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The In(de)finite Object of the Gaze: Reading Ian McEwan's *Atonement* with Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*

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- 1 “*Atonement* certainly began ‘blind’: I wrote a paragraph about a girl with some flowers stepping into a room looking for a vase, aware of a young man outside”.¹ Beginning blind, if one follows Ian McEwan, could mean beginning with just an image. While we are left to imagine that image growing into a story, the first part of the book revolves around another picture or “tableau” (A 39), seen from different perspectives and several times over, which is to become the centerpiece of a novella by Briony Tallis called “Two Figures by a Fountain”—a title which could be that of a drawing or a painting. From the start there is also a frame, materialized by a window, behind which a girl watches intently, opening her eyes onto something never quite imagined before. What truly happens in that first moment will not get fully articulated despite the elaborate story that develops around it. Hence perhaps the visual intensity of the first part of the book, enhanced by its temporal concentration and heightened by its intertextual density. McEwan’s description of his novel as “[his] Jane Austen novel, [his] country house novel, [his] one-hot-day novel” (Kellaway) suggests that the first part could be condensed again into one image—or rather one “impression” to quote Henry James²—and work as a synecdoche for the whole book. The mythical vision of a never-ending English summer afternoon,³ strengthened by multiple textual threads, becomes the canvas on which an intricate tale of the eye develops. Although some might say that the story proper (i.e., “atonement”) starts after Part One, that story will constantly take us back to the first dramatically charged moment.
- 2 In a novel giving such prominent place to the gaze, it is hardly surprising that one should come across Henry James. McEwan explicitly mentions *What Maisie Knew* (Roberts 93) as one of the texts he had in mind when writing *Atonement*. Let us

point out however that unlike Maisie, Briony is not exactly a child: at thirteen, “an awkward age in a girl” (A 94),⁴ Briony has entered an uncertain zone, a fascinating in-between for McEwan who has always liked to blur the line between adults and children. Left with the older but equally “awkward” Lola and the younger twins, Briony quickly appears as the one who will be in charge and who ends up taking on more than she can handle. The story of a young governess,⁵ sent down to a country house to look after two orphaned children looms; so do her multiple encounters with two figures who become in her eyes the ghosts of a scandalous couple, suspected of having violated the children’s innocence. The “romance of the nursery” (TS 18), in which both the governess and Briony bask at the beginning, turns into an intense drama, a frantic struggle which ends in a “crime” (A 156).

- 3 In *Atonement*, the country house and its garden become a scene where trauma replaces initiation, very much as in *The Go-Between*, another book that was on McEwan’s mind while he was writing his “hot-day novel”. Yet if Briony interferes with what goes on between two lovers, her rigid determination and the murky desires it conceals bring her closer to James’s fiercely driven governess than to blithely naive Leo. In some ways, and even if the English classic takes pride of place, *Atonement* has a tighter relation with James’s disturbing ghost story than with L.P. Hartley’s more straightforward narrative. The eye, the intensity of the scenes it presents to the reader largely contribute to that connection; so does the role given to what blurs or challenges vision at its clearest. *Atonement* develops what has been described as a “poetics of blurriness” (Cassigneul and Cavalié 2020, 134),⁶ yet at the same time blindness never seems more complete than at the height of certainty: one may remember Briony’s repeated “I saw him”—which echoes James’s governess’s terrified and triumphant “Flora saw!” after the first apparition of Miss Jessel on the other side of the lake. Spectrality, as it turns out, affects those who see as much as what they see—not least when they are engaged in retrospection and re-vision. The suspended ending in James’s tale sends the reader spiraling into the unknown while Briony’s ultimate revisions give another unexpected turn of the screw to the narrative with the introduction of a shadow ending.

Figures in a landscape: the scene of the gaze

- 4 On one moment, forever stamped on the mind, a whole life may depend. *Atonement* unfolds around this fascinating and terrifying notion, tying the whole narrative to an “eternal loop” (A 173) which helps us make sense of the broken lines of the book. The fearsome power of what the eye may be exposed to finds a powerful echo in the twists and torments that cross the multiple thresholds of *The Turn of the Screw*’s embedded tale—despite their confinement to a manuscript locked at the bottom of a drawer. In both cases, it is inaccurate to talk about one moment or one image: just like James’s governess, Briony receives one visual blow after another in the first part of the book—a shock wave which brings the overall tension to an unbearable intensity.
- 5 In the different apparitions of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw*, just like in Briony’s various disturbing encounters, one could consider that the text repeats and multiplies one and the same image. While the variations set up a visual puzzle, they also replicate the same effect of “intense immobility” (Barthes’s “immobilité vive” 81) that transfixes the gazer: the first vision in both texts is like a matrix that potentially contains all the others. Every striking visual encounter conjures up the scene of the gaze itself, a silent

drama ready to unfold. While the surroundings may vary, the overall setting remains the same: a country house, a large park, a body of water. The first tableau in both texts could be called “Figure(s) in a landscape”—a starting point which marks the irruption of a disturbance in the field of vision and at the same time immediately transforms the not-so-“natural” surroundings (as it is, a landscaped expanse of land) into a kind of dramatic setting where the eye will be involved in an intricate composition. From the first, the image detaches itself as an image. The idea that the image partakes of a *trompe l'oeil* is built in, inscribed in the architecture of the place: little is left of the former grandeur of the house the Tallis bought, no light can “conceal” its “ugliness”, and “the view” it affords is described as “fine enough” “if one turned one’s back to the front entrance” (A 19); the “view of a castle of romance” that the governess finds on her arrival at Bly cannot hide the fact that “it was a big ugly antique but convenient house, embodying a few features of a building still older” (TS 9).

