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Atoning for Nostalgia in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract: Many critics have pointed out the ambiguities of *Atonement*, a postmodernist anti-nostalgic novel that brings to the fore all the traditional *topoi* of Englishness in order better to denounce them as sham. In *Atonement*, the nostalgic longing is linked to the desire of Briony (the protagonist/narrator) for a return to a state of innocence which, I will argue through a close analysis of the text and its recurring images, is as much an atoning for her crime as a longing to be at-one in a state of harmony. Literally utopian, this nostalgic longing appears as a fantasy of omnipotence by an immature ego. Yet Briony's being born into a writer entails a facing of the other within the self, an atoning for her nostalgic bias, not by erasing it, but by acknowledging her full responsibility in it, a process the reader is also invited to go through. From a regressive quest, nostalgia thus turns into an opening to otherness and to new potentialities. The unbridgeable gap between nostalgic desire and its fulfilment is what fuels our longing, keeps us alive and allows for creation.

Keywords: nostalgia; Ian McEwan; *Atonement*; ethics; responsibility

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1. Introduction

"All day long, she realized, she had been feeling strange, and seeing strangely, as though everything was already long in the past, made more vivid by posthumous ironies she could not quite grasp" (McEwan 2001, p. 50). Cecilia Tallis's words[1] in the first part of *Atonement*, Ian McEwan's famous 2001 novel, seem to encapsulate the novel's ambiguous position as regards nostalgia, and the strange feeling and vision it creates in the reader. Indeed, the novel, which McEwan himself, in an interview with Jeff Giles in *Newsweek*, refers to as his "Jane Austen novel, [his] country-house novel" (Giles 2002, p. 62), at once conjures up the leisurely atmosphere of a traditional English country-house just before the outbreak of the Second World War and forces us to look at it with a postmodernist ironical eye; the memory is made more vivid in order better to dissolve its object and enhance its ghostly presence. *Atonement* may thus be seen as an aporia: a postmodernist anti-nostalgic novel which yet plays with the reader's nostalgic bias. Yet is *Atonement*, properly speaking, a postmodernist novel? McEwan himself said: "I think that I'm always drawn to some kind of balance between a fiction that is self-reflective on its processes, and one that has a forward impetus too, that will completely accept the given terms of the illusion of fiction" (Reynolds and Jonathan 2001, p. 20). Laura Marcus comments: "The achievement of *Atonement* is to bring these two dimensions together so seamlessly, and to integrate the 'forward impetus' with the 'posthumous ironies' of retrospective narration" (Marcus 2013, p. 84). The bringing together of two seemingly antithetical positions does not only bear on the suspension of disbelief necessary to referential illusion and its postmodernist metafictional debunking, but also on the novel's particular stance towards nostalgia.

[1] Or more accurately Briony's since she is the real author of the part, as we learn in the coda.

The disjunction inherent in nostalgia, a being here and now while longing to be there and then, is somehow doubled in the very form of the novel, in which the postmodernist coda makes us look back to the three previous parts and maybe long for lost innocence. As J. Hillis Miller writes: "That doubling required a new reading in the light of dismaying revelation. I needed to superimpose a disillusioned reading on the first innocent one [. . .]. My trauma has turned me into that much-maligned thing, a suspicious reader" (Miller 2013, p. 99).

Atonement creates a disjunctive experience for the reader, one that is shared with Briony Tallis, the protagonist and, as is revealed in the final twist, the narrator of all four parts of the novel: as we learn in the coda, the novel was in fact written by an elderly Briony as an attempt to atone for the crime she committed as a little girl, and published posthumously when all the people involved in that crime are dead.[2] Indeed, the first part tells, from various points of view, the events of the summer, 1935, that led Briony, a young girl with a fertile imagination, to wrongly accuse Robbie Turner, the Tallises' cleaning-lady's son taken under the father's patronage, of rape against Lola, Briony's young cousin. The day culminates with Robbie's arrest, brought about by Briony's former misapprehension of a situation she does not understand: the incipient love between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie, which she interprets as the sexual assault of a maniac on her sister. Part 2 takes us to the North of France where a wounded Robbie, discharged after a three-year imprisonment on condition he joins the British army forces, tries, along with two other English soldiers, to reach Dunkirk where soldiers are being evacuated, and eventually closes his eyes on the beach. Part 3, set in a London hospital where Briony has enrolled as a nurse, following in her elder sister's footsteps, overlaps Part 2 as it describes, from Briony's point of view, the arrival of wounded soldiers from the front in the summer of 1940. Briony tries to atone for her crime and attempts reconciliation with Cecilia and Robbie who ask her to write a signed statement retracting her evidence and clearing Robbie's name. The initials at the end of Part 3, BT London 1999, and the coda, Briony's first person narrative, prove the three parts we have just read to be Briony's substitute for this statement, a novel whose final draft we have just read, with previous ones—we learn—having admitted to Robbie's death in Dunkirk and Cecilia's in the bombings of London.

