

Country Houses, Stately Homes: The Tallis House between Tradition and Change in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate the representations of the Tallis house in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). The Tallises' country house, one of the main story settings, undergoes a significant transformation over time, assuming a different role and function in each part of the novel. Englishness, decadence, bucolic nostalgia and the idealised visions of England as a rural, pastoral idyll can be numbered among the ingredients that McEwan blends in the depiction of this mansion and of its surrounding estate: not only do they constitute an integral part of its foundations, but also of its evolution on both the fictional and historical levels, since they contribute to creating the myth that still characterises the famous stately homes of England.

Keywords: *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, English literature, Country House, Englishness

Abstract

Lo scopo del presente articolo è l'analisi delle rappresentazioni della grande tenuta di campagna della famiglia Tallis in *Espiazione*, romanzo di Ian McEwan del 2001, e delle profonde trasformazioni alle quali essa va incontro nel corso della narrazione, assumendo un ruolo e una funzione differenti in ogni parte dell'opera. *Englishness*, decadenza, nostalgia bucolica e visioni idealizzate dell'Inghilterra rurale come mitico idillio della natura pastorale possono essere annoverate tra gli ingredienti principali che McEwan mescola nella rappresentazione della *country house* e del vasto *estate* ad essa circostante: non solo essi costituiscono una parte integrante delle sue fondamenta, ma anche della sua evoluzione sia sul piano storico sia su quello del romanzo, poiché contribuiscono alla creazione di quel mito che ancor oggi caratterizza le famose grandi dimore di campagna inglesi.

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Parole chiave: *Atonement*, Ian McEwan, Letteratura inglese, country house, Englishness



Introduction

The country house¹ has been a powerful source of inspiration for nineteenth- and twentieth-century English writers: from Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945),² the rural

¹ According to David Littlejohn, «“country house” [...] mean[s] a large private residence originally intended to serve as one family's home for at least several generations, a house of 20 rooms or more, which rules out most houses and vicarages, however old or picturesque; a house that, ideally still contains furniture and art works handed down in the family, and contributes to the support of the local church, village and countryside; a house that is set in its own surrounding gardens and parkland and is (or at least originally) in part supported by its own agricultural estate of a thousand or more acres» (Littlejohn 1997, 309-10).

² *Atonement* contains several references to antecedent country-house novels, such as Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) – for the classic Waughian setting of *Part One* – and L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953). In an interview, McEwan stated: «A novel that was very important in this, and I wanted to fit in, was *The Go-Between*, so Connolly says, “I trust you've read *The Go-Between*”. I was very disappointed when the copy editor informed me that it was written in 1952 and I had to take it out. But what does remain from *The Go-Between* is the long hot summer» (Sutherland, 2002). Mellet writes that allusions to *The Go-Between* «may be more implicit or woven into the text [...]. Hartley's novel springs to mind when Robbie uses Briony as a messenger, and when Connolly has this sentence (not the one McEwan had first intended to write) in his letter to Briony: “Might the young couple come to use her as a messenger?” (313)» (Mellet 2017, 45). Mellet also quotes Natasha Alden's volume, *Reading Behind the Lines. Postmemory in Contemporary British War Fiction*, in which «many connections with *The Go-Between*, such as the unexpected couple, the heat, and Briony's and Leo's unbridled imagination and thirst for control» (Mellet 2017, 45) are established.

mansions of the British aristocracy have been playing a fundamental role both in the setting and in the plot of several English novels. In recent times, there has been a revival of country-house literature, in particular after the publication of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) – followed a few years later by James Ivory's 1993 film adaptation – and of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), which was defined by the author himself «my Jane Austen novel, my country house novel, my one hot-day novel» (Chung 2003, 164) and put on screen by Joe Wright in 2007.

What lies at the basis of this interest towards the «power houses of the ruling class» (Girouard 1979, 2) is not only the fascination exerted by the architectural magnificence of the country house itself, but mostly their function as symbols of Englishness,³ as emblems of English tradition and England's mythical rural past.⁴ For this reason, the microcosm of the

³ Studies have widely explored the terms of Englishness, Britishness and their social, cultural and historical implications. In *English Culture and the Decline of Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*, Martin J. Wiener contends that, although by 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, «more than half the population lived in towns, [...] England had become the world's first major urban nation» and «industrialisation and the explosive growth of cities [...] seemed destined to sweep away rural tradition» (Wiener 2004, 47), the English nation adopted «a conception of Englishness that virtually excluded industrialism» (Wiener 2004, 5), which «stressed nonindustrial noninnovative nonmaterial qualities, best encapsulated in rustic imagery» (Wiener 2004, 6). According to Wiener, a faith in progress and industrialism was counterbalanced by the rural myth: «progress versus nostalgia, material growth versus moral stability, workshop versus garden – these were the dichotomous terms in which the struggle for a definition of Englishness was fought out» (Street 1989, 74).