- 6 Briony watches the fountain scene from behind a window; the window is not introduced from the start in James’s tale, yet the first apparition of the male figure in the landscape seems framed: “the man who looked at me over the battlements was as definite as a picture in a frame” (TS 16). The man who appears between “a pair” of towers, “very erect”, is virtually motionless apart from a final “transit” in slow motion, when “as if to add to the spectacle, he slowly change[s] his place” (TS 16). Just like this picture where the painted figure shifts position inside the frame, Briony’s “Two Figures by a Fountain” starts as a frozen image which turns into a silent film (later described as a “dumb show”, 41), yet a film punctuated by a number of stills. The fact that no word reaches Briony is not just a source of misunderstanding, silence imbues the scene—both so close and so distant—with a particular strangeness. Rather than being simply absent, the sound seems to have been turned off. When Cecilia disappears under the water the silence becomes so loud that it reverberates in the whole landscape: “There was only Robbie, and the clothes on the gravel, and beyond, the silent park and the distant blue hills” (A 39). The combination of silence and emptiness is also what surrounds the first apparition in *The Turn of the Screw*:

The place, moreover, in the strangest way in the world, had on the instant and by the very fact of its appearance become solitude [...]. It was as if, while I took in, what I did take in, all the rest of the scene had been stricken with death. I can hear again, as I write, the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped. (TS 16)

- 7 Enhanced by stillness and silence, the image imposes its eeriness. The suspension of time, if one looks further, is accompanied by a disruption which blurs past, present and future. The governess’s vision comes instead of an image that “had been in her mind”: “I had not seen it in Harley Street—I had not seen it anywhere” (TS 16). By naming what it is not, the governess nevertheless attaches to this image its spectral double: Harley Street is where she met the “splendid young man” to whose “seduction” “she succumbed” (TS 5) in the words of Douglas, “such a young man as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel” (TS 4). In the same way, the moment when Cecilia disappears in the fountain in *Atonement* is, as the reader is yet to discover, like a shadow image of Briony’s pretense to drown, three years earlier, so as to be “saved” by Robbie and to declare her “love” (A 232). The scene also foreshadows Cecilia’s own fate as she finally drowns in Balham underground station. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, McEwan offers the reader an “experience of time and its shaping and warping”, to quote Laura Marcus, and explores “the extended temporalities entailed in a singular occurrence” (83-84). Beyond the feeling of strangeness experienced on the spot by the

character, the heterogeneity contained in the image is yet to appear in a disseminated manner.

- 8 In *The Turn of the Screw* each new apparition introduces a new configuration, a new combination with a variable number of figures, different locations and changing positions in space which seem to point to the existence of a grammar of the visible. The image begs to be read—whilst at the same time resisting being read, feeling opaque in its very transparency. Although the pattern is less tight in *Atonement*, McEwan too plays on difference and repetition within a limited perimeter and with shifting coordinates. The initial tableau with its careful geometrical composition retrospectively gives the impression that everything is already there—in some cryptic manner. It also presents us with a fascinating picture of blindness in the clarity of daylight.

The invisible that lines the visible

- 9 While one may oppose the ghost(s) seen by the governess and the familiar couple of flesh and blood whom Briony watches from her window, the framing of the image turns it in both cases into a vision—something that involves not just the eye but the mind's eye, something that inextricably binds a sense of heightened power with the threat of delusion. But vision is also something one receives, something that comes to/at the eye rather than something it commands: in the “interlacing” that characterizes the gaze as Merleau-Ponty describes it, vision foregrounds the sense of being the object or the recipient of the gaze rather than its origin—caught in a chiasmus where one is always already gazed at, even when one thinks one is simply gazing at things. In the first apparition of the man later to be called Quint, the governess insists on the presence of “eyes that [look] at [her] hard”, eyes he never “take[s] from [her]” when he moves, “fix[ing] her” even as he turns away (TS 16-17). There is no such “mutual stare” (TS 16) in the scene Briony catches from the window, and yet we clearly get the sense that she has been taken by surprise by the scene that has caught her attention: “She had arrived at one of the nursery's open windows and must have seen what lay before her some seconds before she registered it” (A 38). The slight, fleeting discrepancy is enough to indicate that something has got fissured in Briony's controlling posture: out there, right in front of her eyes, something challenges the limits of the frame she imposes on a scene she so meticulously—and so blindly—tries to read. From now on what is within the frame must be read with what remains outside the frame.
- 10 The fountain scene comes just after Briony has been forced to acknowledge her failure at conducting the rehearsal of her play as she had planned it. Having failed in her stage managing, she nevertheless ends up taking control of another drama, which happens outside the nursery. Left to her own devices by the adults who are far too busy doing other things, Briony finds herself in charge of something much too big for her, rather like the governess who, from very early on, has an intimation (and a vision) of herself in the position of leading the whole house to its disaster: “[...] I had the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship. Well, I was strangely at the helm!” (TS 9). The governess's employer, the “splendid young man” from Harley Street whom she has seen “only twice” (TS 6), has sent the young woman to the country with a very specific request: “that she should never trouble him—but never, never: neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only meet all questions herself [...] take the whole thing over and let him alone” (TS 6). James's story

cannot be read without taking into account the place left empty by the master of the house: the ghosts are not only the figures that appear in front of the governess's eyes, they also include the man who, in London, had held the governess's hand for a moment, "thanking her for her sacrifice" (TS 6).⁷