The nostalgic impulse, the looking back into the past is therefore clearly linked to Briony's desire to return to innocence. It illustrates the Kantian interpretation of nostalgia as reworded by Jean Starobinski:

> What a person wishes to recover is not so much the actual *place* where he passed his childhood but his youth itself. He is not straining toward something which he can repossess, but toward an age that is forever beyond his reach. (Starobinski 1966, p. 94)

Starobinski further emphasizes the literally utopian dimension of nostalgia by relating it to the Platonic myth of the celestial home and terrestrial exile: "This painful experience, provoked by the uprooting of the conscience from its familiar surroundings, became the metaphorical expression of a much more profound rupture, the separation of man from the ideal" (Starobinski 1966, p. 95). This seems to make the nostalgia experienced by Briony fall into the scope of "restorative nostalgia" as defined by Svetlana Boym: "*Restoration* (from *re-staure*—re-establishment) signifies a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment" (Boym 2001, p. 49). Nostalgia is thus to be linked with atonement defined in Catholic theology as "the exemplifying of human oneness with God", and therefore with the ambivalence of a novel in which we may feel manipulated by a narrator wishing to exonerate herself and recover her lost innocence, or in which we may empathize with her sincere, though impossible, attempt to atone for her crime. In other words, is nostalgia in *Atonement* a regressive and dangerous quest for oneness or an honest confrontation with the past and with otherness (that of

[2] "The posthumous ironies she could not quite grasp" Cecilia mentions may thus be read as a metatextual hint pointing to the ironies the reader will only be able to grasp on a second reading.

others and that of the self) to move into the future? To take up Svetlana Boym's distinction, is it more akin to restorative nostalgia or to reflective nostalgia? According to Boym:

> Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. (Boym 2001, p. 41)

> Nostalgia of the first type gravitates toward collective pictorial symbols and oral culture. Nostalgia of the second type is more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself. If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space. Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgement or critical reflection. (Boym 2001, pp. 49–50)

I will contend that *Atonement* manages to preserve a necessary distance and to hold together nostalgic desire and its constant deferring. Atonement, for Briony and the reader, is not the erasing of otherness to restore blissful oneness but at-one-ment[3], the very fragmentation of the word opening up unity to plurality, oneness to otherness. Making the reader, along with Briony, acknowledge their nostalgic longing and its impossible fulfilment opens the path to creation. Atoning for nostalgia is a dynamic process, a maturation that brings Briony and the reader away from the fixed laws of morality to deliver them onto the more complex grounds of ethics.

As an individual work of memory and tentative reconstruction—as revealed in the coda—*Atonement* definitely belongs to "reflective nostalgia" and the temptation to reconstruct an idyllic collective Englishness is at once called up and dismissed. After briefly delineating the postmodernist anti-nostalgic dimension of *Atonement*, I shall point to the disjunction introduced by nostalgia, to eventually suggest that the novel's paradoxical stance towards nostalgia may be read as an invitation to atone for the nostalgic bias and be at-one with the past, however other, so as to turn regression into progression, protectiveness into opening.

2. A Postmodernist Anti-Nostalgic Novel

As Briony remarks on coming back to the Tallises' estate—now turned into a hotel—to celebrate her seventy-seventh birthday with her family: "There was no need to be nostalgic—it was always an ugly place" (p. 363). From the very beginning indeed, the country-house is presented as a vulgar neo-Gothic pastiche of the original Adam-style house which burnt down in the late 1880s and of which only remain an artificial lake and island with "a crumbling stuccoed temple" (p. 19), an architectural folly that testifies to the neo-classical taste fashionable in British late 18th-century gardens. The embedding of artifacts that betray a longing for civilizations long past emphasizes the universal nostalgic impulse better to debunk it. Far from being the hallmark of a long aristocratic English lineage, the house, bought by Briony's grandfather, is the recent acquisition of a nouveau riche, very much like the d'Ubervilles' mansion in Hardy's *Tess*. Appearances, as the novel keeps reminding us, are deceptive. *Atonement* refuses any collusion with the conservative politics of nostalgia considered by Alistair Duckworth as underpinning the country-house genre: "the estate as an ordered physical structure is a metonym for other inherited structures—society as a whole, a code of morality,

