggested in the rejection letter she receives from *Horizon* in response to that manuscript (McEwan [2001] 2003, 294). Just as Briony laments at the novel's conclusion that it is impossible for the author to step outside the text to establish complete authority, so too is coming to a definitive judgment about the truth of the novel undermined by the fact that Briony, by her own admission, is "an unreliable witness" who repeatedly changes and distorts the facts (338). We cannot entirely trust anything she says, and yet her testimony is all that we have to go by.

Cormack is on sturdier ground when he examines the impact of earlier English novelists on the formation of McEwan's novel, arguing convincingly that F.R. Leavis, especially in *The Great Tradition* (1948), exercises an important influence. "Though Leavis's list of great writers—Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad—is not identical" to McEwan's own references to the English canon in *Atonement*, Cormack writes, "those he specifically excludes [...] match those excluded by McEwan" (2009, 71). Leavis's main criterion for judging the worth of literature stems from his humanist sense of morality, which sees literature as developing the ethical capacity of a human being. Cormack's argument, criss-crossing between a consideration of *Atonement's* literary influences and the novel itself, concludes that McEwan has "written a story that passes through modernism and postmodernism to return to the heart of the 'Great Tradition' of English novelists" (2009, 79). For Cormack, *Atonement* is not only a rejection of postmodernism but a reinvigoration of Leavis's ideas about literature as a tool for moral development: *that*, supposedly, is what novelists are for.

Cormack is not the only critic to have examined the impact of earlier writers on *Atonement*—Earl Ingersoll (2004) convincingly traces the debt owed to L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), while Richard Robinson (2010) provides a detailed commentary on the novel's connections to modernist fiction. No critics, however, have considered in depth McEwan's allusions to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), a work missing even from Cormack's extensive list. Richardson is writing at a time when the novel is considered a low form, a reputation that requires *Clarissa* to exact respectability by dressing itself up in the rhetoric of moral improvement. Richardson thus reassures his readers that while some of his characters are "professed libertines as to the female sex," they are not "infidels and scoffers" in defiance of all "moral duties" ([1748] 1986, 35). The task of the novelist is to "warn and instruct" readers about the moral challenges of life, with the novel functioning as a simulation in which readers vicariously gain experience and wisdom without placing their actual virtue at risk (36). Richardson thus anticipates the moral concerns that characterize Leavis's work.

The problem with such a conclusion is that Richardson's moral rhetoric was viewed, even in the eighteenth century, as a cynical gesture, epitomized by the response to

his earlier novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741) and Eliza Haywood's *The Anti-Pamela* (1741) sought to expose the inherent hypocrisy of Richardson's heroine. The subsequent split between Richardson and Fielding constitutes one of the great literary rivalries of the eighteenth century. They not only reacted to each other's work during their lifetimes—just as *Shamela* and *Joseph Andrews* (1742) were Fielding's response to *Pamela*, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) was Richardson's rejoinder to *Tom Jones* (1749)—but they have also come to symbolize opposing qualities. Richardson and Fielding represent two different visions of what the novel is for, with the sober morality of Richardson standing in contrast to the ironic playfulness of Fielding. Leavis revisits this dispute in *The Great Tradition*, preferring Fielding over Richardson for the possibilities he opens up with his work. "Fielding deserves the place of importance given him in the literary histories, but he hasn't the kind of classical distinction we are also invited to credit him with," writes Leavis. "He is important [...] because he leads to Jane Austen," she who is the centerpiece of Leavis's canon ([1948] 2000, 11). This literary debate provides a crucial context for an early exchange in *Atonement* between Cecilia and Robbie:

"How's *Clarissa*?" He was looking down at his fingers rolling the tobacco.

"Boring."

"We mustn't say so."

"I wish she'd get on with it."

"She does. And it gets better."

They slowed, then stopped so that he could put the finishing touches to her roll-up.

She said, "I'd rather read Fielding any day." [...]

"I know what you mean," he said as they walked the remaining few yards to the fountain.

