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Deprived of protection: The ethico-politics of authorship in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract: The paper proposes to read the British novelist Ian McEwan as an ethically disconcerted post-imperial writer. His early works “gave voice to an anxiety about social, cultural and moral decline after the end of Britain’s imperial power had become vividly apparent” (Groes). Both the writer’s and his characters’ fatherless post-war childhoods testify to the systematic disconnection of the public and private in the late imperial and post-imperial country, which induced the growing feeling of unprotectedness among its inhabitants. McEwan consistently searches for an ethically responsible literary form to cope with the traumatic defenselessness that, much beyond post-imperial Britain, became the experience of both the recent world and literature. In this search, he develops a peculiar technology of his authorial self. By tending to provide a shelter to the defenseless characters, it reproduces the protective attitude of these characters toward the other characters. However, the author simultaneously exposes their remorseful attachment to the victims as selfish. As he thus never stops ethically exempting himself from his Doppelgänger, he continuously wrong-foots the reader. In sum, *Atonement* draws its characters, narrator, author, and readers into a frenetic pursuit of the final *ethical* truth by repeatedly entrapping them in this truth’s provisional *political* surrogates.

Keywords: unprotectedness, post-imperial novel, self-exemption, Doppelgänger, authorship

As Derrida never tired of repeating, it is not regular states but exceptional states caused by the collapse of our familiar world that confront us with the necessity of ethical decisions (Derrida 1993; 1992b: 13–14; 2005b: 155). As long as the world is *mine*, I do not experience the other’s otherness and, therefore, nor its ethical challenge. My world must fall into mischief, come out of sync, or disappear beyond my horizon in order for me to become aware of my responsibility toward the other (as the *other*). My defenselessness is the very condition for my bearing the other.

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Considering this key point in Derrida's deconstructive ethics, it is understandable that he paid great attention to the last line of Paul Celan's poem *Große, glühende Wölbung* (Vast, Glowing Vault): "Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen" (The world is gone, I must carry you) (Derrida 2005a, 2005b: 155; Derrida 2011: 104–105, 169–170, 266–268). In a long and elaborate series of reflections, Derrida argues that once my familiar world has gone, a wholly-other (*tout autre*) world opens up that enables me to remember, yet never to fully appropriate, the one that has disappeared. Being at the same time a condition of my *possibility* and my *impossibility*, this reverberating world of the past escapes me. From the moment of its withdrawal from my familiar horizon, it operates as a persistent challenge to the time and space of my belonging as well as to the rule of my cognition and behavior. In fact, through its interventions, its radical otherness disturbs all that appears familiar to me from the very beginning of Derrida's philosophy (Derrida 1982: 29–69). However, in its later and more explicitly "ethical" phase, this evasive alterity acts as a disruptive constituent of mine, which bereaves me both of mastery over myself and over the other. The state of exception thus gradually substitutes the regular one. From now on, my freedom is handed over to this haunting 'elsewhere', becoming "a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude" (Derrida 2005b: 152). I am invited to invent the new rule of cohabitation with it, which cannot but betray the rule of the world that I belong to. "You have to betray [the world you belong to] in order to be truthful [to the world that displaces you into an 'elsewhere']" (Derrida 2003: 11).

There are ethics precisely because there is this contradiction... [...] I have to respond to two injunctions, different and incompatible. That's where responsibility starts. [...] This is very dangerous and you have no guarantee. [...] Ethics is dangerous. (Derrida 2003: 32–33)

Next to the immediate *political* responsibility toward others inside my given world there is thus this infinite *ethical* responsibility toward the evasive and powerfully resonant alterity outside my world, which in Derrida's understanding enjoys unquestionable priority. He accordingly states that *das Unheimliche* (in the sense of both the uncanny and unhomely) is "in a certain way the only thing which interests me" (Derrida 2003: 33–34). Indeed, his thinking is consistently oriented by the diasporic injunctions of this exilic otherness that invites him to an uneasy cohabitation. For the Derrida of the 1990s, such resonant calls to responsibility 'from the other shore' are epitomized by the radically undecidable meaning of literature. Since it is impossible to determine the identity of its acts, literature establishes a peculiar community in which "we know in common that we have nothing in common" (Derrida 2001: 58). As opposed to political communities with identifiable criteria of belonging, the only thing that unites such an ethical community is unconditional hospitality to literature's absolute alterity (Derrida

2000b: 83). Precisely because this community eliminates “common belonging”, Derrida allocates it the prestigious status of the “New International” (Derrida 2004: 85). Being “never at home” in its “ecstatic process”, the New International “receives its determination from something other than itself” (Derrida 2000a: 28), i.e. from literature’s haunting otherness. Since literature thus becomes *the* “heir to the spirit of the Enlightenment which must not be renounced”, its operations commit all other communities to a remorseless “transformation, re-evaluation and self-reinterpretation” (Derrida 2004: 88).