[3] Ian McEwan himself plays with the etymological breaking up of the word. In an interview with the author published in *The Guardian*, on 16 September 2001, Kellaway (2001) writes: "Almost as an afterthought, I mention 'atonement' itself, a difficult concept for an atheist such as McEwan. For him, it is about a 'reconciliation with self'. I like the word, I say. He does too. He was looking at it one day when he saw, suddenly, how it came apart: at-one-ment".

a body of manners, a system of language”.[4] Such interpretation is carried further by critics like Paul Gilroy who see there a “British postcolonial melancholia”, “the shock and anxiety that followed from the loss of any sense that the national collective was bound by a coherent and distinctive culture”.[5]

Likewise, Gilroy considers that the fascination for WW2 is a symptom of the “British postcolonial melancholia”: “making the anti-Nazi war a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding reveals a desire to find a way back to a point where the national culture was both comprehensible and habitable”.[6] The fascination for the so-called “miracle of deliverance” of Dunkirk is part of the myth-making around WW2 which traditionally turns a defeat into victory and an example of national solidarity. However, the representation of the Dunkirk evacuation in *Atonement* is a far cry from this nostalgic return to a moment of national union, as the episode of the RAF pilot lynched by British soldiers testifies to. To the idealized image of a float of civilian and military boats coming from everywhere to rescue British soldiers, McEwan substitutes that of three privates bogged down in the lanes of France and eventually stranded on a Dunkirk beach where no boats are in sight:

> *But there were no boats*, *apart from* one upturned whaler in the distant surf. It was low tide and almost a mile to the water’s edge. *There were no boats* by the long jetty. [. . .] They waited, but *there was nothing* in sight, *unless* you counted in those smudges on the horizon—boats burning after an air attack. *There was nothing* that could reach the beach in hours. But the troops stood there, facing the horizon in their tin hats, rifles lifted above the waves. From this distance they looked as placid as cattle. (pp. 247–48)

The repetitions here enhance the vacancy and lost hopes, all the more so as the concessive constructions only point to ruin and destruction. The valiant lions have been turned into placid cattle, action has been turned into petrification. Nostalgia for a national historical British past, be it through the ideal of the country-house or of union in the face of evil, is therefore invalidated by the novel.

The coherent and distinctive culture mentioned by Gilroy is nevertheless part and parcel of the pleasure we experience reading the first part of *Atonement*, which abounds in literary references to English classics, from Shakespeare to James and Woolf, including Richardson, Waugh, and of course Austen. The nostalgic dimension of such pleasure cannot be denied as it feels like moving into a familiar and comforting environment; as Ian McEwan said in a recent interview: “all of us readers have a kind of literary furniture we move around [. . .] Books shape our consciousness and we read and write through them” (Guignery 2018).[7] However, the postmodernist metatextual references, Briony’s reflection on her writing and her desire to emulate Woolf, the inclusion in the third part of Cyril Connolly’s rejection letter of Briony’s manuscript discussing its literary merits and shortcomings, also draw the readers’ attention to the constructedness of the literary artefact, thereby making them self-aware of their nostalgic indulgence. Connolly’s advice to Briony to let go of the Woolfian influence in order to create “a sense of forward movement” (p. 312) may be seen as an echo of McEwan’s remark about “the giants on the writer’s shoulder”: “imitate, write pastiche, and then free yourself from them” (Guignery 2018).[8] In order to move forward, both writer and reader need to disentangle themselves from a reverential attitude towards the past.