"There's more life in Fielding, but he can be psychologically crude compared to Richardson."

(McEwan [2001] 2003, 24)

Beneath Robbie's words lies a deeper question, a secret lover's curiosity that wants to discover how Cecilia views the world through the window of her literary tastes. Cecilia's dislike of Richardson is confirmed in a later conversation with her brother Leon, when she confides to him that *Clarissa* "proved the case of *Paradise Lost* in reverse—the heroine became more loathsome as her death-fixated virtue was revealed" (103). Yet Robbie's defense of Richardson suggests that McEwan believes his novels contain a hidden value that exists in spite of the repellent moralism of his work.

Leavis's views on Fielding and Richardson are the platform on which he elevates Austen to the center of the English tradition. Austen's influence is pervasive in *Atonement*, from McEwan's opening quotation from *Northanger Abbey* (1817) to the final transformation of the Tallis house into Tilney's Hotel. Although Leavis claims that Fielding is the gateway to the tradition established by Austen, he also argues that Richardson cannot be dismissed completely, for "his immediately relevant historical

importance is plain: he too is a major fact in the background of Jane Austen” ([1948] 2000, 13). Austen unifies the opposition between Richardson and Fielding, since her work brings together key elements of *both* writers. Leavis goes on to claim that while Richardson made an important impression on Austen, the “social gap between them was too wide [...] for his work to be usable by her directly” (13). “It was Fanny Burney who, by transposing him into educated life, made it possible for Jane Austen to absorb what he had to teach her,” argues Leavis (13). “Here we have one of the important lines of English literary history—Richardson—Fanny Burney—Jane Austen” (13). While Burney’s most famous novel is *Evelina* (1778), the work of interest here is her second novel *Cecilia* (1782), a text Austen references several times, and which seems the likely inspiration for McEwan’s choice of name for his character. In keeping with Leavis’s argument, she—that is, Burney/Cecilia—also provides the bridge between Richardson and Austen in *Atonement*.

Through Austen, Richardson and Fielding come to represent the dual tasks of the novelist: a serious consideration of ethics on the one hand, a playful but incisive skepticism on the other, a balance that avoids the unhealthy extremes of puritanical self-righteousness and bleak nihilism. Austen’s influence is so crucial that McEwan told *Newsweek* he regularly referred to *Atonement* in his notebooks as “my Jane Austen novel” (Giles 2002, 62). As Juliette Wells explores in “Shades of Austen in McEwan’s *Atonement*” (2008), Austen’s influence is evident not only in the parallel between Briony’s journey into experience with that of Catherine Morland but also in the evocations of the Gothic in McEwan’s descriptions of the Tallis house. Even Catherine’s conviction that Northanger Abbey conceals some terrible secret, which leads to her false indictment of General Tilney, finds its counterpart in Briony’s accusation of Robbie. *Northanger Abbey* is a landmark work not only because it skillfully parodies the Gothic novel but because it does so without rejecting the value of fiction. Henry Tilney makes it clear that, for all his “cool reasonings,” he is a voracious reader of Gothic novels (Austen [1817] 2003a, 181). Austen is not renouncing the Gothic any more than McEwan is renouncing postmodernism. Rather, both writers share a willingness to evaluate critically the texts they are producing, a self-reflexive strategy that asks repeatedly the question posed by Briony at the end of *Atonement*: “What are novelists for?” (McEwan [2001] 2003, 349).