- 11 In *Atonement*, Briony's father, far too busy in London, never makes a single appearance on the scene. He leaves the run of the house to his wife, who, herself, retreats in the dark, only too happy to let her clever child take matters in hand. The mother is not a sheer absence though, but rather another ghostly presence, "the sombre Angel in the house" in the words of Adèle Cassigneul and Elsa Cavalié (2020, 130). The invisible role she plays behind the scenes is allegorized by Joe Wright by a hand she lays on her daughter's shoulder to congratulate her on her accusation of Robbie—the fatherless boy (protected by the very husband who neglects her) whom she seems so prepared and so eager to sacrifice. Deprived of guidance, almost as parentless as the children they look after (the orphaned brother and sister in *The Turn of the Screw*, the twins and Lola, jettisoned by their mother in *Atonement*), the governess and Briony nevertheless remain within the control of the absent—puppets in the hands of an invisible puppeteer, even as they feel they are pulling the strings.
- 12 In quixotic fashion (Briony's play, *The Trails of Arabella* can be read in the light of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote or the Adventures of Arabella*), what is seen in *Atonement* is pre-determined by the stories that frame Briony's vision of the world. Lost in thought, Briony thinks that she is witnessing "the stuff of daily romance" (A 38) as she first catches sight of Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the first apparition of the ghost occurs as the governess, apt to daydream, muses and thinks "it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone" (TS 15). That Briony has read too many tales and wants reality to conform to her imagination is stated repeatedly and explicitly (overly so perhaps) in *Atonement*, while James's text relies far more on the implicit. Yet, the first chapters of the governess's narrative make it clear that she is very much taken by what she views as "a castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite, such a place as would somehow [...] take all colour out of storybooks and fairy-tales" (TS 9). It takes more than one apparition for the charm to turn to dread: wondering whether there is "a 'secret' at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho", the governess still claims: "It was all the romance of the nursery and the poetry of the schoolroom" (TS 18).
- 13 The "romantic" imagination that connects Briony and the governess can be read as what lends a fascinating imperviousness to their character. It places them in a long line, which from Don Quixote to postmodernist fiction, reverses the process whereby seeing is knowing. The logic of Mrs Grose, the housekeeper in *The Turn of the Screw*, seems all too simple: "See him, Miss, first. *Then* believe it!" (TS 11). "Less like seeing, more like knowing" is the way Briony sums up, after the event, what she has experienced in the darkness of the park. Yet if "knowledge" works as a screen (in all senses), both texts allow us to question the immunity it seems to confer. Briony's hubristic attempt to shape reality significantly alters, according to some critics, what can otherwise be seen as a traumatic experience:

The totally abrupt irruption of a totally unpredictable event is what is lacking: it is, on the opposite, as if Briony, through her warped imagination, were bracing herself for a traumatic encounter that she wishes for, because it ties in with the plot she has thought up for her next story. (Letissier 217)

- 14 This description of the heroine “bracing herself for a traumatic encounter” brings to mind the determination of the governess to face the ghosts and “launch at the beast” (TS 85). Yet, in the yearning for confrontation, control and domination, we may point out that McEwan (like James before him) invites us to recognize something more shadowy than foreknowledge, something that precisely does not know itself and is all the more dangerous for it. Rather than saying that the mediation of knowledge “short-circuit[s] the usual process of perception” (Letissier 217), we could argue that foreknowledge plays into the hands of (and is finally defeated by) a strange desire exposing the viewer to the violence of an object that imposes itself without mediation—that disrupts but also questions in a fundamental way “the usual process of perception”. What is certain is that what makes Briony almost as unpliant as the governess does not make her invulnerable. The eye, even as it attempts to exert control, becomes a direct point of entry into the body, which will remain forever wounded by what it never saw coming and what cannot simply be located either inside or outside.
- 15 The main fracture in both novels is perhaps not so much between seeing and knowing as within vision itself, between the eye that feels it can grasp whatever presents itself to it and a gaze that becomes opaque to itself. The romantic heroines do not simply have too much imagination, “mistaking reality for fiction”,⁸ they are mostly blind to their own self-division.⁹ However far apart they may stand, James and McEwan share the same fascination for the erotic charge contained in the gaze as well as for the infinite anxiety it involves. In the drama through which Lacan repositions Freud’s scopic drive, Paul-Laurent Assoun reminds us of the key role given to the object he calls *objet petit a*, the “object cause of desire” that is both there and not there in the field of vision.¹⁰ Interestingly, Žižek calls it a “transfinite” object: “an empty object that frames the endless set of empirical objects” (91), “that frames ‘the bad infinity’ of the field of the visible by giving body to what constitutively eludes this field. On this account, the object gaze is a blind spot within the field of the visible” (92).
- 16 If knowledge informs or distorts vision, vision has the power to challenge knowledge precisely through what it withdraws from the gaze. This challenge is something from which clever Briony feels she can learn stage by stage, until it appears (much later) that each new step took her further from the reality of what was happening. When she sees Cecilia’s head resurface in the fountain, we read that “[Briony] had her first weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now” (A 39). But while the scene works as an eye-opener, shattering the screen of fantasy, Briony’s epiphany still retains an element of self-deception: the “here and now” feels very much like something she can handle and look straight in the face. “Strangeness”, as James’s tale suggests, rather means facing something that does not stay in place and that unleashes its power of being “not here” at the same time as “here”. Interestingly enough, Briony’s most disturbing experience of something not staying in place is when “the word” jumps at her from the page of the letter: “The word: she tried to prevent it sounding in her thoughts, and yet it danced through them obscenely, a typographical demon, juggling vague, insinuating anagrams [...]” (A 113). The “*ob-scene*” leads Briony to think that “the scene by the fountain [...] would have to be reconsidered. With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced [...] (A 113)—something against which she resists with her usual weapons: “[...] she needed to be alone to consider Robbie afresh, and to

frame the opening paragraph of a story shot through with real life. No more princesses!" (A 113). Driven by this renewed desire to "frame" her story with a fresh eye, Briony does not see that her words will once more fail to catch "real life"; "real life", as it is, will catch up with her.