The circular structure of the novel, which opens on the preparation for Briony’s play, *The Trials of Arabella*, and ends on its long-postponed performance 64 years later in the very same room where it was initially meant to be performed, is revealing of the novel’s staging of nostalgia. Indeed, the frame around the story draws the reader’s attention to the fabricated nature of the stories. Briony’s first play is indeed a child’s sentimental story of love, retribution and atonement with a God-like author

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4 Quoted in (Quarrie 2015, p. 194).
5 Paul Gilroy, *After Empire*, quoted in (Quarrie 2015, p. 193).
6 Ibid, 89, quoted in (Quarrie 2015, p. 201).
7 This was during an unpublished interview with Vanessa Guignery on 21 May 2018 for the “Assises Internationales du Roman” organized by the Villa Gillet in Lyon (France).
8 This is also a personal transcription of that same interview.

who judiciously rewards the meritorious and punishes the wicked. But the play never gets to be performed, its perfectly ordered world being constantly thwarted by the insisting demands of a real world where no such unerring justice and righteousness is possible. What Briony manages to achieve is everything that is peripheral to the performance: the design of the posters, programmes, tickets, i.e., the packaging that allows the selling of the illusion while clearly designating it as illusion. Thus, the very first sentence of the novel works as a metafictional warning to the reader:

> The play—for which Briony had designed the posters, programmes and tickets, constructing the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper—was written in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. (p. 3)

This is apparent in the very syntax since the main information is presented as secondary, contained within a long peripheral cumulative clause which comes to overweigh the main clause with its end-focus on meals rather than creation. When the play is eventually performed, Briony has become a well-known author able to look critically on her first literary attempt, while a part of herself very much remains the little girl she was then: "Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited girl, and she was not dead either, for when people tittered appreciatively at 'evanesce' my feeble heart—ridiculous vanity!—made a little leap" (p. 367).

As suggested in the introduction, the nostalgic impulse indeed very much revolves around the ambivalent character of Briony and her longing for a time of innocence, a time that is not only out of reach but may well never have existed The utopian dimension of nostalgia emphasized by Starobinski is linked to a regressive attitude: "nostalgia no longer designates the loss of one's native land, but the return towards the stages in which desire did not have to take account of external obstacles and was not condemned to defer its realization" (Starobinski 1966, p. 103). Like Briony, the reader is invited to revisit the past, not so as to mythologize it and create fixedness but to be able to cast a critical eye both on the past and the present or, to take up Svetlana Boym's distinction, to experience a "reflective" rather than a "restorative" form of nostalgia. But this creates in both Briony and the reader a disjunctive experience.

3. Nostalgic Disjunction

> Reading these letters at the end of an exhausting day, Briony felt a dreamy nostalgia, a vague yearning for a long-lost life. She could hardly feel sorry for herself. She was the one who had cut herself off from home. In the week's holiday after preliminary training, before the probationer year began, she had stayed with her uncle and aunt in Primrose Hill, and had resisted her mother on the telephone. Why could Briony not visit, even for a day, when everyone would adore to see her and was desperate for stories about her new life? And why did she write so infrequently? It was difficult to give a straight answer. For now it was necessary to stay away. (p. 279)

Briony's need to stay away from the family place of her childhood despite her nostalgic longing appears as an inability to cope with the ruptures that took place there between her innocent and her knowing selves, between her idealized and her guilty selves. Her present is haunted by the past, and she is at once here and there, an experience which, according to Annika Lems, is characteristic of nostalgia:

> Haunted by the somewhat spectral experience of encountering one's former self but from the point of view of the here and now, nostalgia itself could perhaps best be described as a disjointed experience. [. . .] the sense of rupture that causes the pain in nostalgia stands for discontinuity between self and world". (Lems 2016, p. 434)

Briony's nostalgia is for a self before the fall, but the guilty self cannot be dismissed and prevents her being in the world now. Scrubbing the hospital lockers, bedframes and floors cannot wash the

stain off her hands: "Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination in tutorial she had relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college lawn, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable" (p. 285). Like Lady Macbeth, Briony is well aware that "what's done cannot be undone" (Vi, 45). There is no reconnecting with the past innocent girl she once was, as her vain attempt to call her father proves:

> The switchboard put her through to a helpful nasal voice, and then the connection was broken and she had to start again. The same happened, and on her third attempt the line went dead as soon as a voice said—Trying to connect you. (p. 286)

But it seems that, more than the father, it is the mother who represents that lost unity Briony longs for. Emily Tallises' complacent overenthusiasm on reading the play Briony has just finished goes together with a nostalgia for the time when Briony was still a part of her mother, depending on her:

> She took her daughter in her arms, onto her lap—ah, that hot smooth little body she remembered from its infancy, and still not gone from her, not quite yet—and said that the play was 'stupendous' [. . .]. (p. 4)