2. THE EMPIRICAL TEST OF LITERATURE’S VIRTUE

There is no shortage of recent answers to Briony’s question. Harold Bloom’s *How to Read and Why* (2001), for instance, gives an array of overlapping reasons for the ongoing importance of literature. One reads, he says, for “pleasure,” for “healing” from “all the sorrows of familial and passional life,” because reading “alleviates loneliness,” teaches method and discipline, and lastly, because it is a pleasure in itself (19–20). “Information is endlessly available to us,” laments Bloom, “where shall wisdom be found?” (19). The answer for him lies in the literary classics, an argument that also appears in *The*

Western Canon (1994) and *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (2011). In *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (2004), Dean Mark William Roche argues that literature “opens up for us the value of diversity, the richness of different stories, even as we recognize through these works certain common aesthetic principles” (24). Frank B. Farrell, in *Why Does Literature Matter?* (2004), supplements his claim that literature “allow[s] for experiences important to the living out of a sophisticated and satisfying human life” by arguing that the literary canon has a proven track record, so that “a relatively small number of texts carry out these functions in so exceptional a manner that we owe it to past and future members of the species to keep such texts alive in our cultural traditions” (24). Martha C. Nussbaum, in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), contends that literature and the humanities are crucial for the cultivation of the civic virtue necessary for a successful democracy to flourish.

If these responses seem familiar, it is because they are all essentially variations of Leavis’s influential argument that tradition and virtue are the twin pillars of literary studies, the core on which individual moral character and a successful society are built. Yet the importance of literature is repeatedly questioned in *Atonement*, most notably when Robbie undertakes his own refutation of Leavis:

Despite his first, the study of English literature seemed in retrospect an absorbing parlor game, and reading books and having opinions about them, the desirable adjunct to a civilized existence. But it was not the core, whatever Dr. Leavis said in his lectures. It was not the necessary priesthood, nor the most vital pursuit of an inquiring mind, nor the first and last defense against a barbarian horde, any more than the study of painting or music, history or science. At various talks in his final year Robbie had heard a psychoanalyst, a Communist trade union official and a physicist each declare for his own field as passionately, as convincingly, as Leavis had for his own. (McEwan [2001] 2003, 86)

The advocates of literature, from Leavis to Bloom to Nussbaum, all champion its value from the assumption that reading instills a sense of ethics and tradition while improving one’s critical abilities, an orthodoxy that McEwan boldly dares to question in this passage.

The humanities have been belittled in recent times by the accusation that the kind of knowledge they produce is speculative, arbitrary, lacking in rigor. Literature does, nonetheless, possess its own highly-developed logic of empirical measurement, one that is meant to complement, rather than supplant or rival, the scientific method. The scientific method aims to exclude the inherent bias of the person conducting the experiment in order to reveal the objective truth about reality. In the realm of human interaction, however, actions are weighed instead by the perceived authenticity of their agent. When rereading *Atonement* with the crucial knowledge of Briony’s authorship, for example, a surprise twist that is only revealed in the novel’s epilogue, the reader becomes aware of the sheer extent of her narrative manipulation. Suspicions are aroused

by her decision to withhold vital information, to wait until part two to relate how Robbie saved her from drowning three years earlier, for instance, an incident that reveals her childhood crush on him. Such a revelation, were it to appear in part one, would have dramatically altered the reader's view of her actions, since her spurned passion would have brought her motives for accusing Robbie immediately into question. What the reader wants to know, primarily, is whether or not Briony has been *duplicious*, an evaluation that is qualitatively different from assessing the *factual* veracity of her tale—it is possible, after all, to reveal all the facts about a matter in a surgical, scientific manner while still being cunning, manipulative, deceitful.