⁴ Peter Mandler writes that «nostalgic, deferential and rural, “Englishness” identified the squire-archival village of deep Southern or “Deep” England as the template on which the national character had been formed and thus the ideal towards which it must inevitably return. Purveyed by the ‘dominant classes’ to the wider culture by means of a potent array of educational and political instruments [...] “Englishness” reversed the modernizing thrust of the Industrial Revolution [...]» (Mandler 1997, 155). For a more

country house has often come to coincide with the macrocosm of the English nation, as Henry James illustrates in *English Hours*, his collection of essays and sketches written over a period of thirty years and published as a travel book in 1905:

Of all the great things that the English have invented and made part of the credit of the national character, the most perfect, the most characteristic, the only one they have mastered completely in all its details, so that it becomes a compendious illustration of their social genius and their manners, is the well-appointed, well-administered, well-filled country house (James 2019, 35).

The significance of the stability of the country house⁵ and the importance of its permanence on English soil in relation to what it incarnates has been emphasised by Catherine Palmer, who argues that country houses are

markers of nationhood linking the past to the present. [...] This enhances their power and potency as signs of Englishness, because their physical durability ensures that what they represent will also survive, further reinforcing the notion that there are fixed and unchanging aspects of nationness passed down from one generation to the next (Palmer 2003, 442).

Furthermore, the identification of the country house as a repository of essential Englishness goes hand in hand with a radical change in the

detailed analysis of Englishness, see also: Burden and Kohl 2006; Easthorpe 2004; Mattless 1998; Kumar, 2009.

⁵ This concept is also expressed by Jocelyn Anderson: «Many of the leading figures in the *country-house* preservation movement stressed that *country houses* were important sites of British heritage because of their *longevity*, including their historic role as tourist attractions» (Anderson 2018, 198).

function of the country house itself: at the beginning of the twentieth century,

the idealised, mythical form, which symbolised orderly relations between the aristocracy and their tenants, was replaced by an understanding of the country house that highlights its abstract meaning as the embodiment of history as well as its role in the formation of national identity (Topolovská 2017, 10).

This change became particularly crucial in the interwar period, when the celebration of Englishness and of England's traditional values grew stronger together with a general reinforcement of nationalistic ideals all over Europe.⁶ After the Second World War, alongside the resumption of country-house demolitions that had started in the previous century, a further impoverishment of the British upper classes due to increasing income taxes and death duties led to another significant shift from the original role of the country house: the ancestral seats of the English aristocracy started to be opened to visitors by their destitute proprietors in need of fast cash. This phenomenon is perfectly described by the English writer Nancy Mitford in her essay *The English Aristocracy*, part of the volume *Noblesse Oblige*

⁶ In this respect, it is important to recall here *What England Means to Me*, the memorable speech on the meanings of Englishness delivered by the British Conservative politician and three times Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to the Royal Society of St George on 6 May 1924, which contains the famous statement: «To me, England is the country, the country is England». Known for his eulogies of country life, Baldwin evoked both pastoral and domestic imagery to eternalize, with a touch of rural nostalgia, the «ideology of Englishness by transposing it to the world of the [rural] landscape» (Schwarz 1986, 170), and, at the same time, to invoke «the country as a paradisaal garden to counter the squalor and rootlessness of the city and the modern world» (Tsen 2003, 1). Stanley Baldwin's speech can be found at: <https://spinnet.humanities.uva.nl/images/2013-05/baldwin1924.pdf>.

(1954), in which she lists some solutions adopted by various members of the British nobility in order to curb the effects of their indigence:

The crippling effects of supertax also can be overcome in various ways by those who own large capital sums. The aristocrat can augment his fortune in many a curious manner, since he is impervious to a sense of shame (all aristocrats are: shame is a bourgeois notion). [...] our dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons [...] throw themselves into the sad commerce [letting strangers into their houses] with rapture, and compete as to who among them can draw the greatest crowds (Mitford 1954, 48-49).

Therefore, in the post-war period, the vast majority of England's great houses definitely lost that aura of power and prestige that had characterised them for centuries, becoming progressively tourist attractions, the famous stately homes⁷ we visit today.

Central to the first part of *Atonement* (2001), which is set in interwar rural England, is the country house of the upper-middle class Tallis family, around which a series of unfortunate events unfold. Although France is the location of the second part of the novel and wartime London of the third, the house reappears on the scene in another guise, as a shelter for three refugee families escaping the London bombings during the Blitz. In

⁷ Although the terms country house and stately home are often used interchangeably, the first exclusively applies to a house in the countryside, while the second can also refer to town houses. David Littlejohn explains that «the phrase “stately home” was first popularised [...] by Mrs. Felicia Hemans, the once-famous poet, [...] in 1827» and that «people who lobby on their behalf, or are arguing for government grants, prefer to call them “historic houses”. Instead of “stately home” or “historic house”, both of which terms beg a few questions» he prefers «to use the understated, self-effacing label “country house”» (Littlejohn 1997, 309). Topolovská argues that nowadays «no longer restricted to *stately homes* and *manor houses*, the *country house* has embraced all kinds of dwellings ranging from old, converted farms and cottages to sea-side villas» (Topolovská 2017, 10).

the final brief section entitled *London 1999*, not only does the elderly Briony, the younger sister of Leon and Cecilia Tallis,⁸ lay «bare the process of fiction writing, which leads to metafiction» (Habibi 2013, 1), revealing to the readers that she is the author of the previous text, but she also “returns to her roots”, nostalgically revisiting the home of her childhood – now the Tilney’s hotel – for her birthday party.

