"THE ETERNAL LOOP OF SELF-TORTURE": ETHICS AND TRAUMA IN IAN MCEWAN’S ATONEMENT

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The title of McEwan’s novel, published in 2001 just before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, echoes many philosophical reflections that emerged in the aftermath of the Holocaust. On the collective scale of a whole nation, the question of guilt was raised by Karl Jaspers, immediately after World War II.1 Hannah Arendt, for her part, addressed the issue of fault as a solitary experience and its etiology, that is, how to trace its origin.2 Guilt has also been integrated into a reflection on history writing. In the same way as Adorno claimed that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”,3 the process of history writing has been reconsidered progressively as the extent of the tragedy of World War II was being brought to public knowledge. The imprescriptibility of some ineradicable acts was posited as a prerequisite for historiography4 and the semantic relevance of the etymological kinship between gift and forgiving5 has been underscored. From many respects, the polysemic term “atonement” covers most of the above-mentioned debates.

Atonement spans the whole twentieth century (from the allusion to venerable Victorian grandparents to a birthday party set in 1999). In a nutshell, it can be said to narrate what Shoshana Felman describes as

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5 As underlined, after Mauss and Bataille, by Derrida (“Le Siècle et le pardon”, s.p.).
an unresolved experience, in the “age of testimony”. Shortly before dying, a famous woman novelist confesses to what has been a lifelong obsession. When a teenage girl, she wrongly accused a man (her sister’s lover) of rape: he was then sent to prison and later volunteered to fight in the war to shorten his sentence. Both he (Robbie in the novel) and the writer’s elder sister (Cecilia) died in the prime of life, sealing a tragic, romantic destiny. With the benefit of hindsight, the girl’s stupid accusation – she probably had a crush on the young man and she was all wrapped up in literary vagaries – caused tragedy on an unprecedented scale. What could have been confined to a private domestic incident, with the master’s daughter telling on the charlady’s son for a crime he was later proved never to have committed, was compounded by the events of World War II. With the falsely accused young man dying as anonymous victim of modern warfare, and his beloved losing her life hardly a few months later in the Blitzkrieg, Briony Tallis, the novelist, for the remainder of her life was to look upon herself as a sort of executioner. Hence the many long years dedicated to atoning for a silly crime – a freakish action by a girl eager to show off – by serving as a nurse to do penance while trying to come to terms with the unexplainable and unforgivable, through writing: a “fifty-nine-year assignment”. At the novel’s end, nothing has been resolved as there is serious doubt concerning the publication of the written testimony due to expected litigation problems, and it is also suggested that the two protagonists who have haunted the narrator’s consciousness are still far too present to be consigned to history:

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.

Atonement is the record of an unachievable “mourning work” – it eschews the trappings of fiction as problem-solving conjuring trick.

The experience of trauma, theorised by Freud in the third chapter of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, refers to the repeated mental re-enactment of a painful event. It designates the peculiar and sometimes

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8 Ibid., 372.