It is this “new Enlightenment for the century to come” (Derrida 2004: 90), i.e. an Enlightenment that is itself persistently enlightened by literature as regards its “infinite task”, that Derrida unconditionally attaches himself to. In his philosophy of the 1990s, literature remains completely spared of deconstruction, whereas all other (id)entities are subjected to it. In the same sense in which he criticized Levinas’s concept of ethics for not having taken into consideration its philosophical and historical “memory” that would necessarily condition it (Derrida and Labarrière 1986: 76), he could himself be criticized for having neglected the long philosophical and historical tradition of his rendering of literature in order to keep its ethical urge untainted.¹ As I have already argued elsewhere (Biti 2016: 283), although Derrida had repeatedly drawn attention to the possibility of a violent implementation of such an absolute ‘command from beyond’ (Derrida 1997: 65),² of its perilous proximity to ‘the bad, even to the worst’ (Derrida 1992c: 28),³ whenever this ‘command’ was epitomized by literature, he nonetheless

1 This means that Derrida’s understanding of literature (though not always uncritically, as I will indicate in short) spontaneously adopts the early German Romanticist literary opposition to Kant’s philosophical transcendentalism. Because he tacitly adopts this overturn of philosophy’s supremacy over literature – instead of reworking it as he regularly does with other oppositions – transcendentalism resurfaces in his rendering of literature. He significantly highlights the importance of the (new) Enlightenment, making now literature into its chief representative. If, in the Enlightenment doctrine, philosophical ratio assumed divine traits, the same authority is now allocated to literature: “God looks at me and I don’t see him and it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out [ce regard qui me regard (Derrida 1992a: 59, 67, 87)] that my responsibility comes into being” (Derrida 1995: 51, 67, 91). In the ultimate analysis, however, Derrida places such divinization of literature at the service of deconstruction as its protector. For instance, he unhesitatingly declares that “deconstruction is justice” (Derrida 1992c: 15).

2 Derrida explicitly warns that pure face-to-face communication with the Other (i.e. without the mediation of the “small [political] other”) might result in perilous consequences, i.e. the impossibility of distinguishing between good and evil, love and hate, giving and taking etc. (Derrida 1997: 66).

3 Published as a separate book *a posteriori*, the French original contains an addition that is even more explicit in this regard: “Abandonnée à elle seule, l’idée incalculable et donatrice de la justice

reiterated its welcome reevaluating character. Tending to deny literature's political investments, he ethically sanitized its High Address.

I take this significant understanding of literature by Derrida to be subconsciously healing the experience of defenselessness that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, powerfully affected some intellectual circles in post-imperial and post-colonial Europe. The prolongation of the turbulent interwar state of exception into the posttraumatic after-war Europe deepened the feeling of unprotectedness among selected intellectuals in both imperial countries and/or their (former) colonies. Whereas Derrida, as an Algerian Jew, might be attributed to the latter group, Maurice Blanchot for example, who in his youth collaborated with an anti-Semitic regime, testifies to the possibility of the former group's exposure to exceptional conditions.⁴ Irrespective of whether this exposure was political, as in the first instance, or ethical, as in the second, it drove its victims to establish a 'literary community' as the shelter for their imagined allies.

As I argue in more detail in the following, one of the ethically disconcerted post-imperial intellectuals was the British novelist Ian McEwan. Sebastian Groes convincingly argues that McEwan's early works "gave voice to an anxiety about social, cultural and moral decline after the end of Britain's imperial power had become vividly apparent" (Groes 2009a: 6). Groes also addresses the systematic disconnection of the public and private that characterized the fatherless post-war childhood of both McEwan himself and his hero Henry Perowne (in *Saturday*) (Groes 2009b: 108). Formative of the writer's youth, the frequent military service of McEwan's father at various outposts of Britain's colonies additionally induced his continual geographical, cultural, psychological and linguistic displacement (Groes 2009a: 5). In my interpretation, this deeply divided and guilt-ridden constellation of post-imperial Britain gave rise to the ethical profile of literature in McEwan's work, akin to (although, of course, also different from) that in the works of Derrida and Blanchot. Being developed by a novelist in the first place,

est toujours au plus près du mal, voire du pire car elle peut toujours être réappropriée par le calcul le plus pervers" (Derrida 1994: 61).