Of course, these are supposedly Emily's thoughts, but as we know, they are actually the thoughts Briony has allocated her; hence they may well betray Briony's own longing for "[. . .] the archetypal image of harmony or oneness; a state of archaic partial identity [. . .]" (Peters 1985, p. 135) which Roderick Peters traces as the origins of nostalgia. As the narrator remarks, pointing at the importance of this moment of fusion with her mother which can only be remembered with nostalgia for the irretrievable: "Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project's highest point of fulfilment. Nothing came near it for satisfaction, all else was dreams and frustration" (p. 4). Briony's longing for a state of innocence coalesces with the desire for a lost state of being characterized by the absence of conflict and struggle. The violence of her being thrown into the adult world through her reading Robbie's explicitly sexual note to Cecilia, her witnessing the love-making scene between Cecilia and Robbie and her arriving on the scene of Lola's rape may well result in a traumatic severing from the mother and surface in the image of "a disembodied human leg" (p. 161) as seen by Briony through the window frame and which turns out to be Emily's leg. The fragmentation of the mother's body is a graphic representation of this lost integrity, all the more so as it is echoed by the leg in the tree observed by Robbie at the beginning of Part 3, the leg of an innocent child caught in his sleep and which haunts Robbie, alias Briony, as he is dying on the Dunkirk beach, feeling guilty for not saving that child. The other traumatic image that haunts Robbie is, unsurprisingly, that of the mother and child "vaporised" (p. 239) in a Stuka attack. Thus, the guilt felt by Briony may be compounded with a traumatic and violent separation from the mother/infant union, a paradise myth of perfect harmony where the other is the perfect provider. Emily Tallis, though, hardly qualifies as this perfect provider, for her migraines confine her to her room, and she delegates her motherly role to her eldest daughter, even her Mrs. Ramsay-like dinner proving a failure.

Neumann's analysis of nostalgia as a manifestation of "uroboric phantasy" is revealing for he defines it as "the sort of phantasy taken by an infantile ego threatened by an unacceptable and annihilating feeling of lost omnipotence [. . .]. For the uroboric position involves a hunger for powerfulness so that the blissful state be maintained"[9] (Peters 1985, pp. 136–37). Such a definition cannot but call to mind Briony's desire for control, a control which quickly proves to be an illusion as it constantly runs against the desires of others, the cousins from the North or the adults' own preoccupations. As the young Briony soon learns, others cannot be reduced to the One. However, we may wonder whether the elderly Briony, who writes all the parts and enters her characters' minds, has really outgrown this omnipotent immature ego by being able to consider others' positions or

[9] Neumann, E. *The Origins and History of Consciousness*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949; quoted in (Peters 1985).

whether she is trying to recapture her lost blissful powerfulness. In other words, is Briony's atonement, her attempt to make her doubly disjointed nostalgic self one, a regressive nostalgic return to the One or a nostalgic quest that can open onto the otherness of others and of the self? What is apparent anyway is that this atonement, this restoration of continuity in the nostalgic disjunction can only be achieved through writing: "And at a time when she was cut off from everything she knew—family, home, friends—writing was the thread of continuity. It was what she had always done" (p. 280).

4. Atoning for Nostalgia

By writing the various drafts of her novel, Briony is trying to atone for her crime, but as she admits at the end, the omnipotent position of the writer makes this a self-defeating attempt:

> The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There 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. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (p. 371)

If acknowledging the godly power of the novelist makes any permanent and unquestionable forgiveness impossible, it yet places responsibility for forgiveness and reconciliation in the sinner herself. No omnipotent God, as in her play, can conveniently substitute for private responsibility. Briony's rewriting of her past is not a simple erasing of her wrongdoing, a nostalgic return to a state of innocence, but an attempt to come to terms with her crime and with the girl that committed this crime. She needs to look at the other within the self, that part of her which she might have wished to forget but which yet was, and still is, as she admits when watching the play, part of herself. Briony needs to be at-one with all the facets of herself, even the least glorious ones, even the manipulative and conceited selves. She also needs to atone for her nostalgic bias, to reconcile past and present, but this requires "[...] a ceaseless re-negotiation of who [she was, is] and will become" (Lems 2016, p. 435).[10] According to Boym, this is what reflective nostalgia implies: "Reflective nostalgia doesn't lead back to the lost homeland but to that sense of anarchic responsibility[11] toward others as well as to the *rendezvous* with oneself" (Boym 2001, p. 342). Writing is not so much akin to confession as to analysis, motivated by "a passion for autonomy, integration, individuation and realization of self" (Peters 1985, p. 145), and nostalgia, together with guilt, is the triggering factor. As Peters writes: "Nostalgia aims towards individuation inasmuch as its pain provides an impulsion to do something, and in some people, that something is the grueling work of individuation" (Peters 1985, p. 145).