This article proposes to analyse the representation of the Tallis house in *Atonement*, which, «in addition to being read as a metafictional novel exploring guilt, ethics, and trauma», ought also to be «read as an indictment of the nostalgia that arises in the midst, and even as a result of triumphalist heraldings of the “new”» (Henderson 2017, 717). In the novel, McEwan makes historical change coincide with the functional transformation of the country house over time, which shifts from a pre-war decline to a thorough re-evaluation – and alteration – at the end of the last century, from decadent mansion of a wealthy family to luxurious hotel. The author thus offers the reader an overview of the historical as well as the socio-cultural role of England’s great houses in the twentieth century, which evokes, in Elsa Cavalié’s words, «the in betweenness of a changing world and [the] ambiguous relationship with loss and nostalgia» (Cavalié 2009b, 133). Recent studies have widely explored the role of the Tallis house in the first part of *Atonement*; however, less attention has been paid to its representation in the other sections of the novel, and, more generally, to its evolution over the course of the narrative. The present article can therefore shed new light not only on the diverse functions the Tallis house assumes

⁸ A thirteen-year-old girl and an aspiring writer in the first part of the novel, Briony has a crucial role in the arrest of Robbie Turner, son of Grace Turner – the Tallis’ maid – who lives on the grounds of the Tallis home, since she falsely accuses him of raping Lola Quincey, her fifteen-year-old cousin. Lola and her twin brothers, Jackson and Pierrot, are guests of the Tallis family after their parents’ divorce.

within *Atonement* (hereinafter *A*), which emphasize different aspects of social, cultural as well as historical change, but, most importantly, on the connections between the transformation of the fictional country house and the parabola of decline, revaluation and renewal that characterised many real great houses of England.

1. Antebellum

Located in Surrey, «the garden of England»,⁹ the Tallis estate immediately conjures up the image of a *hortus conclusus*, whose inhabitants live in a sort of rural bubble, which keeps them separated from the rest of the world. The landscape surrounding the house gives the idea of being an immutable idyllic *locus amoenus* suspended in another dimension, in which everything moves quietly, as if it were part of a slow-motion film:

if one turned one's back to the front entrance and glanced down the drive, ignoring the Friesians already congregating in the shade of widely spaced trees, the view was fine enough, giving an impression of timeless, unchanging calm (*A*, 19).

Particularly noteworthy is the comparison between the flash-forward to the present «dry, savage look [of the estate], roasting like a savanna» (*A*, 38) and the description of the state of the house in 1935, when the first part of the novel is set:

Some miles beyond the Tallises' land rose the Surrey Hills and their motionless crowds of thick crested oaks, their greens softened by a milky heat haze. Then, nearer, the estate's open parkland, [...] where isolated trees

⁹ «It is the garden of England, you know. Surrey is the garden of England» (Austen 2003, 254).

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threw harsh stumpy shadows and the long grass was already stalked by the leonine yellow of high summer. Closer, within the boundaries of the balustrade, were the rose gardens and, nearer still, the Triton fountain (A, 38).

Inevitably, the seclusion of this ostensible bucolic idyll, which is embedded in the rural English countryside, has relevant consequences on the behaviour of some of the characters, for instance Briony's: the «relative isolation of the Tallis house» keeps her, «at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends» (A, 15). In this gilded cage, Briony leads «a generally pleasant and well-protected life» (A, 15), but also Cecilia, the middle child of the Tallis family who falls in love with Robbie Turner, seems to find restoration in the natural elements of the estate:

The cool high shade of the woods was a relief, the sculpted intricacies of the tree trunks enchanting. Once through the iron kissing gate, and past the rhododendrons beneath the ha-ha, she crossed the open parkland – sold off to a local farmer to graze his cows on – and came up behind the fountain and its retaining wall and the half-scale reproduction of Bernini's Triton in the Piazza Barberini in Rome (A, 18).

In another passage of the novel, Cecilia reaches the terrace and is instantly overwhelmed by a *mélange* of emotions caused by the scent of the multitudinous varieties of flowers, largely amplified by the gloomy sky, by the visual effect deriving from the dark outline of the fountain's mythical warden, and by the soft sound of trickling water, which seems to give off an acute, argentine smell:

The open French windows framed a greenish sky, [...]. [...] as she [Cecilia] stepped out she smelled the pennyroyal, chamomile and feverfew crushed underfoot, and headier now than in the morning. [...] The Triton pond rose [...], an inky mass whose complicated outline was honed against a sky turning greener as the light fell. [...] the trickle of water, and Cecilia thought she could smell it too, silvery and sharp (A, 106-107).

Interestingly, the garden is characterised by that mixture of wilderness and tamedness, of natural and artificial elements, which represented the distinguishing feature of the English landscape garden created in the 18th and 19th centuries by landscape architects and gardeners such as Lancelot “Capability” Brown and Humphry Repton. However, allusions to real and ideal geometries, which recall the typical strict layout of formal garden style or *jardin à la française*, are also omnipresent in the novel: flawless geometric patterns have a calming effect on Briony, who «hurried through the darkness of the bamboo tunnel, and emerged onto the reassuring geometry of the paving stones» (A, 159) while searching for the twins who, apparently tired of the Tallis household,¹⁰ had run away during the dinner, or even magical ones, such as the «parallelograms of light» in the drawing room «which had transfixed Cecilia that morning» (A, 106).