- 17 In the complex relation the two novels establish between the visible and the invisible, neither simply oppose word and image—the text potentially limiting and containing the wordless threat posed by the visual. As it happens, both text and image have the potential to unleash the *ob-scene* as much as to tame it. A remarkable and fascinating point of convergence between James's and McEwan's stories lies in the role played by letters in the diegesis. In both stories, the letter stands as the other of romance and daydreaming: its invisible or unspeakable contents obsess the characters, who fail to fully control their meaning and circulation and meddle with it at their own cost. In *The Turn of the Screw*, a letter arrives as early as chapter 2 announcing that Miles, who has not arrived on the scene yet, has been for some unclear reason dismissed from his school. The letter acts as a poison which irreversibly alters the governess's vision of the boy: Miles succumbs in the last chapter to the frantic questioning of the governess who suspects him of having stolen a letter she had written—all this as the ghost of Quint appears one last time at the window. Briony, as for her, is the one who steals the incriminating letter and yet she is in the position of the governess who wants everything to be revealed and tries to control the scene where the "truth" will out: having intercepted Robbie's message, she displays it at the dinner table in a spectacular scene with a view yet again of framing its author, in a "fresh", yet this time far more sinister manner. The letter will follow its own course;¹¹ in the meantime, what the heroines so desperately want to fix vanishes as they think they are holding it.

I / you / she "saw": climactic points, vanishing points

- 18 If the snare that is being built in the first part of *Atonement* cannot quite compare with the spiral that forms in the twenty-four chapters of *The Turn of the Screw*, something of the rising tension of James's text is certainly to be found in the multiplication of arresting visual encounters that Briony has to face, each shock feeling like another turn of the screw. In both cases, the suspicion of sexual complicity increases, and so does its imaginary identification with sexual aggression (McEwan staging the "intercourse"¹² that the governess only imagines and dares not name, her two figures always appearing to her separately). McEwan adds his own turn of the screw by showing that aggression can become real, yet this reality does not dispel the confusion under which Briony labours: sexual predators do exist, but they are not necessarily where one looks (Briony falls victim to the same social prejudice as the governess who shudders at the thought of Quint being "so dreadfully below", 32). The ghosts move closer and closer in James's text, appearing at every turn not just outside but inside the house: the governess once finds Miss Jessel sitting at her desk in the schoolroom, while Briony discovers Robbie and Cecilia in a strange embrace in a recess of her own domain: the library. "Briony's outrage and fervour" (A 168) at the thought that she too could have been a victim of Lola's aggressor matches "the sudden vibration of duty and courage" (TS 20) which takes hold of the governess on the second apparition of Quint. The "vibration" is strong enough to take both characters all the way to committing their own crime, but action needs to be supported by the claim that one cannot have been betrayed by one's eyes.

In each case this claim gets voiced, loud and clear, but the cry of triumph carries its own defeat.

- 19 In his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Tzvetan Todorov argues that the insistence on the act of perception often obfuscates the object perceived (“Lorsqu’il s’agit de la perception d’un objet, on peut insister aussi bien sur la perception que sur l’objet. Mais si l’insistance sur la perception est trop forte, on ne perçoit plus l’objet lui-même”, 110). Todorov takes *The Turn of the Screw* as a case in point:

Le Tour d’écrou de Henry James offre une troisième variante de ce phénomène singulier où la perception fait écran plutôt qu’elle ne dévoile. Comme dans les textes précédents, l’attention est si fortement concentrée sur l’acte de perception que nous ignorerons toujours la nature de ce qui est perçu (quels sont les vices des anciens serviteurs ?). (111)

Interestingly enough, James’s ghosts are not exactly ghostly in the sense that they can be described in a precise and vivid manner and possess, in the words of Agnès Derail, a kind of “splendid immediacy”.¹³ The figures, or later, the shapes and forms that Briony sees on the fateful night are far more uncertain than James’s ghosts—“a vertical mass” initially taken to be a bush “was a figure, a person”, whilst “the remaining darker patch on the ground was also a person” (A 166). Yet what makes the object elusive in both texts lies mostly elsewhere and comes through at the moment of naming what has been seen. In James’s tale, the object tends to vanish from the sentence when its existence is most adamantly asserted. The governess’s frenzied announcement that “Flora saw!” at the beginning of chapter VII (after the first apparition of Miss Jessel on the other side of the lake) finds an echo in Briony’s frantic repetition in chapters 13 and 14 of her initial “I saw him. I saw him” (A 165). While Briony names “Robbie” (short of prying the name out of Lola’s lips), oddly enough, only the pronoun “him” (the pro-noun standing for the absent)¹⁴ remains when it comes to yoking it to the verb “to see”.

Far from affecting only the object of the gaze, indetermination contaminates everything in the foursome formed by aggressor (the ghost/“him”), victim (Flora/Lola), witness (the governess/Briony) and addressee (Mrs Grose/the police)—if only because these places and roles are not as firmly separated as it might seem at first. In both works, the outcry is triggered by the involvement of another innocent (a virgin body, one may presume in the case of *Atonement*, and a virgin gaze, as one may assume the governess assumes in *The Turn of the Screw*).¹⁵ In the same way as the witness also sees herself as an innocent victim (“his victim could easily have been her[self]” thinks Briony, A 158), the victim is used as another pair of eyes that could potentially bear witness and validate the accusation proffered. Yet in both cases, the victim is mute and the witness speaks not so much *for* her as *instead of* her. On looking at the child to see “whether she too would see”, the governess “[holds] her breath” while waiting for “what a cry from her [...] would tell [her]”, adding: “I waited but nothing came” (TS 29). Briony, as for her, does not wait:

Briony whispered, “Who was it?” and before that could be answered, she added with all the calm she was capable of, ‘I saw him. I saw him.’
Meekly, Lola said ‘Yes.’ (A 165)

In this long scene where Briony speaks for Lola (as she will do later in the investigation) and where answers tend to blot out any question that threatens to resurface, Lola robotically repeats what is neither a question nor an answer: “You saw him.” (A 166-167); “But you saw him. You actually saw him.” (A 167). The absence of question marks potentially reflects the state of shock in which Lola finds herself, but it

also indicates that Lola can and will only repeat what Briony asserts very quickly “without the trace of a question” (A 166).