4 For Blanchot's collaboration see Haase and Large 2001: 85–95. In his lucid reading of Blanchot's "thought from outside", Foucault pointed to the post-traumatic character of Blanchot's attraction by "an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible [... and that] has nothing to offer but the infinite void" (Foucault 1987: 28). This powerful attraction to the inarticulate 'outside' makes him negligent of the politically articulated order *inside* the world, which is extremely dangerous because the inarticulate outside, through its endless withdrawal, gradually removes the attracted person from his or her political articulation (Foucault 1987: 34), making his or her past, kin and whole life non-existent (Foucault 1987: 28). Nonetheless, Blanchot was (like Derrida) deeply fascinated with the dispossessed of protection (Foucault 1987: 41, 45), which ultimately drove him to render literature (like Derrida) as the most proper caretaker of theirs.

McEwan's understanding of literature acquires its final form in the complex narrative construction of his 'literary acts'. However, in order to uncover the suppressed traumatic germ at their basis I will open my analysis of *Atonement* with its central characters' significant feeling of defenselessness.

It deserves attention that the loss of parental care that severely affected the infants in *The Cement Garden* strikes the dependents in *Atonement* with unabated fierceness.⁵ In this novel, not only the Tallis family's children grow up dispossessed of parental devotion. Father Jack is continually physically absent due to his political engagements and (secret) love affairs in London, while mother Emily absents herself from her children's lives because of her frequent migraines. The oldest among the three children and the only son, Leon, refuses to assume his father's responsibility, at least from his sister Cecilia's perspective (McEwan 2001: 102–103). Since their grandfather Harry was a farm laborer's son who changed his name and whose birth and marriage were not recorded, Cecilia experiences her family tree as wintry, bare, and rootless (McEwan 2001: 109). She sorely misses her father's authority that, even if she disagrees with him, centers her world (McEwan 2001: 46–47). The same goes for her younger sister, the novel's central character Briony (McEwan 2001: 122), in whose view her father must know the truth but is sadly inaccessible (McEwan 2001: 285–286). Deprived also of her mother's care, she either requires mothering from her older sister (McEwan 2001: 103) or isolates herself on her artificial island in an artificial lake (McEwan 2001: 163). She spends her time alone in her "intact inner world", always off and away in her mind (as her mother Emily perceives her, McEwan 2001: 68).

Even more shaken than the Tallis children are the Quincey children, cousins from the north on a visit to the Tallis' household, because of their parents' divorce and neglect (McEwan 2001: 57–59). Parental disregard is thus the general experience of infants in *Atonement*. The epitome of the fatherless childhood, however, is that of Robbie, the son of the Tallis' servants who was abandoned by his gardener father as a six years-old child (McEwan 2001: 122) and thereupon found in Jack Tallis a benevolent surrogate father to support his schooling. Unfortu-

5 As indicated above, Henry Perowne in *Saturday* also recalls his fatherless childhood (McEwan 2005: 194) and is deeply disquieted by the disaggregation of his mother's mind (McEwan 2005: 158–167, 273–275). Some critics have addressed McEwan's own parentless childhood years (from the age of eleven to eighteen) in this context but it would certainly be misplaced to read McEwan's novels exclusively through these optics. In them, defenselessness reflects the condition of world and literature much more than his individual and personal problems. I therefore agree with those critics who claim that, inasmuch as McEwan consistently searches for an ethically responsible literary form, his novels develop truth-oriented as opposed to relativist postmodern poetics (Elam 2009, Alden 2009).

nately, it turns out that even the Tallises renounce him. As a result of the return of this trauma, he desperately longs for his own father, dead or alive, to center his life. Moreover, he powerfully desires the role of the father for himself (McEwan 2001: 241). That is to say, precisely as an abandoned child, whose rejection was reinvigorated by his surrogate family, Robbie strongly inclines to take into protection various helpless dependents.⁶ His passionate attachment to them is striking (even more so if we consider that it is established by Briony as the narrator *and* the implied author as this narrator's shaper). First, he bravely saves Briony from the river (McEwan 2001: 230–231). Then, he rescues the disappeared Quincey brothers by carrying “Pierrot on his shoulders and Jackson in his arms” back into the Tallises' house (McEwan 2001: 262). Finally, in the disjointed world of war, devoid of God – a chaotic inversion of the poetic order that characterized his study time (McEwan 2001: 264) – a severed child's leg in a tree does not let him go (McEwan 2001: 191–192, 202, 262). It reminds him of a Flemish woman with a terrified child in her arms (McEwan 2001: 236–238) for whose dismemberments he somehow feels responsible:

He must go back and get the boy from the tree. (...) Gather up from the mud the pieces of burned, striped cloth, the shred of his pyjamas, then bring him down, the poor pale boy, and make a decent burial. (McEwan 2001: 263)

Haunted by the abandonments he was victimized by, Robbie proves to be affectively committed to victims. If we try to translate the aforementioned poem by Celan into his own ethical terms, the outcome might read: because my familiar “world is gone” “I must carry you” as a random, collateral victim whom I happened to meet in a world out of joint. For who if not I myself am the ultimate addressee of your victimhood? The war as the paradigmatic state of exception disqualifies inherited rules that the so-called grand history instructs us to adhere to. They lose their former validity:

Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books? And take the reasonable view and begin to assign the blame? No one would ever know what it was like to be here. Without the details there could be no larger picture. (McEwan 2001: 227)

In a world deprived of universal protection, in which therefore “everyone [came to be] guilt and no one was”, because “we witnessed each other's crimes” (McEwan 2001: 261), infers Robbie, one of us who is guilt has to take the

⁶ In this regard, his acting is an internal echo of McEwan's narrative acting that, as delineated above, equally tends to provide a shelter to the defenseless characters and readers.

responsibility for “burying the innocent” and letting “no one change the evidence” (McEwan 2001: 262–263). This is why he – silently endorsed by the narrator, Briony, behind him and the implied author behind her – attentively records occurrences that do not match the so-called accounts of general historical interest. In a world thrown into the state of exception, the criteria of historical and moral ‘recordability’ are left to individual responsibility. It would be immoral to take them at their face value.

Robbie’s delineated strategy of taking care of apparently insignificant occurrences, apart from resounding Briony’s and the author’s, is all but unique in the highly turbulent interwar time devoid of secure belonging. Crafted as his character is, its ethical attitude establishes elective affinities with that of some renowned ‘external’ contemporaries.⁷ To mention the most famous one, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War Ludwig Wittgenstein declared that the human world’s ultimate sense lies outside its inhabitants’ horizon (Wittgenstein [1921]1974: 6.41), which is why it remains impenetrable to them. All they can do is attentively gather its indices. The same ruined world has also driven Walter Benjamin to replace historian with the “chronic” who lets “nothing that ever happened” go unnoticed (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte”, 252). In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, one of the key documents of the same chaotic interwar time that affects the world of *Atonement*, Benjamin stated that any trifle might prove to be important for the final account to come (252). In his notes from the same state of exception, finally, Mikhail Bakhtin similarly concluded: “There is nothing absolutely dead; every meaning will experience the holiday of its rebirth” (Bakhtin 1990: 373).

While it establishes the delineated multidirectional correspondences, Robbie’s ethical reasoning in the midst of the war operates as a sort of transmitter between the *prewar* thinkers and Briony’s and McEwan’s *postwar* ethics. The overlapping of these two states of exception points to their troubling continuity. McEwan is as equally guilt-ridden as Derrida who “always feels guilty” (Derrida 2003: 48–49) and both of them in a way subscribe to Robbie’s war statement: “Let the guilty bury the innocent, and let no one change the evidence” (McEwan 2001: 262–263). Even if McEwan attributes the glorification and sanctification of Robbie’s character to the atonement of his narrative shaper Briony, thus keeping aloof from both Doppelgängers of him, he nonetheless engages their war commitment

⁷ The abundance of intertextual references in McEwan’s work is notorious (Cormack 2009; Marcus 2009; Groes 2009). However, correspondence between Robbie’s ethical orientation and that of some prominent interwar thinkers does not so much originate in McEwan’s intertextual strategy as in the ethical disposition of his oeuvre, which was generated by the same experience of defenselessness as felt by Robbie. Once again, Robbie appears as the author’s Doppelgänger.

to the innocents to undo the contemporary heroic myths (Elam 2009: 44).⁸ His meticulous care for the seemingly insignificant details of the past – as induced among other things by personal indebtedness to his father as a Second World War veteran who served at Dunkirk⁹ – refuses to take recent historical fictions at their word (Alden 2009: 60–61).

Even though Robbie's and Briony's remorseful attachment to the victims anticipates in many important aspects the authorial ethical strategy in *Atonement*, they are both simultaneously exposed as selfish. This is how correspondences operate in this novel: they continually turn those who know better into the duped, truths into illusions, and vice versa. While the narrator and author expose their characters as their inferiors – 'almost the same but not quite' – these inferiors make their superiors reproduce their fallacies. All are entrapped within a persistently devaluing and revaluing web of correspondences which is why, ultimately, the reader has nobody left to rely on. As one critic put it, *Atonement* "continuously wrong-foots the reader, brutally punishing us for our willingness to suspend our disbelief" (Groes 2009a: 4). The author never stops ethically exempting himself from his Doppelgänger, but he nonetheless reenacts their moral and cognitive aberrations; and the same happens to his reader. In sum, *Atonement* draws its characters, narrator, author, and readers into the frenetic pursuit of the final *ethical* truth but repeatedly entraps them in this truth's provisional *political* surrogates.