Essential for the English garden, the ha-ha¹¹ and, more importantly, the fountain inspired by the Baroque Berninian masterpiece are not only emblematic of the interpenetration of classical references of bygone eras with modern aesthetics, but also of the multifarious facets that constitute the house, which «seems to be lost in time, stranded as it is between the beautiful house that once was, the ugly house that is and the impressive house that could have been» (Cavalié 2009b, 130). The exterior of the Tallis house is indeed depicted as a late nineteenth-century neo-gothic aberration built on a former Adam-style house, which had gone ablaze in the

¹⁰ «*We are going to run away because Lola and Betty are horrid to us and we want to go home*» (A, 142-143) is what Emily Tallis reads in a letter found by Briony on one of the twins' chairs.

¹¹ «*A ha-ha is a ditch that is deep enough and wide enough to be a barrier for livestock, yet does not interrupt the view as a fence or a wall would do. [...] Charles Bridgeman, William Kent, Capability Brown, and other landscape gardeners have installed numerous ha-has during the eighteenth century*» (Staubach 2019, 111).

1880s, an ensemble of «architecturally confused medieval references» (A, 109), symbol of a gradual impoverishment in taste over time:

Morning sunlight, or any light, could not conceal the ugliness of the Tallis home – barely forty years old, bright orange brick, squat, lead-paned baronial Gothic, to be condemned one day in an article by Pevsner, or one of his team, as a tragedy of wasted chances, and by a younger writer of the modern school as “charmless to a fault.” An Adam-style house had stood here until destroyed by fire in the late 1880s. What remained was the artificial lake and island with its two stone bridges supporting the driveway, and, by the water’s edge, a crumbling stuccoed temple (A, 19).

Rin Henderson argues that this passage is a clear indication of «the disappearance of an historical estate and the substitution of an inferior new one having already occurred», also adding that «the house’s glory, essentially lost in the nineteenth century, is noticeably absent by 1935» (Henderson 2017, 718). Both the Gothic architecture, a result of the late-Victorian Gothic revival, and the Adam style, an 18th-century neoclassical style of interior design and architecture inspired by the ruins of the Classical World, introduced by the Scottish Architect William Adam and continued by his sons, are no other than inferior and imperfect imitations of their originals. In reference to the Adam style, the cultural historian Steven Parissien has pointed out that

the Adams, while espousing the new cause of the Greek style, were also prepared to improve upon the ancient forms if they deemed it necessary. Such a bold move was regarded with horror by the more traditional designers, schooled in the forms of Ancient Rome and Renaissance Italy (Parissien 1996, 104).

Therefore, not only was «even the lost “original” estate [...], in its own time, an imitation of a modernized replica of a ruined, older structure», but also the declining look of «the house in 1935 reveals layers of “modernizing” renovation», which, in Henderson’s words, accentuates

«the foregone “authenticity” of this space as an imposed, belated idealization, rather than something innate to the historical site» (Henderson 2017, 719).

In a passage of the second part of the novel, McEwan depicts the slow decline of the Tallis house through the deterioration of its founding elements. An analepsis based on Robbie’s recollections takes the reader back to the Tallis estate on a day in June 1932, when Robbie is giving Briony swimming lessons:

There was a grandeur about the day, about the colossal, barely stirring beeches and oaks, and the light that dropped like jewels through the fresh foliage to make pools among last year’s dead leaves. [...] The path emerged from the woods onto the broad grassy banks of the river. [...] on a bend in the river, below overhanging trees, was the pool, dug out in Briony’s grandfather’s time (A, 229).

The magnificence of the natural world, characterised by the «colossal» trees and the light that drops «like jewels» is opposed to the «rusty iron ring, [...] lurid mossy walls and greenish cement» (A, 230) of the river pool, which is subject to the eroding patina of time. In this respect, Sylvie Maurel has written about the crumbling world of *Atonement*, arguing that «history, in which the novel is steeped, is seen as a process of ruination, not just decay, wreaking havoc on private and public spheres alike», by also highlighting the fact that McEwan does not present «an aesthetics of ruins», namely «a positive approach to ruins which consists in enjoying the new unities that emerge from the lost unity of the original», but «a politics of ruins in the sense that the motif partakes of [his] “engagement with the world” and provides commentary on it» (Maurel 2012, 164). Nevertheless, it must be observed that the significance of this passage cannot be wholly understood unless one considers its being inserted within a highly tragic narrative section, in which the male protagonist finds himself surrounded by the war landscape during his march to Dunkirk:

The road no longer had the protection of the plane trees. Vulnerable to attack and without shade, it uncoiled across the undulating land in long shallow S shapes. [...] They were passing more bodies in the road, in the gutters and on the pavement, dozens of them, soldiers and civilians. The stench was cruel, [...]. The convoy had entered a bombed village, or perhaps the suburb of a small town – the place was rubble and it was impossible to tell. [...] The abandoned stores, equipment and vehicles made an avenue of scraps that spilled across their path. With this, and the bodies, they were forced to walk in the centre of the road (A, 226-228).