This human capacity for duplicity is what separates scientific thought from the kind of knowledge dealt with by the humanities. The facts observed by science may sometimes work in strange and unexpected ways (quantum particles) or create illusions that trick the human senses (moving images), but there is no active duplicity at work in these phenomena. The capacity for duplicity therefore requires a different set of tools for assessing the authenticity of human behavior. Rather than seeking to eliminate all falsehood in favor of discovering the naked truth, as scientists do, literary authors explore instead how illusions, which have no value as facts, nonetheless possess value in human social interactions, depending on the context in which they appear. In *Atonement*, for instance, the value of illusion is illustrated by Briony's behavior toward Luc Cornet, a dying French soldier who, in his delirium, mistakes her for an English girl he once met. Witnessing the soothing effect this delusion has on the soldier's last minutes on earth, Briony plays along with his fantasy, eschewing the truth in order to bring him a final sense of comfort. Scenes like this deviate from reality in order to reveal a different *kind* of truth, which is that human beings operate in a complex system of values that is not limited by the factual rules of the scientific method. It is naive to assume that human beings naturally seek after factual truth in most cases, and an empirical approach to human behavior anyway soon reveals otherwise. "How quick come the reasons for approving what we like!" quips Austen in *Persuasion* (Austen [1817] 2003b, 16). It is important, therefore, to draw a critical distinction between truth and value: in the human mind, it is an everyday phenomenon for illusions to carry a weight that is greater than the objective truth. What distinguishes value from fact is the social dimension of power that marks all human interactions. Robbie uses his literary training to gain psychological control over his circumstances during the war, for example, just as Briony uses her skills as a storyteller to reshape her own history. The exploration of this discursive power is the domain of the novelist, not the scientist.

McEwan's empirical approach, which provides him with insight into the subtle duplicities of humanity, in turn makes him a rational skeptic of the idea that literature is inevitably connected to moral improvement. Studiously avoiding any self-serving assumptions about the impact of literature on virtue, *Atonement* expresses numerous doubts about its ability to change the ethical character of the world. In his rejection letter, for instance, Cyril Connolly assures Briony that she need not apologize "*for not*

writing about the war” (McEwan [2001] 2003, 296). “Since artists are politically impotent,” he tells her, “they must use this time to develop at deeper emotional levels” (297; emphasis in the original). As a soldier, Robbie reiterates his earlier stated preference for practical knowledge over poetry: “No one at Cambridge taught the benefits of good marching order. They revered the free, unruly spirits. The poets. But what did the poets know about survival?” (249). The reservations that McEwan expresses throughout the novel are not a literary game—they are genuine questions about whether literature can truly have a positive impact on life when so much historical evidence points to the contrary.

These doubts are a reflection of the chief concerns of this period of McEwan’s work. *Atonement* is the third in what I consider to be a loose trilogy of novels meditating on the close of the twentieth century. The first of these is *Black Dogs* (1992), a novel that explores the horror and disillusionment resulting from the utopian ideas of the twentieth century, which is epitomized by the loss of faith in communism by the book’s central characters, Bernard and June Tremain. Their failed marriage is chronicled by their son-in-law Jeremy, who meets his own wife, Jenny, while on a trip to Poland, where their love blossoms in the shadow of the Majdanek concentration camp, a horrifying reminder of the depths of human cruelty. As Jeremy digs through the past, both public and private, he discovers that no one is willing to take responsibility for the atrocities he uncovers. Bernard condemns June for being interested only in “poetic truth, or spiritual truth, or her own private truth, but she didn’t give a damn for *truth*, for the facts, for the kind of truth that two people could recognise independently of each other” (McEwan [1992] 1999a, 86; emphasis in the original). The scientific training that shapes Bernard’s point of view fares little better at gaining a clear view of reality, for by his own admission it is “easy [...] to bend a result to fit a theory. It isn’t even a matter of dishonesty. It’s in our nature—our desires permeate our perceptions” (89). *Black Dogs* thus seeks to evaluate the ideas of the twentieth century, not from their idealistic intentions, but according to their empirical consequences. The terrible outcome, for McEwan, is embodied in the desolation of the concentration camps and the “shameless indignity” of the perversely realized “utopia” that separated one side of the Berlin Wall from the other (92).