Anyhow, for those who are remorsefully attached to this truth, no worse a delusion than the selfish withdrawal into one's own artificial world is imaginable. Instead of ethically extending the politically established world, it tyrannically restricts it. In the novel, this kind of behavior represents *young* Briony, who thereby inconspicuously acts as the Doppelgänger of the author's delusive youth.¹⁰ But this is not her only blind spot because she also instinctively reproduces her evasive mother who finds refuge either in her migraine, selfish "peace of mind" (McEwan 2001: 71), or complete disregard of upcoming war dangers as anticipated in her husband's secret file "Eventuality Planning" (McEwan 2001:

8 For the parallel profile of Briony's and McEwan's commitment to the meticulous reconstruction of the past, see Finney (2002).

9 In his reply to accusations of plagiarism, McEwan (2006) addresses "his weighty obligation to strict accuracy. In writing about wartime especially, it seems like a form of respect for the suffering of a generation scripted into a nightmare".

10 In "Mother Tongue: A Memoir" McEwan confessed that in his early collections of stories "[m]y female characters became the repository of all the goodness that men fell short of. In other words, pen in hand, I was going to set of my mother free" (2002: 41–42), i.e. from the mistreatment of his father.

122). As testified by Briony's youthful melodrama *The Trials of Arabella*, her desire to compensate for her family's disintegration through the creation of literary illusion beats even that of her mother. The teenager enjoys exerting absolute control over her artificial world, which is why she keeps the complexities of the surrounding reality at a safe distance from it. Next to her mother and young McEwan, she equally echoes young Robbie at the time of his Cambridge professors who "revered the free, unruly spirits" of poets (McEwan 2001: 264). Mature Briony is therefore at pains to liberate herself from her youthful blind spots. But instead of the desired liberation, in an informed reader's perspective, she accomplishes only a reduplication of Robbie's and McEwan's maturation.

At the moment when Robbie chooses to study medicine, he equally exempts himself from the attitude to literature that was induced by his education at Cambridge (McEwan 2001: 91).¹¹ But it turns out, retroactively, that he thereby merely fulfilled the elderly Briony's wish to transform her literature through her expiating medical care. While Robbie's literary maturing thus echoes Briony's, her nursing remorsefully resumes Cecilia's damaged course of life. In this novel's entrapping hall of mirrors, all emancipations are destined to fail. At the end of the day, Briony's conviction that she would be a better writer for having gone through a difficult life experience unwittingly turns Robbie's conviction that "he would be a better doctor for having read literature" upside down (McEwan 2001: 93). Through Robbie's delusions, Briony realizes that the vicissitudes of reality only exist to serve the ennoblement of her literature. She accordingly refutes the 'Leavisite' right of reality to arrogate to itself the primary ontological position (McEwan 2001: 371). The only task of life is to aggravate and thus refine the mission of literature. Yet in the "wrong-footing strategy" of this novel, even Briony's "suspension of disbelief" in literature is destined to be punished.

This disillusionment by Briony deserves more detailed elaboration. The re-drawing of her life's originally envisaged design – nursing instead of university – makes Briony abandon the writerly self-confinement of "the earnest, reflective child" that she was by considering in her subsequent literary attempts other, previously neglected points of view (McEwan 2001: 41). The grown-up Briony

11 Before this distancing, literature visibly affected his way of thinking, for example the conversations and letters that he shared with Cecilia (the obscene one is obviously inspired by D. H. Lawrence; see Marcus 2009: 91). Robbie is said to have finished English literature at Cambridge at the time of Professor Leavis (1969: 91), who knowingly claimed the preeminence of Literary Studies as a "strong humane center" over increasingly "specialist studies" as its mighty rivals (Leavis 1969: 3). With him, literature wiped its hands clean of any political interest by rendering its representation of reality all-encompassing. As already indicated, not only Robbie's and Briony's but also McEwan's maturing help them 'emancipate' themselves from this illusion.

trusts she was “so worldly now as to be above such nursery-tale ideas as good and evil”, launching instead a search for “some lofty, god-like place, from which all people could be judged alike, not pitted against each other, as in some life-long hockey match, but seen noisily jostling together in all their glorious imperfection” (McEwan 2001: 115). In her retroactive view, literary maturing implies rejecting authorial anger toward fellow beings in favor of an endless compassion for them. To achieve such impartiality, she replaces “direct and simple” stories that were destined to telepathically “send thoughts and feeling from her mind to her reader’s” (McEwan 2001: 37) with a more complex and encompassing kind of narrative prose, which transcends easy genre determinations. To term it a story is “such an inadequate word” for it (McEwan 2001: 281) but neither “novella” (McEwan 2001: 318) nor “little novel” (McEwan 2001: 320) really fit. By stubbornly exempting herself from the role of a dupe, which she was continually lured into, Briony never stops drafting and redrafting this prose in the course of almost six decades until it acquires the given novelistic profile of *Atonement*.