- 20 The solitude of the accusers, despite their attempt to rely on another pair of eyes, appears also at the moment of bearing witness. Briony slowly feels like asking questions rather than giving answers in front of her interrogators (“she could have left it to her interrogators to decide whether they would proceed together in the name of this kind of vision”, A 170). Faced with the risk of flagging, she repeats what sounds more and more like an attempt at convincing herself: “she reached back to revive her first ardour and said it again. I saw him.” (A 170). In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess needs Mrs Grose to answer her queries as much as she needs her to receive her own testimony: between each apparition, the governess puts more pressure on the servant, plying her with endless questions (“Lord, how I pressed her now!”, 35), so fiercely determined (“But I shall get it out of you yet”, 35) that she makes the “poor woman” “wail” (TS 35). This prefigures the final relentless interrogation of Miles, which the governess conducts till “his supreme surrender of the name” (TS 85) before stifling the boy in a last embrace/assault.¹⁶ In a similar way, Briony can be seen to smother Lola after the rape scene, “gather[ing] to her” her “unyielding body” (A 165), leaving her no time to breathe in-between questions in her desire to hear a name which she eventually produces herself. Just as the places of the witness and the innocent victim overlap, just as the person who asks the questions turns into the one who provides the answers (and vice-versa), the tormented becomes the tormentor—paving the way for yet another twist: the haunted becomes haunting. It is through Robbie’s eyes that older Briony paints herself as a “white shape” seen for a minute as a “ghost” (A 93) as he is about to hand her his letter to Cecilia. It is through the eyes of Mrs Grose “turning white” that the governess, who has taken the place of the ghost by the window first sees herself like in a mirror, “white as a sheet” (TS 21), both dead scared and dead scary.
- 21 At the same time as the object slips away, the “I” too becomes a vanishing point. Turning to a “you” or a “she” does not relieve the solitude of this “I” which no longer coincides with itself while remaining a prisoner of itself. What is left is a verb, “saw”, whose meaning was from the start fraught with uncertainty. Rather than a statement, the adamant claim almost immediately sounds like an attempt at self-persuasion, an “incantation” (Cassigneul and Cavalié 2018). The italics in which we can hear the attempt to load the word with the force of the irrefutable become a marker of opacity—the only thing that is left when all has been called into question. Ultimately “I saw” is like a cry in which the voice takes over from the eye, leaving the “I” in a void where all that remains is an echo: “I saw him. I saw him”. Even before the new day has dawned, it has become a lame stutter, crushed by another echo at the close of Part One, namely Grace Turner’s repeated “Liars! Liars!” (A 187).

Re-vision: “the truth had become as ghostly as the invention” (A 41)

- 22 *The Turn of the Screw* and *Atonement* converge in the fact that the narrative involves at all times not one pair but two pairs of eyes—at the least. In James’s tale, we are told from the start that we are about to read the manuscript of a former governess, dead for the past twenty years. *Atonement* reveals in the epilogue that the narrative we have just read, although in the third person, was in fact written over the years by Briony herself.

However, a major difference lies in the fact that James's tale stops abruptly at the climactic point where the governess finds herself with a body whose heart "ha[s] stopped beating" (TS 85) in her arms whereas the first part of *Atonement* is followed by three parts in which the title of the novel finds its justification. To the complete silence that leaves everyone breathless at the end of James's tale (so breathless, it seems, that there is no return to the outer circle of the narrative and that we are left with half a frame), one could oppose the unwinding of a long tale in which penance involves a sort of ascesis of the eye. McEwan himself sets the first part of his book against the rest of the story, the war making the "duty"¹⁷ to see what lies in front of one's eyes imperious. In a meaningful reversal of what Todorov saw at work in James's fiction, the act of seeing is no longer the focus of a story, and the subject seems to efface itself in front of the object. At the same time as the horrors of the war must be looked at straight in the face and are described sometimes with forensic precision in Part Two, the multiple revisions of the fountain scene in part I could be seen to testify to the later transformation of the writer: the tragic failure of the eye has become, so it would seem, material for an anatomy of blindness.

- 23 At this point, we could simply decide that James's and McEwan's texts part company, the scene on which they come so close together being brutally abandoned in *Atonement* after Part One. Seventy-seven-year-old Briony asserts on the first page of the coda that she has "always liked to make a tidy finish" (A 353): having put her papers in order, she gets prepared for a celebration that involves a performance and an audience, features which, in an interesting chiasmus, appear at the beginning of James's tale but not at the end. However, Briony's last attempt at framing things with a return to the seemingly thoroughly transformed scene of the crime cannot prevent the ghosts from creeping back in. Far from working as a mere epilogue, the coda slowly awakens those who had seemed buried and allows them to take their place next to the living. On the very brink of closure, the narrator reveals that the story we have just read is only one draft among "half a dozen different drafts" in "a fifty-nine-year assignment" (A 369) and that the ending we read at the close of Part Three (the lovers survived and met again) was a dramatic alteration of all the previous versions (where they die). Like the abrupt ending of *The Turn of the Screw*, the addition of the coda in *Atonement* compels us to reread the whole story to revise our perspective—a revision which partly allows for a clarification but also involves at every step the new awareness that everything we read is the stabilized picture of what cannot be entirely considered as finished or final. Combining two perspectives into a single act of narration could be like having two children rather than one: as a member of the audience in James's tale cries out, it simply adds another turn of the screw.¹⁸ In both cases, double vision involves its own opacity, an uncertainty that cannot be simply attributed to the so-called unreliability of the narrator but to a more fundamental undecidability. The return of the ghosts at the end also complicates the picture of a shift to a stark realism after Part One, a picture which was never that simple to start with.¹⁹
- 24 Revision, as the last part of *Atonement* makes clear, is not only synonymous with a change or transformation in the way of looking at things, but a repeated attempt at gazing at something that demands to be seen again. The compulsion to repeat undermines any simple notion of revision as correction, all the more so as revision in this case also has to overcome revulsion. The "maniac" that Briony saw in a series of flashes will be replaced by the monster of a lifetime looming in her own broken mirror.