The French countryside devastated by the war is put in opposition to Robbie's memories of the apparent idyllic nature of the Tallis estate, which, nonetheless, behind a veil of ostensible bucolic tranquillity, hides its relentless and gradual decadence.

Another emblem of the decay of the Tallis estate is the island temple, which recalls Brideshead's chapel in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).¹² Presented as the only real ruin, although it has nothing to do with William Gilpin's picturesque equivalent,

the island temple, built in the style of Nicholas Revett in the late 1780s, was intended as a point of interest, an eye-catching feature to enhance the pastoral ideal, and had of course no religious purpose at all (A, 72).

This dying edifice, which may be associated to what Jameson defined as architectural historicism, namely «the random cannibalisation of all the styles of the past» (Jameson 1991, 18), symbolizes

the remains of the religious within both the estate and the novel, so that the spirit of the place is embodied both by the domestic and mundane

¹² Cynthia Quarries argues that «as examples of Greek revival, both house and folly were designed to commemorate a fallen civilization, an irony reinforced by the absent original house and the neglected status of the temple» (Quarrie 2015, 198).

country house, and by the decorative temple, built [...] to connote some kind of spiritual presence (Cavalié 2009b, 131).

Similarly to the pool, the natural elements around it, such as the elms and oaks, «charmingly half obscure» its «sorrier look», which is a sad combination of «moisture rising through a damaged damp course [that] had caused chunks of stucco to fall away», decaying and «unpainted cement which had turned brown and gave the building a mottled, diseased appearance», «late nineteenth-century clumsy repairs» and «exposed laths, themselves rotting away, [which] showed through like the ribs of a starving animal» (A, 72). Nature in the forms of «leaves, leaf mould, droppings of various birds, filthy ruins of spiderwebs and nettles» seems to have regained possession of its due – dilapidated – space, reoccupying the interiors, penetrating inside what remains of that fake harmonic balance between Classical and Georgian elements («the style of column, or the pediment, or the proportions of the windows», A, 73) that characterised the temple:

The double doors that opened onto a circular chamber with a domed roof had long ago been removed, and the stone floor was thickly covered in leaves and leaf mould and the droppings of various birds and animals that wandered in and out. All the panes were gone from the pretty, Georgian windows, smashed by Leon and his friends in the late twenties. The tall niches that had once contained statuary were empty but for the filthy ruins of spiderwebs. The only furniture was a bench carried in from the village cricket pitch [...]. The legs had been kicked away and used to break the windows, and were lying outside, softly crumbling into the earth among the nettles and the incorruptible shards of glass (A, 72).

Although it was constructed in parallel with the new house, the temple «was supposed to embody references to the original Adam house», while «the swimming pool pavilion behind the stable block imitated features of the temple» (A, 73): an odd game of cross-references that does

nothing but wreak havoc in both the eye and the mind of a watchful observer. According to Cavalié, this decaying religious edifice, whose «very obvious status [is] a symptom of a bygone era, cannot be discarded as mere simulacrum», since «the dynamics of bereavement and loss resemiotize pastiche and its mechanical, purposeless quality, to acknowledge the humane dimension of loss and disconnectedness» (Cavalié 2009b, 133). The temple indeed undergoes a process of humanisation, which can be observed in its portrayal as a bereaved orphan:

the idea that the temple, wearing its own black band, grieved for the burned-down mansion, that it yearned for a grand and invisible presence, bestowed a faintly religious ambience. Tragedy had rescued the temple from being entirely a fake (*A*, 72-73).

Therefore, the temple can be considered as the symbol of «the collapse of a fake ethos of Englishness», «an artificial link between past and present – a fascinating yet fake “punctum” in the landscape» (Cavalié 2009a, 131); it is pervaded by a disarticulated mixture of nostalgia for an unspecified past and more recent disconnected memories of human profanation:

More than the dilapidation, it was this connection, this lost memory of the temple’s grander relation, which gave the useless little building its sorry air. The temple was the orphan of a grand society lady, and now, with no one to care for it, no one to look up to, the child had grown old before its time, and let itself go. There was a tapering soot stain as high as a man on an outside wall where two tramps had once, outrageously, lit a bonfire to roast a carp that was not theirs (*A*, 72-73).

By considering the structure of the house both in its exteriors and interiors, it becomes clear that Englishness has permeated the house since its foundation. Solidity, safety and stability, a triptych of typical Victorian values, were meticulously imposed to the buildings by Cecilia’s grandfa-