But did she really renounce her adolescent phantasies about the “godly power of creation” (McEwan 2001: 76) once she had realized that to “enter a mind and show it at work, or being worked on, and to do this in a symmetrical design – this would be an artistic triumph” (McEwan 2001: 282)? By adhering to this belief, was she not again driven into Robbie’s opinion:

Rise and fall – this was the doctor’s business, and it was literature’s too. He was thinking of the nineteenth-century novel. Broad tolerance and the long view, an inconspicuously warm heart and cool judgement ... [?] (McEwan 2001: 93)

Or, by achieving this “triumph”, has she not fallen victim of McEwan’s temporary admiration for the nineteenth century novel’s shifting points of view, which he seems to have distanced himself from in *Atonement*?¹² In a word, was she not silently dispossessed of the unbiased authorship she was heading to?¹³ Since the impartially shifting points of view are invisibly filtered through Briony’s selfish representation from the novel’s very outset, the implied author seems to be suggesting behind her back that impartiality and selfishness make an inextricable couple. Briony involuntarily intertwines them all the time.

12 On this admiration see the interview given to David Lynn. According to Elam, by dismantling Briony’s illusions, McEwan alerts his readers to not unreservedly trust the strategy he has chosen in this novel (2007: 23).

13 Marcus remarks that “the novelist’s imaginative entry into other minds can never obviate the fact that these minds are, ultimately, his or her own creation” (2009: 94). Seaboyer endorses this by stating that “Briony may be claiming to attempt to atone for her sin against Robbie, but she may also be accused of ‘colonising’ him for the sake of her writing” (2005: 32).

Already as a teenager, she considers writing a story about the scene by the fountain by representing the scene from three different and equally valid points of view (McEwan 2001: 40). As a guilt-ridden old woman whose memory and reasoning ability are on the brink of the incapacitation, she realizes, on the contrary, that the engagement of the different points of view testifies to her cowardice toward the others more than to her altruism. By exempting herself from being duped by her youthful revenge, she moved into another, genetic entrapment. While through her meandering she consistently avoided facing the truth, she was repeating her mother who, by keeping herself away from confrontations with her husband (McEwan 2001: 148–49), only strove for her own comfort (McEwan 2001: 71). If young Briony was predetermined by her mother's evasiveness, old Briony is captured by her disinterestedness. Despite her entire literary maturing, she does not accomplish individuality. Her creative authorial strategy turns out to have been governed by her genetically programmed mind: "It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone" (McEwan 2001: 320). Her narrative did not follow from her *mind's* literary self-reflection and genre considerations (McEwan 2001: 37, 41, 45, 115, 159–160, 280–282), but from her *brain's* inborn disposition.¹⁴ Is each and every literary emancipation predetermined to be deluded in such a way? Can McEwan, as Briony's 'protector', prevent such subterranean dispossession of his authorial sovereignty?

In fact, both the young and mature Briony victimize the uneasy truth, 'slash its nettles' (McEwan 2001: 76) to please those who desperately need the illusion, such as the deathly wounded soldier who longed for true love (McEwan 2001: 206) or the literary audience that attaches itself to common sense or love stories (McEwan 2001: 76, 169–170, 308). But, more than anybody else, she herself is addicted to illusions. If she consistently identified with those in need of illusions, she did it for the same reason that Robbie identified with those in need of protection. By forcing them into the role of victims, she made them epitomize her own wishful status. By making Lola the victim of Robbie's desire despite her obvious hesitations to clearly identify the rapist (McEwan 2001: 168), she pun-

14 For the replacement of modernist 'mind' with postmodernist 'brain' in McEwan's novels, see Head 192. It deserves attention that the old-aged Briony (who narrates the novel) suffers from a neurological disease like Perowne's mother and Braxton in *Saturday*, and McEwan's own mother for that matter. That is to say, as any political regular state can at any time be destroyed by the state of exception that hideously inhabits it, the same can happen to any personal 'regular state'. The perspective of personal memory's eradication makes, both in Briony's (Elam 2009: 42–43) and McEwan's view (Marcus 2009: 95), the meticulous storage of its 'innocent victims' equally central as is the above addressed storage of the seemingly insignificant details of political states of exception.

ished Robbie for failing to act toward her in the same way. Or, in an equally compensatory manner, after a half a dozen different drafts of her manuscript in an almost 60-year assignment (McEwan 2001: 369), she resumes the happy love story from the beginning of her career, calmly falsifying the facts that Robbie died of septicaemia and Cecilia was killed by a bomb (McEwan 2001: 370–371).