A small detail at the end of Part One announces the violence of what will hit Briony back in the face: from the “vantage point” of the window, Briony is “horrified” (A 184) to see the handcuffs that have been placed around Robbie’s wrists; her eyes seem unable to detach themselves from them: “The handcuffs were in full view” (A 185). The “silver glint of steel” reflects a shocking “disgrace”, a condition which Briony cannot directly see as her own although at that very moment something is staring her in the face: “It had the look of eternal damnation” (A 184).²⁰ One may remember in *The Turn of the Screw* the moment that follows the second apparition by the lake, when Flora, suddenly painted as “hideously hard”, turns against the governess and comes out with a “furious wail”: “Take me away, take me away—oh take me away from *her!*” (TS 70). For a brief moment, it dawns on the governess that “*her*” is herself and not the ghost, and yet how can she see herself as the “horror”²¹ that she sees beyond the deceptively smooth surface of the lake?

- 25 At the same time as the desire for clarity gets disturbed by what may not so easily be faced directly, linearity gets complicated by the difficulty of separating a “before” and an “after”. After a lapse of time, both Briony and the governess are still there to tell the tale, and while both make us aware of the gap in time, they also allow us to question what is commonly described as “the benefit of hindsight”, casting doubt on the presumed “benefit” but also on “hindsight” itself. The presence of a narrator detaching her eyes from the picture and commenting on it is more heavily stressed in McEwan than in James, yet the difficulty, and often the impossibility, of separating the perspectives of the character and the narrator prevail in both texts. Doubt is sometimes voiced and comes to bear on the uncertain duration of things: “I gave him time to reappear. I call it time, but how long was it? I can’t speak to the purpose to-day of the duration of these things. That kind of measure must have left me: they couldn’t have lasted as they actually appeared to me to last” (TS 20). The longest and most memorable prolepsis in *Atonement* (“Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen [...]”, A 41) points out that what has just been “recalled” in the description of the fountain scene is not “the long-ago morning [...] so much as [Briony’s] subsequent accounts of it” (A 41). The narrative then comes back to a “now” (repeated four times) which presents Briony at the window immediately after the couple has left the fountain—a “now” which already includes what will later come into existence: “Now there was nothing left beyond what existed in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as the invention” (A 41). While preserving the distinction between “truth” and “invention”, the text makes it impossible to tell at what point one has “become” the other.
- 26 Belatedness, a defining feature of trauma, can be considered to be part and parcel of the experience of time itself—which leads some exponents of the spectral turn like Julian Wolfreys to declare that “all stories are, more or less, ghost stories” (3). The lasting power of James’s tale lies in its ability to enhance the relevance of the spectral beyond the scope of the traditional ghost story. Although McEwan seems determined in *Atonement* to offer a corrective to this dizzying (pre/post)-modernist spiral, and seems to be intent in particular on putting fiction at the service of history, by his own admission, the reversed perspective he proposes seems “eerie”: “it is an eerie, intrusive matter, inserting imaginary characters into actual historical events” (McEwan 2006). As Elsa Cavalié points out, “[i]l n’est pas certain qu’*Atonement* soit lu, ainsi que McEwan semble le désirer, comme un roman historique” (Cavalié 2011). At the same time as it feels more convincing to think of history as a “horizon” and a “vanishing line” inside

the novel (Cavalié 2011), the linearity of the second part continues to be disturbed in a number of ways. Julian Wolfreys's approach of spectrality as a "force of displacement" seems particularly appropriate to describe the narrative that starts in Part Two: "[...] haunting remains in place as a powerful force of displacement, as that disfiguring of the present, as the trace of non-identity within identity, and through signs of alterity, otherness, abjection or reversion" (1).

- 27 The recurrence of some striking images, patterns or figures scattered in the four parts of the novel has often been underlined. Most memorable is the image of leg in a tree in Part Two, "a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child's" (A 192) which recalls in Part One Briony's strange vision of "a cylindrical object that seemed to hover", "a disembodied human leg" (A 161), which turns out to be that of her mother. Lynn Wells in particular insists on "the artificiality of dream-like repetitions that pervade the novel from beginning to end"—repetitions which do not "dilute the historical significance of the events of the war but "point to the complexities of post-realist representation" (98). The best way to convey the sense of the "here and now" may be after all to translate its dreamlike, surreal or hallucinatory quality—Robbie's fever and delirium become a privileged means to enter history. This means a rupture or a disjunction, of which the "disembodied leg" could be an emblem, and a poetics in which the encounter between history and fiction could be thought in terms of "hybridity" and require the art of "montage" as Adèle Cassigneul and Elsa Cavalié have shown.²²
- 28 Briony's visit to the reunited couple at the end of Part Three stands out in the spectral landscape that unfolds after the fateful hot summer day. A fabrication, a concession to the reader, if one is to believe the aged narrator, this part of the book is written with as much detail and as much precision as the rest of the tale: it is an account which, as far as the reader is concerned, is as real—and no more real—²³ than the rest. The narrator's final revelation comes after some images—in particular that of the sprightly eighty-year-old Lola with her "voracious, knowing look" (A 361)—have come back rather insistently in the coda, disturbing the placid, apparently unemotional "tidy finish": "I was haunted by the thought of Lola" (A 361). Briony confesses in the quiet of her flat, having seen the sinister couple in the morning on her last visit to the Imperial War Museum. "There was a crime. But there were also lovers" (A 370): the choice to paint the lovers alive, having just come out of an unmade bed in Part Three, can be seen as an expression of desire, regret and longing that will never die. It certainly sets off the cruel irony by which, on one summer night, Briony got tied up for the rest of her life with the "villains" rather than with the lovers ("There was our crime—Lola's, Marshall's, mine", A 369). Hence the paradoxical movement of the paragraph in which Briony, like Penelope, unmakes the tapestry of her fantasized encounter with the reunited couple, only to reach the following conclusion: "But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish" (A 371). Hence the need, on the very last lines to conjure once more Robbie and Cecilia attending the party, "side by side in the library", "still alive, still in love" (A 372).
- 29 What never was is as real, in some ways, as what was. It matters as much. It must come out of the shadows, if only once, and be offered to the eye. Joe Wright seems to have felt that way when he chose to end his film with the dream made true, beyond the death of the protagonists, of a cottage on the beach. While the truth may be "as ghostly