ther, «who grew up over an ironmonger's shop and made the family fortune with a series of patents on padlocks, bolts, latches and hasps» (A, 19), not only as a whim or as a consequence of delusions of grandeur, but as a means to compensate his lack of aristocratic roots («The family tree was wintry and bare, as well as rootless», A, 109). «The son of a farm labourer» (A, 109), a «man who [had] spent a lifetime devising iron bolts and locks [and had] understood the value of privacy», Harry Tallis aimed at consolidating «an ambience of solidity and family tradition» (A, 145), an unaccomplished goal that often emerges in the course of the novel, in particular in the description of the portrait in the living room, «a vast canvas that hung above a fireplace unlit since its construction», a pale imitation of a Gainsborough, depicting «an aristocratic family – parents, two teenage girls and an infant [...] posed before a vaguely Tuscan landscape» (A, 126). Contrarily to what Cecilia's grandfather had thought, namely that the family in the portrait «would lend an impression of solidity to his household» (A, 126), the thin lips, the wan faces and ghoulish look of these eighteenth-century figures instead contribute to increasing «the effect of suffocation» and oppression of the interiors, «heightened by the dark-stained panelling reaching from the floor and covering the ceiling» (A, 125). All these elements, in addition to a structural defect, «a fault in the architectural drawings [that] had left no provision for a flue or chimney» (A, 125) create a stale, fusty atmosphere in the room, in which «none of the three tall windows would open because their frames had warped long ago» and «an aroma of warmed dust from the Persian carpet rose» (A, 125-126). Therefore, Harry Tallis's attempt at building a cradle of peace and stability for his family had the opposite effect: «the walls, the panelling, the pervasive heaviness of nearly new fixtures, the colossal firedogs, the walk-in fireplaces of bright new stone», which «referred back through the centuries to a time of lonely castles in mute forests» (A, 145) generate a claustrophobic,

stifling ambience. In addition to this, a heavy – almost deathly – silence sometimes lingers above the whole mansion:

However elegant the old Adam-style building had been, however beautifully it once commanded the parkland, the walls could not have been as sturdy as those of the baronial structure that replaced it, and its rooms could never have possessed the same quality of stubborn silence that occasionally smothered the Tallis home. [...] There was no sound. [...] Noise from outside the house was excluded completely, and even homelier indoor sounds were muffled, and sometimes even eliminated somehow (A, 145).

Nevertheless, the silent heaviness and the stagnating isolation of the house, make it, at the same time, an independent entity, which breathes, moves and feeds upon the suggestions of its inhabitants, a creature that mutates with the weather, transforming its appendices in accordance with the seasons and the cycle of day and night. During the heatwave, when England appears as «a different country» since «all the rules change» (A, 128), the entire Tallis household is affected by some sort of hallucinatory experiences induced by the mugginess: thinking about «the vast heat that rose above the house and park, and lay across the Home Counties like smoke, suffocating the farms and towns», Emily Tallis hears «the house creak as it expanded [...] the rafters and posts drying out and contracting against the masonry [...] everything [...] shrinking» (A, 64). At dusk, the look of both the main building and the estate start to change, acquiring distinct overtones at night, when darkness descends on the countryside: the island temple is described as «obscure, but not too cut off from the house, a friendly little place with the consolation of water and not too many shadows» (A, 160), «the vastness of the night beyond the house, the dark trees, the welcoming shadows, the cool new-mown grass» (A, 143) recall a magical Romantic landscape inhabited by fairies and spirits, which seems to envelop the mansion and transport it into another dimension. During the search for the twins, Briony witnesses «some trick of

darkness and perspective» since she sees «the bush that lay directly in her path [...] break up in front of her, or double itself, or waver, and then fork», as if it were «changing its shape in a complicated way, thinning at the base as a vertical column rose five or six feet» (A, 164), while «the falling light magnified the dusky expanse of the park, and the soft yellow glow at the windows on the far side of the lake» make «the house seem almost grand and beautiful» (A, 91-92).

Presenting the Tallis estate as a microcosm of the English nation, in this passage McEwan seems to insist on the image of the mansion as an old warrior who defends its own territory, showing undisputed supremacy on its own land, and reappropriating its natural domain on the surrounding rural landscape, symbol of nostalgic Englishness and of a mythical, pastoral “Old England”.

2. The war

In the third section of the novel, which is partly set in England during the Blitz, the Tallis house assumes a fairly different connotation. During the Second World War, numerous great houses of England became casualties of wartime requisitions: after being confiscated by the government, they were usually employed for state operations, the billeting of military personnel, schools, hospitals or for a vast plethora of other uses (Musson 2005, 38). The Tallis house befell a similar fate when «three mothers with seven children, all from the Hackney area of London, had been billeted on the Tallis family» (A, 278): the arrival of these urban strangers into the rural estate not only represents a violation of both the intimacy and privacy of the English home, which intrudes on the “Englishman’s home is his castle” philosophy, but also, on a larger scale, an invasion by urbanity of that mythical bucolic England propagandised in the interwar period. While

the weak and compliant Emily Tallis «thought they should consider themselves lucky to have evacuees» since «at one point it had looked like the whole house was going to be requisitioned for use by the army» (A, 278), the aversion towards the urban guests and the disparity between the upper-middle class Tallis family and the refugees, who are represented as alien, coarse working-class intruders («one of the mothers had disgraced herself in the village pub and was now banned», A, 278), are expressed through the disgust shown by some of the servants, such as the catholic Betty, who was – as country-house tradition dictates – part and parcel of the household.

After the cessation of hostilities, many rural mansions were returned to their owners often in very bad conditions:

Castle Howard, Longleat and the Vyne housed evacuated schools [...]. Some, like Corsham Court and Harewood, were transformed into military hospitals or convalescent homes; and Bletchley Park became an intelligence centre where secret German codes were decrypted. [...]. Troops billeted at Blickling Hall in Norfolk broke the windows and forced the doors; and those at Eggington Hall in Derbyshire left the taps running, with the result that the ceilings collapsed and the house had to be demolished (Sackville-West 2010, 242).