To sum this up, not only the young but also the grown-up Briony refuses to face the dispossessing truth. In her writerly strategy, protecting herself in the guise of others maintains supremacy. Toward the end of her life, she compulsively repeats “I was trying not to think about it”, or “I could hardly face that now” (McEwan 2001: 358), or “I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism” (McEwan 2001: 371). Equally, during the wedding ceremony in the Church of the Holy Trinity on Clapham Common, not only does she miss the opportunity to proclaim in public the crime that Paul, Lola and she committed but she convinces herself to keep silent even though she recognizes in Lola a “little mistress of histrionics” (McEwan 2001: 146) or, much later, “the stage villain” who is “heavy on the make-up” (McEwan 2001: 358). After all, Lola imposed herself on Briony’s life by pushing her to deliver Paul, the attacker and Lola’s future husband, to safety. Although Lola heavily ruined her life’s opportunities in much the same way that Lola’s mother Hermione damaged her mother’s, Briony nonetheless takes her into her protection. This is because, as such a generous protector of others, she pointed out *their* dependency by preventing them from uncovering *her own*. “What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader” or anybody else draw from telling the truth, asks Briony, seemingly out of concern for others (McEwan 2001: 371), but she in fact avoids telling it in order to keep *her wounds* protected. Yet by dismantling Briony as the “little mistress of histrionics” like Lola, the author dooms her strategy to failure. Lola overwhelms her despite Briony’s effort to keep her under surveillance.

As I have already indicated, mature Briony’s care for the unprotected acts as the Doppelgänger of mature McEwan’s ethical strategy. Both distance themselves from their deluded literary youth but the author, in shaping his own literary transformation, ‘parenthesizes’ that of his Doppelgänger. By dismantling the selfishness of Briony’s mentoring he surreptitiously renders his caretaking superior. He pretends not to be entrapped in her delusions as she is in those of her characters. If her narrative atones – and the title, that is by definition in the implied author’s competence, leaves no doubt about this – his narrative does not. Such an interpretation of authorial strategy goes against the grain of the mainstream reception of *Atonement*, which claims that from its very epigraph up to deep into its narrative strategy the novel cautions against the illusion of literature’s neutrality (Kemp 2001, Elam 2009, Alden 2009, Finney 2002, Marcus 2009, Groes 2009b). I on the contrary claim that by exposing the political entrapment of Briony’s literature, the author ethically exempts his own literature from it. Like

Derrida who spares (his rendering of) literature of the same reevaluation to which this literature subjects the whole world, McEwan exempts (his technique of) authorship from the same devaluation that all his figures must undergo. To recall my argument from the beginning, he gives his authoring operation the traits of an 'evasive alterity'. Strategically withdrawn into an 'elsewhere', he protects characters and readers from a *non-place* that eludes to their protection.

In *Atonement*, even Briony as narrator remains hidden until the novel's very epilogue, which transfers the readers into the much later situation of writing. Once introduced into it, the reader is asked to reevaluate all that s/he has learned hitherto, especially if s/he has failed to notice earlier references to the situation of writing (McEwan 2001: 41, 162) or Briony's critical reflection on the literary practice of her youth (McEwan 2001: 281–282). As opposed to the explicitness of this switch to the first-person narrative with all its far-reaching consequences, the implied author's deactivating operations are carried out in the background of the reader's attention. They assume, firstly, the form of intertextual hints, such as those to Jane Austen in the epigraph, to Woolf's modernist novelistic agenda in Briony's *Two Figures by a Fountain*, and to the nineteenth century novel's shifting point of view in the final version of Briony's narrative, in addition to the scattered and more or less cloaked hints at *Twelfth Night*, *Clarissa*, *What Maisie Knew*, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and other works and writers. Secondly, as already indicated, by pointing out Briony's need to please herself through the others¹⁵ and by disclosing in the background of her fiction either her selfish interests¹⁶ or genetically inherited habits, the implied author questions the sovereignty of Briony's literary action. Finally, in the epilogue the reader realizes that Briony was legally prevented from publicizing the crime that Paul, Lola and she committed as long as her fellow criminals were alive (McEwan 2001: 368–370) and, even more importantly, that she can no longer postpone the publishing of her novel because of the quickly approaching incapacitation of her memory. In all these various and subtly combined ways, the implied author turns Briony's writing into an inferior Doppelgänger of his own. That is to say, while claiming to provide protection to others as situated both within and outside her fictional universe, she unwittingly redoubles them, enmeshes herself into their particular interests, distorts them and falsifies them for the sake of her personal pleasure.

15 For example, the soldier with a missing head's side Luc Cornet (who is aged eighteen, like Briony while she nurses him) asks Briony if her sister is now happily married. She responds, "They will be soon" and lets this happen in her fiction as if to please him (McEwan 2001: 305–310). But it is of course not only him whom she pleases with her happy love story.

16 For instance, she punishes Lola for stealing her role in *Arabella*, Cecilia for stealing Robbie from her, and Robbie for choosing Cecilia instead of her.