If "large quantities of unwillingly suffered nostalgia are a manifestation of problems in the area of oneness/separation and omnipotence/helplessness" (Peters 1985, p. 144), it seems that Briony is in the process of completing this process of individuation as the coda, a first-person narrative, proves that she is eventually speaking in her own voice, acknowledging her power of invention, taking full responsibility for the creation of alternative and contradictory versions of reality that coexist, and for her choice, explicitly asserted, of a happy ending:

> I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness,

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10 Annika Lems writes: "[...] far from being an attempt at escaping the present, the nostalgic experience is in fact determined by an ambiguous interplay between self, time and place—by a constant switch back and forth in time and place and by a ceaseless re-negotiation of who we were, are and will become".

11 "Emmanuel Lévinas speaks about ethics as a particular 'attentiveness to what is occasionally human in men'. He calls it 'anarchic responsibility'—that is, responsibility for the other individual in the present moment and 'justified by no prior commitment'. [...] Anarchic responsibility foregrounds the distinctions between individual home and collective homeland" (Boym 2001, pp. 337–38).

> but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration . . . Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella?* It's not impossible.
>
> But now I must sleep. (p. 372)

The proviso made at the end of the first paragraph, and the repetition of the amphibological *still* which signals the lovers' persistence, but also their existing as still images, caught in deathly perfection—*still alive* is somehow an oxymoronic phrase signaling death-in-life or life-in-death—confirm Briony's lucidity about the mechanisms of nostalgic reconstruction and her being able to sustain both belief and non-belief, a position perfectly translated in the last sentence where belief is expressed through a double negation.[12] Like a dream, which might be expected from sleep, the version is at once imaginary and true, true to the psychology of the dreamer but calling, or not, for analysis. Hence, if the ending of the novel may be seen again as regression to a wishful unity (the lovers reunited and present in the family reunion), it is yet a conscious nostalgic longing that is not taken in by its illusory nature. And the ellipsis, signaled by the three dots, leaves a space for the reader's own imaginings, which may prove restorative or not. Along with Briony, the reader is invited to experience reflective nostalgia, to turn regressive into progressive utopia: "Reflective nostalgia has a utopian dimension that consists in the exploration of other potentialities and unfulfilled promises of modern happiness" (Boym 2001, p. 342). This calls for an ethical approach to nostalgia in which each individual's responsibility is involved, preventing a collective thoughtless regressive and conservative mythologizing of the past, and allowing for the contingency of otherness.

5. Conclusions

This is very close to the reader's experience as they take up the novel again after reading the illusion-shattering coda. Indeed, they can indulge in their nostalgic reading all the while knowing that it is self-ingratiating and potentially regressive enjoyment. The bitter-sweet feeling, inherent in nostalgia, is redoubled in the innocence/knowledge dichotomy which needs to be accommodated. *Atonement* thus invites the reader, like Briony, to be at-one with nostalgia, to acknowledge it and take full responsibility for it. The reader is eventually left to decide which version of Briony's story they wish to believe, no authoritative omniscient writer exonerating them from their responsibility, and they need to face their own irrepressible longing as well as the knowledge that the object of this longing is gone or was never there. The disjunction of nostalgia becomes the safe distance that makes it possible to sustain paradox: critical distance and emotional involvement, discontinuous continuity, the otherness of the self and allows for the contingency of multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations. "The chasm that lay between an idea and its execution" (p. 17) which Briony is forced to acknowledge in the first part, the unbridgeable gap between nostalgic longing and its fulfilment, is what fuels creation. "The attempt is all" Briony says at the end. If no atonement is ever possible, atoning, the constant process of trying to be at-one while acknowledging our essential lack, is what drives us on. As Saint-Exupéry said, no ship would ever have been built if men had not felt a yearning for the (maternal waters of the) sea.

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[12] This double negation somehow echoes the opening sentence of the quotation, denial always implying a form of assertion.

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