In the post-war years, requisitioned and war-torn properties all over Britain looked like old ruins in decay, as emerges from the pages of Lees-Milne's *Caves of Ice* (1983):

Mercham-le-Hatch [...] is now empty. Troops have been in it all the war. It is much messed about. [...] Adlington [...]. The condition of the house is so deplorable. A hospital has just left. Everything peeling and disintegrating (Lees-Milne 1983, 36, 39).

This appears also in *Atonement*, when the narrator describes the numerous changes that both the Tallis house and estate underwent according to the practical functions required by war-time needs: «the cows had been

moved into three fields on the north side so that the park could be ploughed up for corn» (A, 278-289), the artistic or decorative elements slowly disappear into oblivion to leave space to urgent necessities: «a mile and a half of iron fencing dating from the 1750s had been taken away to be melted down to make Spitfires» (A, 279). Picturesque views, the *genius loci* and the local flora and fauna are no longer contemplated, only new and functional buildings can be erected:

a cement and brick pillbox had been built down by the river, right on the bend, among the sedges, destroying the nests of the teal and the grey wag-tails. [...] Another pillbox was being built where the main road entered the village (A, 279).

But it is the destruction – perpetrated by one of the refugee children – of the fountain Triton, emblem of a mythical past and of an idealised pastoral heaven, that marks the ultimate end of what the country house once symbolised.

Therefore, from decadent mansion of the interwar years, the Tallis house becomes a mere shelter from the bombed cities during the Blitz, a period in which the long-standing opposition and, at the same time, interpenetration between the country and the city illustrated by Raymond Williams in *The Country and The City* (1973), escalated. This comes to the surface in particular when Briony, working as a nurse in a London hospital, is affected by a «dreamy nostalgia, a vague yearning for a long-lost life» (A, 279). Suddenly, her longing for the Tallis estate leads to a transformation of the city into a mythical Arcadia: London no longer appears as the grey, smoky and sad Metropolis, but assumes the positive connotations of the English countryside through an instantaneous naturalisation of its artificial elements. The city becomes, in this way, an extension of rural England:

She paused outside [...] to admire the huge cumulus clouds piled against a pale blue sky. The river with its spring tide racing seaward reflected the colour with dashes of green and grey [...]. Despite the traffic fumes, there was a scent of fresh vegetation around, newly cut grass perhaps from the hospital gardens, or from young trees along the riverside. Though the light was brilliant, there was a delicious coolness in the air (A, 286).

Through Briony's idealisation of the English countryside of her childhood, her melancholic reveries and the imaginary countrification of London – vague late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century reminiscences of «anti-industrial pastoralism» (Chambers 2013, 33) – McEwan aims to shed light on the revival of Englishness in the 1920s and 30s, which resulted in the exaltation of a mythical image of a bucolic, rural England.

3. The Tilney's Hotel: Post-war revaluation and stately-home tourism

The Town and Country Planning Act 1968¹³ constituted the first – real – step towards country-house preservation, which led, in the early 1970s, to a gradual decrease in the demolitions¹⁴ of these «white elephant[s] [...] on

¹³ This act «required the owner of listed buildings wishing to demolish or alter them to seek permission, rather than simply serving notice of their intentions [and] also introduced spot listing, which meant that houses at risk could be listed overnight» (Worsley 2002, 21). As a consequence, local authorities were empowered to issue a Building Preservation Notice to promptly safeguard all those building the owners intended to demolish.

¹⁴ «At least one in six of all the great country houses existing in Britain and Ireland in 1900 had been demolished by 2000. Over 1.200 English, 400 Scottish and 300 Irish country houses have been recorded as lost during the twentieth century» (Raven 2015, 2). The *great majority of demolitions were a consequence of the intolerable costs of maintenance of*

their last legs» (Lees-Milne 1983, 126), and to a radical change in the function of great houses of England. Weight and Garnett explain that

heavy post-war taxation forced more aristocrats to open their properties to the public to pay for their upkeep, and by 1960 over 300 were open, attracting 6 million visitors a year (Garnett and Weight 2003, 242).

Others were turned into museums, wedding venues or hotels – acquiring, in this way, the more exact definition of stately homes –, as is the case with the fictional Tallis house, which, in the last pages of the novel when Briony returns for her birthday party, no longer exists, but is replaced by the Tilney’s Hotel. According to Cynthia Quarrie, this transformation is a consequence of the revaluation of the country house, which, «after decades of neglect and disrepair, [...] testified to Britain’s post-war status as an empire on the wane», in particular, in the 1980s, «Thatcher’s campaign to symbolically reverse this process was tremendously successful; it prompted a heritage-nostalgia industry that is still thriving today» (Quarrie 2015, 196). Indeed, after the conflict, country houses started to be

caught up in a process of memorialization aimed at representing the prowess of England at the height of empire. The houses are examples of [...] *lieux de memoire*, places, objects, or monuments through which memory is “preserved”, and which operate synecdochally to permit access to a past that has receded beyond living memory (Quarrie 2015, 197).