The second novel in this trilogy, *Amsterdam* (1998), is a still darker examination of humanity’s capacity for transforming even the most optimistic philosophies into a twisted caricature of their original intentions. McEwan shows this distortion at work in the friendship between Clive Linley, a composer, and Vernon Halliday, a newspaper editor, who bond after the funeral of a mutual friend, Molly Lane. The indignity of Molly’s sudden illness leads the two friends to agree that, should similar circumstances arise, they would arrange a merciful, medically-administered death for each other in Amsterdam, where such procedures are legal. When the two friends fall out over Vernon’s decision to publish some compromising photos of a cabinet minister, their former rapport spirals into a vicious desire for revenge. McEwan refutes any intrinsic connection between art and virtue, using the thoughts of Clive, in this passage, to take a particular swipe at novelists:

It would have been possible to back out of his engagements by assuming the license of the free artistic spirit, but he loathed such arrogance. He had a number of friends who played the genius card when it suited, failing to show up for this or that in the belief that whatever local upset it caused, it could only increase respect for the compelling nature of their high calling. These types—novelists were by far the worst—managed to convince friends and families that not only their working hours but every nap and stroll, every fit of silence, depression, or drunkenness, bore the exculpatory ticket of high intent. A mask for mediocrity, was Clive's view. (McEwan [1998] 1999c, 66)

In *Amsterdam*, the utopian political visions of *Black Dogs* are replaced by the equally utopian artistic aspirations of romanticism. As the plot plunges toward its murderous *dénouement*, the romantic message of salvation through art in Clive's new symphony turns from harmony into "dissonance" (171), so that what "should have been the symphony's moment of triumphant assertion, the gathering up of all that was joyously human before the destruction to come" comes across "as a simple fortissimo repetition, it was literal-minded bombast, it was bathos; less than that, it was a void" (173). With this musical metaphor, *Amsterdam* looks back on the twentieth century, on romanticism, indeed, on the entire history of the past millennium, as resembling a symphony of human perversity that reproduces over and over again the same depressing tune. What begins as a grand, optimistic vision repeatedly descends into a cruel parody of its ideal, just as Clive's final work, conceived in a spirit of revenge, turns out to be nothing more than a "shameless copy of Beethoven's Ode to Joy" (191).

This loose trilogy of novels stands as a pertinent critique of the view that virtue and literature are inextricably linked. The empirical evidence, McEwan points out in these works, suggests otherwise, for as the size of the reading public has grown, so too the scale of humanity's atrocities has increased. McEwan is not saying that literature *cannot* have an effect on virtue—what he is disputing is its inevitability, its universal application. In McEwan's novels, therefore, literature affects his characters in different ways, but the depth of this impact is variable and uncertain. In *Enduring Love* (1997), for instance, Joe Rose, a journalist who writes about science, scoffs at the humanities, dismissing them as the work of "scientific illiterates" (McEwan [1997] 1999b, 46). Joe's feelings arise from the fact that he "is jealous, one might say, of literature itself," an emotional hurdle inseparable from the process of reconciling with his wife Clarissa, a Keats scholar (Greenberg 2007, 99). In *Atonement*, Robbie believes that his training in literature will help him in his future medical practice:

For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive men toward ill health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall—this was the doctor's business, and it was literature's too. [...] [H]is kind of doctor would be alive to the monstrous patterns of fate, and to the vain and comic denial of

the inevitable; he would press the enfeebled pulse, hear the expiring breath, feel the fevered hand begin to cool and reflect, in the manner that only literature and religion teach, on the puniness and nobility of mankind... (McEwan [2001] 2003, 87)

McEwan's more recent works feature characters that remain staunchly deaf to literature's value. In *Saturday* (2005), the capacity of Baxter, an uneducated thug, to be moved by poetry is meaningfully juxtaposed with Henry Perowne's own indifference to literature, an outlook he maintains despite his upper-class lifestyle, his training in neurobiology, and the interventions of his daughter Daisy, an aspiring poet. Michael Beard, the vulgar protagonist of *Solar* (2010), reads Milton's poetry for the cynical purpose of seducing an English student, later to become his first wife, and in the process develops a lifelong contempt for the humanities, which he sees as superficial and vastly inferior to his own studies in physics. In *Sweet Tooth* (2012), literary authors are recruited as propaganda agents, employed by secret government agencies under the rubric of combating communism. McEwan thus meticulously dismantles the hypothesis that literature plays an indispensable role in the formation of either public or individual virtue. It may have an impact in some cases, but the historical evidence suggests that literature is not a reliable tool for improving the ethical behavior of humanity as a whole.