as the invention”, the invention feels as real as the truth. James’s ghosts, in their intense and vivid presence, have splendidly paved the way.

“And above all to make you see”

- 30 In each part of his film, Joe Wright presents us with a pair of blue eyes which are never the same (they belong to a different actress) yet somehow always the same. What is framed over the years is the gaze itself, fixed and intense, like a question mark hanging in the air. At the close of McEwan’s novel, Briony has significantly shifted position (she is now the spectator of her own play and the recipient of her own words) but she is drawn once more to the window where she resumes her place and lingers, gazing at the now empty driveway where Robbie once disappeared “into the whiteness” (A 371). In the tension between survival and erasure that shapes the entire epilogue, Briony invites us to imagine the moment when nothing will remain but the empty frame—that frame behind which, at the very end, James’s governess finds herself “alone with the quiet day” (TS 85). It may cross the mind of the reader that the two figures at the window are no longer really with us anyway: the governess has been dead for twenty years when the seal of the manuscript is broken; Briony insists that the words we are reading will not be published in her lifetime.²⁴ We must imagine that the voices of both narrators are reaching us from beyond the grave.
- 31 The vacant window at the end gives a particular resonance to Conrad’s famous words, “And above all to make you see”, offering a visual inscription of McEwan’s aspiration to make these words true in his own fiction. The striking elision of the object in Conrad’s sentence should not go unnoticed. The intransitive use of the verb points to an indefiniteness which is immediately obvious when one thinks of Conrad’s writing, but which, somehow, also finds its way in McEwan’s fiction. In an interview in which he dwells on the importance of the visual in writing, McEwan mentions the power of words to convey the most minute details with amazing accuracy, “like little starbursts in the darkness”,²⁵ a comparison which sounds very Conradian—or Woolfian for that matter. McEwan’s choice of apposition, “to make you see, to get to the heart of any emotional exchange or any transaction or any set piece” (Roberts 148), also suggests that the power of the image lies in what lines or loads the image, invisibly, as much as in its visible contours, however surgical description may get. Indefiniteness can be felt to shadow the visible at every step rather than intermittently obscure it. In that respect, James and the specters he allows to appear in the sharpness of daylight most definitely help us see. From a broader critical perspective, reading *Atonement* with *The Turn of the Screw* invites us to look at the novel through the lens of “the spectral turn” and not just as a landmark in the “ethical turn”—or more exactly, it brings home the importance of thinking the two turns together. McEwan may wish to put modernism behind him, James reminds us that ghosts have no master.

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NOTES

1. This description which appears in an interview with Cook, Groes and Sage (Groes 146) can be found elsewhere with slight variants, the “girl” being sometimes “a young woman standing in a doorway, with wild flowers in her hand, looking for a vase” (Kellaway).
2. One may remember “the formula” that James imagines “for the presentation of [*The Coxon Fund*] in 20 000 words”: “to make it an *Impression*—as one of Sargent’s pictures is an impression” (Notebooks 160).
3. See Elsa Cavalié (2015) on the English imaginary of the country house and of the perception of the Edwardian era as a golden age and a “moment of identity” overflowing its temporal borders.
4. In this the reader may also hear another Jamesian echo: *The Awkward Age* (1899) was written not long after *What Maisie Knew*.
5. In the prologue, Douglas talks about “a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage” (TS 4) and insists on her inexperience and vulnerability: “She was young, untried, nervous” (TS 5).
6. See also the analysis that the authors propose in a previous article: “‘And above all to make you see’: Vision, Imagination and the Aesthetics of Montage in *Atonement*” (Cassigneul and Cavalié 2018) and Laurent Mellet’s study of vision in his book *Atonement, Ian McEwan, Joe Wright, “The attempt was all”*, in particular his remark about “vision becoming more and more impaired and ineffective” (46) as we proceed through the novel.
7. The possessive (“her”) is perfectly ambiguous—both the governess and the children being in a way sacrificed by the master. As it turns out, the story (which gets postponed until after Christmas) is read to the people gathered around the fire on the day of the Massacre of the Innocents.
8. The conclusion that Georges Letissier draws, in line with a number of other critics, (“There is a price to be paid for mistaking reality for fiction”, Letissier 217) would thus need to be qualified, together with the notion that it was just “a stupid accusation” and “a silly crime” (Letissier 210) that led to the final disaster. What sets the infernal machine into motion feels much more obscure than this.
9. In an article entitled “*Le Tour d’écrou* ou l’illusion tragique”, Agnès Derail-Imbert insists on this dimension of James’s tale: “Un puissant motif tragique, porté par la figure des spectres, vient prêter sa prestigieuse caution à la frivole fantaisie romanesque d’une héroïne qui rêve au prince charmant” (Derail 58).
10. Paul-Laurent Assoun underlines the change of angle introduced by Lacan and his *objet petit a*: “Tout se passe comme si Lacan organisait en drame—dont le sujet et l’Autre sont les ‘actants’ et l’objet l’enjeu—ce que Freud décrivait en suivant les diverses pistes des processus” (85).