The Tallis estate is, however, barely recognisable: «the absence of parkland trees, the giant elms lost to disease [...], and the remaining oaks

these great houses, which further increased in the first half of the twentieth century after the introduction of new income taxes and death duties.

cleared to make way for a golf course» are counterbalanced only by «the woods that surrounded Grace Turner’s old bungalow [that] were still there» (A, 363). The remains of the pre-war house, which still bore evidence of Harry Tallis’s attempts at providing solidity and security to the household, have completely disappeared:

from a distance it had a stark and unprotected look. The ivy which used to soften the effect of that bright red façade had been stripped away, perhaps to preserve the brickwork. [...] the lake was no longer there (A, 363).

Through Briony’s attention to detail, which «signals much more than metafictional illusion-making or the cultivation of a Barthesian “reality-effect”» (O’Hara 2010, 93), the reader can immediately perceive the changes that have affected every single part of the estate to accommodate it to the contemporary need for luxury and comfort. These modifications are in line with the modern evolution of aesthetic production, which «has become integrated into commodity production generally» (Jameson 1991, 4):

On the bridge we were suspended above an area of perfect lawn, such as you sometimes see in an old moat. It was not unpleasant in itself, if you did not know what had once been there – the sedge, the ducks, and the giant carp that two tramps had roasted and feasted on by the island temple. Which had also gone. Where it stood was a wooden bench, and a litter basket. The island, which of course was no longer that, was a long mound of smooth grass, like an immense ancient barrow, where rhododendrons and other shrubbery were growing. There was a gravel path looping round, with more benches here and there, and spherical garden lights. [...] the asphalted car park [...] ran the length of the house (A, 363).

Thereby, the Tallis house, now a hotel, no longer harmonises with the rural landscape, as a country house is supposed to do, but only seems to fit into it merely as part of a commodified countryside. In this respect, Henderson highlights that «*Atonement*’s transformation of the country

house into an anachronistic hotel» underlines «English Heritage's continuing commodification of history for new audiences» (Henderson 2017, 716). Indeed, although the narrator insists that the horrible aspect of the building cannot leave place for nostalgia («There was no need to be nostalgic – it was always an ugly place», *A*, 363), both the external natural elements and the internal – artificial – ones evoke melancholic memories, such as Aunt Venus's room, «always considered to have the best view in the house, over the lake, the driveway, the woods and the hills beyond», which has been deprived of «the huge high bed, which Auntie Venus had occupied for so long without complaint [...]» (*A*, 364). Briony tries to conceal her nostalgia towards her former home, which, nonetheless, transpires through her thoughts:

I could not quite accept the absence of the lake, but it could be restored one day perhaps, and the building itself surely embraced more human happiness now, as a hotel, than it did when I lived here (*A*, 365).

Years have gone by, but the country house that McEwan describes in the last pages of the novel has not ceased to exert its fascinating power over its former inhabitants, to spread its alluring magical influence on the guests, on the temporary visitors, thus remaining a fulcrum, around which the space-time coordinates of human existence intersect. Within its walls, the past and present mingle together to then fade away in a mysterious light, which bundles up the estate, its nostalgic memories and its long, eventful history:

The floor seems to be undulating [...]. [...] the first gray light bring[s] into view the park and the bridges over the vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness (*A*, 371).

Conclusion

Atonement fits within all the recent literary works dealing with the crisis of traditional and nationalistic values, which, in the English context, have coincided with the melancholic celebration of an imaginary, ideal rural England of the past and of its idyllic countryside. Though published in 2001, McEwan's novel is one of the most relevant literary works depicting interwar and wartime England, and remains highly topical even today for the commonalities between the 1930s setting of *Part One* and contemporary England, whose withdrawal from the European Union is symbolic of the rise of nationalism in many European and non-European countries, and whose post-Brexit cultural climate has heightened reveries concerning the golden age of the British Empire or glorious events of English history connected to the peak of England's power. As also emerges from the novel, the English country house, which has triggered the curiosity of scholars of all times and sparked the creativity of writers to innumerable representations, symbolises «the microcosm of England's exclusive and self-conscious society» (Lassner 1998, 133), and is strongly emblematic of *Englishness*, of its controversial and problematic aspects related to the atavistic country/city opposition, the rigid class distinction, and, above all, the long-standing identification of England with its former undisputed imperial supremacy. Individual and collective traumas,¹⁵ generational conflicts and essential Englishness contribute to lay the foundations of the

¹⁵ «*Atonement* has been labelled a work of trauma fiction by J. Hillis Miller and Paul Crosthwaite, whose Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic readings of the text's treatment of trauma show how the initial traumatic event fits (or does not) into the narrative and psychological frame of reference of both reader and text» (Joyce 2019, 107-108).

Tallis house, which integrates, interbreeds and interweaves with many aspects of reality and cannot be understood as abstract or independent. Symbol of bygone era, in which it constituted the centre of power and the boast of the upper classes, the English country house still epitomizes the deepest essence of England: by transcending its mere physical dimension, it becomes a monument to a distant – and mostly mythical – past, whose fascination reverberates through time.

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