3. THE HOUSE OF FICTION

These ethical failures require us to return, once again, to the question of what novelists are for—if not for moral improvement, then what? Furthermore, within the field of literature, is there not something peculiar to the novel genre that distinguishes it from other forms? Poetry, after all, plays an important role in *Atonement*—Cecilia sends Robbie a clipping of W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" (1939), for instance, and Robbie owns an extensive collection of poetry, from the "eighteenth-century poetry that had almost persuaded him he should be a landscape gardener" to his copies of "Wilfred Owen, [...] the priceless 1783 edition of Crabbe's *The Village*, his Housman, the autographed copy of Auden's *The Dance of Death*" (McEwan [2001] 2003, 87). Robbie's rejection of poetry as impractical for today's world begins with his decision to become a doctor and continues, in part two, with his meditation on how the mindset of a poet might inhibit him as a soldier. Finally, there is Cyril Connolly's observation to Briony that the "*crystalline present moment is [...] a worthy subject in itself, especially for poetry*" but that "*an underlying pull of simple narrative [...] is required*" to engage the modern reader fully (294-295; emphasis in the original). *Atonement* also contains important references to drama. At Cambridge, Robbie played Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1602), and there are further references to that play, as well as *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), in the list of doomed lovers to which Robbie and Cecilia compare their plight. The novel's most obvious connection to drama is Briony's play

The Trials of Arabella, although its initial failure and her incipient adulthood lead her to reject drama as a vehicle inadequate to convey the complex states of mind she wishes to explore. “And how close she had come to wasting that life as a playwright!” she exclaims with childish pique (McEwan [2001] 2003, 71). The evocation of poetry and drama in these examples, and their subsequent incorporation into Briony’s novel, requires that we consider the specificity of her query—what, specifically, are *novelists* for?

An established discourse exploring this question already exists, of course. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), for instance, Mikhail Bakhtin traces the evolution of the novel, a form he defines by its innovative use of polyphony, emerging from such earlier, monological forms of literature as the epic. Georg Lukács’s seminal *Theory of the Novel* (1916) also draws a connection between the novel and the epic, arguing that the former is “the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” ([1916] 1974, 56). In Briony’s closing ruminations that “atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists” is impossible (McEwan [2001] 2003, 351), we can hear the distant echo of Lukács’s assertion that the “novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” ([1916] 1974, 88). In *The English Novel* (2005), Terry Eagleton argues that there has been a historical shift away from poetry toward the novel because, in an echo of Robbie’s sentiments, the concerns of poetry now focus on private experience, with the novel having come to occupy the public space where poetry once reigned.

As poetry gradually ceases to be a public genre somewhere between Shelley and Swinburne, its moral and social functions pass to the novel, in a new division of literary labour. By the mid-nineteenth century the word “poetry” has become more or less synonymous with the interior, the person, the spiritual or psychological [...] The poetic has now been redefined as the opposite of the social, discursive, doctrinal and conceptual, all of which has been relegated to prose fiction. The novel takes care of the outer world, while poetry copes with the inner one. (12)

The common thread that connects these various theories is that the novel constitutes a genre that, because it comes into existence at the same time as a certain permutation of modernity, is particularly well-suited to exploring the conditions of that era.

This idea finds its affirmation in Briony’s youthful desire to create a new kind of novel, one that goes beyond plot and character, those “quaint devices that belonged to the nineteenth century” (McEwan [2001] 2003, 265). “A modern novelist could no more write characters and plots than a modern composer could a Mozart symphony,” muses Briony, “a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and [...] only fiction, a new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change” (265). This attempt is undermined by the inherent contradictions of her ambition, for this supposedly new approach to fiction comes from her having “read Virginia Woolf’s *The*

Waves three times” (265). Briony’s imitation of Woolf’s style is ultimately derivative, so that for all its promising qualities, the editors of *Horizon* note that her manuscript “owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf” (294; emphasis in the original). This example nonetheless allows McEwan to pinpoint an important contradiction shared by both the novel and modernity: in their capacity for reinvention, each of these discourses is often blind to the forces that motivate them, so that what is conceived as being new is often a reconditioned version of an earlier, misrecognized impulse.