Briony thus proves overtaken by the figures that she was at great pains to appropriately store in her fictional shelter. However the question has to be raised as to whether the author himself, while exposing the selfishness of Briony's literary action, manages to avoid its repetition. The strategy he engages to accomplish this is to give expression to the aspects that Briony's narrative has bereft of voice, to place himself at the service of an 'elsewhere' that Briony's fiction has left behind. It is through such resumption of 'diasporic injunctions' that his authorship escapes to be identified. However, because he assumes responsibility for that which Briony's 'truth' has forced into exile, he must 'betray' her truth in the same way that she has previously 'betrayed' the truth of others. In accordance with Derrida's ethics, which renders this responsibility toward the 'exilic alterity' both superior and infinite, this novel turns 'betrayal' of one's fellow beings into its imperative strategy, demanding from characters, the narrator, the author, and readers that they ceaselessly 'betray' those with whom they share the world. This is why, precisely by 'ethically' exempting himself from Briony's 'political' perspective, the author must also repeat her 'betrayal' of others.

To return to my introductory thesis, the establishment of the reevaluation as the central agenda in the novel's agencies uncovers the post-imperial state of exception as the place of origin of McEwan's works. After the collapse of the long-lasting imperial world, the post-imperial world's distribution of values ran amok, making its inhabitants into repeated dupes. This explains why in *Atonement* the scene by the fountain, for example, undergoes incessant reevaluation through the changing perspectives that never stop 'stranding' one another of its protagonists, its witnesses, the writer and the reader (like Cyril Connolly). Likewise, why the character of young Briony is subjected to an equally merciless re-description from the perspective of her mother, sister and Robbie. The same holds for Jack Tallis through the perspectives of his wife, two daughters and Robbie. The truth of all characters becomes the object of a persistent 'betrayal', all the more so if one considers Briony's underlying and invisible perspective as additionally oscillating between her role as the protagonist and her capacity as the narrator. The characters are consecutively exposed to each other's, the narrator's, and the author's questioning in the name of an 'ultimate' truth that escapes them all.

As I stated in the introduction, only this *elusive literary truth* – typical of the exceptional states' passionate attachment to their commanding 'exterior' – undergoes no questioning at all. It reigns supreme not only within the novel but, because of *Atonement's* rich intertextual resonances, far beyond it. Both the epigraph that 'grafts' this novel onto the British mainstream tradition and the introduction of Briony's situation of writing, that for its part 'frames' her fiction, testify to this elusive truth's all-pervasiveness. In Derrida's interpretation, neither *grafts* nor

frames fully belong to that which they transfigure (Derrida 1988: 9; Derrida 1987: 9). Like “supplements”, while completing the presence of an entity, they simultaneously “mark an absence” (Derrida 1976: 144) and, in this way, open an “indefinite process” (Derrida 1976: 281) of supplementation. Placed as they are, “neither inside nor outside” (Derrida 1987: 9), they exempt themselves from that which they transfigure. In Giorgio Agamben’s interpretation, exactly the same atopic in-betweenness characterizes that which he calls the “state of exception” that:

is neither internal nor external to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with one another. (Agamben 2005: 27)

Because such a state of exception, as I claimed at the outset, induces the authorial operation of McEwan’s novel, the grafting of its outside onto its inside cannot but be interminable. In the same manner that the situation of Briony’s writing transfigures all that she has written, the situation of McEwan’s authoring of her transfigures all of her writing. This is how persistent reevaluation, in the spirit of Derrida’s “New International”, becomes the law of reading *Atonement*.

Whenever an ethical agenda establishes itself as a law, it expects all whom it addresses to respect this law, i.e. to accept the role of one of its instances. *Tua res agitur, tua fabula narratur* operates as the binding force of literary community, the chief manner in which it mobilizes its allies. It therefore drives not only this novel’s narrator but also its author into an almost compulsive multiplication of their Doppelgänger. If Briony’s exposed narrative politics turns these Doppelgänger into the devices of her atonement, McEwan’s hidden politics of authoring turns them into the polygons of his self-healing protection. The difference between these two politics is that the feeling of guilt that sets in motion the author’s is not self-induced as Briony’s but inflicted by the post-imperial state of exception that he, as a member of an imperial nation, was ‘thrown into’. Yet although he therefore felt that he was continually guilty, his literary protection of those whom he found to be in need of protection did not eliminate the imperial relationship that gave rise to his ‘guilt’ but involuntarily reaffirmed it.¹⁷ Since all ethical re-descriptions unwittingly reintroduce the political asymmetry that they are at pains to neutralize, McEwan’s ethical reconfiguration of literature carries out a political service despite the author’s endeavor to exempt himself from it.

¹⁷ On the political and historical background of the ‘protectoral’ shape of imperial relationship, see Amselle (2003: 12–13).

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