11. Both texts can be read through the lens of Poe's "Purloined Letter", a tale in which the scene of the gaze is determined by everyone's dependence on a letter that holds the key to their desire and leads them on, blindly. On this question, see Tollance 2018.
12. "What it was least possible to get rid of was the cruel idea that, whatever I had seen, Miles and Flora saw *more*—things terrible and unguessable and that sprang from dreadful passages of intercourse in the past." (TS 51)
13. Derail talks about "la splendide immédiateté des spectres" (63). "Les fantômes du *Tour d'écrou*, à bien des égards, ne sont pas des revenants, ils ne font qu'être là, de plain-pied dans le décor et le texte, précédant et transcendant bien souvent la perception trop fugace qu'en a le sujet [...]" (63). Derail adds: "La souveraine continuité de leur présence fait cruellement ressortir le caractère partiel, imparfait de la vision" (63).
14. On the role of the (ghostly) pronouns in *The Turn of the Screw*, one may remember Blanchot's reading of James's text and his description of what he calls "the indefinite/undecidable space of narration": "l'espace indéci de la narration [...] où tout devient fantôme, tout se fait glissant, fugitif, présent et absent" (178).
15. Agnès Derail presents the scene of the lake as "[la scène de] la défloration partielle de l'innocence (celle de Flora, justement)" (65). Interestingly, Briony is described as feeling "a flowering of tenderness" (A 165) as she first approaches Lola who has just been raped.
16. That is, of course, just one of the readings that James's elliptical ending allows.
17. A word on which McEwan insists in particular when he talks about "modernism and its dereliction of duty" (Silverblatt 2002).
18. "If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children-?' 'We say of course,' somebody exclaimed, 'that two children give two turns!'" (TS 1).
19. Part One can be said to obey some of the conventions of realism while the documentary quality of Part Two needs to be assessed in the light of Robbie's increasingly failing vision.
20. The "priggish, conceited, little girl" that appears, decades later, in front of the elderly writer when she hears the words of her former play seems to have become rather reduced and tame, and yet she still causes the "feeble" heart to make "a little leap" (A 367).
21. One of the names the governess gives to the ghosts: "he is a horror" (TS 22).
22. See in particular the conclusion of the authors' 2018 article.
23. "When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions" (A 371).
24. The fact that Lola, the "villain" (358), remains so "haunting" (361) in the coda can be explained by the likelihood she will survive Briony: as long as Lola lives, Briony will not be able to publish her novel.
25. For the full quotation see the interview with David Lynn: "It is crucial, in my view, to have the reader see, and that is not to say that you've got to lard the page with masses of description, but key, vivid, specific details, like little starbursts in the darkness, I think have emotional consequences" (Roberts 148).

ABSTRACTS

This paper dwells on the multiple echoes and points of convergence between *Atonement* and *The Turn of the Screw*, a text which has been rather overlooked in the teeming intertextuality

crisscrossing McEwan's novel. Thanks to a sophisticated scenography, the English novelist, just like Henry James, explores both the avidity of the eye and the anxiety it faces in front of what turns out to be an in(de)finite object, the *ob-scene* that shatters the frame of the scene. Structured around dramatic visual encounters that result in a frenzied escalation, the narrative shows how the fierce determination to protect innocence leads to a crime: the English garden becomes the theatre in which the "romance of the nursery" turns to tragedy. McEwan's novel, very much like James's tale, explores the fearful and destructive power of a certainty that too easily wipes away the fogs of doubt; it invites us to think of the spectral not as a marginal phenomenon, but, in the line of "the spectral turn", as what fractures the word and the gaze. In the wake of James's tale, the ghostly in McEwan involves the person who lives to tell the story, whether she is engaged in vision or in *re-vision*. At the point where McEwan seems to part company with James and as the long path to atonement begins, the ghosts continue to unsettle the narrative.

Cet article se propose d'étudier les multiples échos et points de convergence entre *Atonement* et *The Turn of the Screw* de Henry James, texte que la critique semble avoir peu pris en compte dans son examen de l'intertextualité foisonnante du roman de McEwan. À travers la scénographie sophistiquée qu'il met en place, le romancier anglais, à la suite de James, explore à la fois l'avidité de l'œil et l'angoisse qui surgit face à ce qui s'impose comme un objet in(dé)fini, l'*ob-scène* qui met à mal le cadre de la scène. Structuré autour de plusieurs mini-drames du regard qui s'enchaînent dans une tension grandissante, le récit montre comment la détermination féroce à protéger l'innocence mène au crime : le jardin anglais devient le théâtre où la « romance de la nurserie » tourne à la tragédie. Le roman de McEwan, à l'instar du conte de James, explore le pouvoir redoutable et meurtrier d'une certitude qui écarte trop facilement les brumes du doute ; il nous amène, dans la lignée du « tournant spectral », à penser le spectral non comme un épiphénomène, mais comme ce qui installe sa faille au cœur de la parole et du regard. Comme chez James, le spectral chez McEwan implique celle qui porte le récit, il affecte sa vision autant que son entreprise de *ré-vision* ; au point où l'on pourrait penser que McEwan laisse James derrière lui et là où débute un long chemin d'expiation, les fantômes persistent à troubler le récit.

INDEX

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