This inconsistent attitude toward the past, in which history is simultaneously referenced and disavowed, is particularly evident in the first part of the novel. The Tallis house is used as the main metaphor of this contradiction: the original building was an Adam-style house, a neoclassical mode of architecture that was in fashion during the eighteenth century. McEwan creates an implicit parallel between this house and the English novel—the basic “architecture” of which, the features that will inform all later permutations, is laid down during this same time. The conflagration of the Adam-style house in 1880 coincides with the publication of Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880), which James, in his preface to the New York Edition, would later famously compare to a “house of fiction” that possesses “not one window, but a million [...] every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, [...] by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will” ([1880] 2003, 45). James’s ideas in turn sowed the seeds of Woolf’s later experiments in perspectivism, a pattern of revolutionary succession that marks the entire history of the novel’s evolution.

Just as Charles Baudelaire, in “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), defines modernity as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable,” so too the novel captures this restless spirit of change in its protean capacity to fit the whims and fashions of the time ([1863] 1995, 12). That is why revolutionizing the novel can never be the same thing as destroying it—on the contrary, revolution is the energy on which the genre feeds. McEwan symbolizes the ongoing survival of the novel’s literary architecture in *Atonement* using the island temple, which eludes the fire that destroyed the original house.

The island temple, built in the style of Nicholas Revett in the late 1780s, was intended as a point of interest, an eye-catching feature to enhance the pastoral ideal, and had of course no religious purpose at all [...] [T]he temple was supposed to embody references to the original Adam house, though nobody in the Tallis family knew what they were. [...] The idea that the temple [...] grieved for the burned-down mansion, that it yearned for a grand and invisible presence, bestowed a faintly religious ambience. Tragedy had rescued the temple from being entirely a fake. (McEwan [2001] 2003, 68-9)

The temple thus remains as a trace of the house’s original design, though neglected and forgotten, an “orphan [...] with no one to care for it” (69). Yet this neglect gives it a new authenticity, one which is enhanced by its setting as the location of the novel’s

primal scene. In the temple's ongoing existence McEwan thus establishes a connection to the eighteenth-century rise of the English novel—even the putative rape of Lola bears an uncanny parallel to the violation of Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe*. In this way, McEwan turns the tradition of the novel into a masterfully realized return of the repressed. The principles that animated Defoe, Richardson and Fielding have never truly disappeared. They have lain dormant, forgotten, repressed, but they were always latent in the postmodern novel, waiting for the right moment to be reanimated so as to demonstrate the full extent of their power. It is in this respect, rather than Leavis's moral purpose, that *Atonement* is the inheritor of the Great Tradition.

McEwan's engagement with the tradition of the English novel is a logical consequence of his investigation into what novelists are for, a question that necessarily returns to the origins of the genre. As such, looking beyond the novel's immediate historical context by understanding the evolution of the novel provides a richer understanding of what McEwan is doing in *Atonement*. Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), for instance, outlines the emergence of a new philosophical mindset in the seventeenth century that thought in terms of concrete, individual experience rather than abstract universals. These philosophical influences brought about a crucial series of literary innovations: the creation of realistic plots grounded in contemporary settings, the exploration of the psychology of individualized characters, and the invention of an impression of truth through such devices as found letters and journals. Watt thus lays out the historical foundations of the genre's empirical tradition that resonates in *Atonement* through the prism of Austen.

Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (1987) focuses on the political history of the genre, extending Watt's observation that the novel was built on the "great power and self-confidence of the middle class," McKeon examines how two opposing notions of virtue inform the novel's formative years ([1987] 2002, 59). "The social significance of the English novel at the time of its origins lies in its ability to mediate [...] the revolutionary clash between status and class orientations and the attendant crisis of status inconsistency," writes McKeon, outlining a critical division between "progressive" and "conservative" ideology, the two sides of a political debate over whether virtue springs from personal merit or aristocratic birth (173-174). While this specific dispute has disappeared from today's society, its importance continues to resonate, argues Nancy Armstrong in *How Novels Think* (2005), because it helped create the modern notion of the individual. "[T]he history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same," writes Armstrong, "[t]he British novel provides the test case" (3). The rise of the novel, and its attendant notion of the individual, reflect, for Armstrong, an ongoing social revolution, the history of which must be delineated if we are to understand not only the novel but also ourselves.

The genealogies that Watt, McKeon and Armstrong provide of the English novel are crucial for interpreting *Atonement*, since McEwan portrays the Tallis family as inhabiting an environment saturated by historical objects they do not fully understand.

This pastiche of tradition extends beyond the orphaned island temple, the purpose of which “nobody in the Tallis family knew” (McEwan [2001] 2003, 69), to Emily Tallis’s survey of the family’s dining room: “The walls, the paneling, the pervasive heaviness of nearly new fixtures, the colossal firedogs, the walk-in fireplaces of bright new stone referred back through the centuries to a time of lonely castles in mute forests. Her father-in-law’s intention, she supposed, was to create an ambience of solidity and family tradition” (136). A further touch is the portrait that hangs in that room, a picture of an unknown aristocratic family: “The portrait, in the style of Gainsborough, showed an aristocratic family [...] posed before a vaguely Tuscan landscape. No one knew who these people were, but it was likely that Harry Tallis thought they would lend an impression of solidity to his household” (118). Cecilia’s genealogical investigations reveal that her “family tree was wintry and bare, as well as rootless,” the family name having been changed from Cartwright to Tallis during her grandfather’s lifetime (102). The Tallises are thus commoners who, were they living in a different age, would be seen as merely pretending to be gentry. So successful is their transformation, however, that the current generation of Tallises feels no need to suppress or deny their lowly past. The “smoothing hand of time” has allowed their family to recreate itself according to a new image of gentility (152). The rise of this new mindset, as Armstrong contends, parallels the rise of the novel, not only as overlapping phenomena peculiar to modernity but also in this shared capacity for innovative reinvention.

The primary impulse of the novelist is thus to innovate, to overcome the feeling of exhaustion that John Barth (1997) famously identifies in the twentieth-century English novel. The plot of a novel, writes Peter Brooks, “animates the sense-making process,” a practice that reflects, in turn, the burgeoning ability of modern humans to shape the meaning of their lives (1984, 37). The characters in *Atonement* repeatedly employ the conventions of narrative as a means for seizing hold of the shapelessness of life and endowing it with a sense of structure and meaning. “Modern man,” writes Michel Foucault, “is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself” ([1984] 1991, 42). Far from being a rejection of the past, Foucault’s words are framed by an implicit engagement with it—not, as in Heidegger or Lukács, so as to recover a state that has been lost, but to understand the fractured, amnesiac manner in which modernity continually reinvents itself. The “ideological core” (Armstrong 2005, 10) of what novelists do, Armstrong contends, has never really changed since the novel’s inception, for despite its endless permutations the genre always comes back to “the presupposition that novels think like individuals about the difficulties of fulfilling oneself under specific cultural conditions” (10). Endless renovations to the “house of fiction” have caused its origins, like the Tallis house, to become lost and obscured. Austen was a great novelist, claims Leavis, because “her relation to tradition is a creative one” in which her work “like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to

the past" ([1948] 2000, 13-14). In the same spirit as Austen, McEwan uses his fiction to remind readers that the task of the novelist is to create something new while at the same time acknowledging the past. *Atonement* successfully reconciles these opposing principles of modernity, functioning simultaneously as a forward-looking experiment in fiction and a critical reminder of the founding ideas that gave rise to the English novelistic tradition.

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