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Literature as Counter-History in *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement*

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Introduction

Where was I? I turn back the page: the war is still raging. *Raging* is what they used to say, for wars; still do, for all I know. But on this page, a fresh clean page, I will cause the war to end—I alone, with a stroke of my black plastic pen. All I have to do is write: *1918. November 11. Armistice Day.* (Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 93)

In her novel *The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood poses many questions on writing about the past. To what extent can we write what has truly happened? Do we shape the past through the act of describing it? How do we capture something that was once real and highly traumatic, like World War I in the quote above, on a page of a book? These issues become even more problematic when the book in question is not a history book but a novel, typically known for its fictionality. Both major and minor historical events have been popular topics of literature ever since its existence. Despite the vast number of historical novels that exist it is still a subject of discussion how we can approach the past through the novel, and what might be gained from historical novels that cannot be gained from traditional history.

The relation between history and literature has been topic of academic debate since at least the 1970s, if not earlier. In 1973 Hayden White published his work *Metahistory*. In this work and others he argued that history and literature are more alike than we like to think, due to their textual and narrative nature: “The [historical] events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play” (“The Historical Text” 84). According to White this would require a new way of thinking about history. This was partly caused, as White argues in “The Modernist Event,” by certain disturbing events at the beginning of the twentieth century—world wars, genocide, poverty, pollution—that removed the ground under the feet of traditional historical writing. He writes that these events “bear little similarity to what earlier historians conventionally took as their objects of study and do not, therefore, lend themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry” (“The Modernist Event” 70). A better way of representing these events, White argues, might be found in literature. The “stylistic innovations of [literary] modernism” were a direct result of the historically unconventional “modernist event,” according to White, and would therefore be better suited to represent it “than the storytelling techniques traditionally utilized by historians” (“The Modernist Event” 82).

This line of thought was picked up by Linda Hutcheon. While she was interested in White's idea of using literary techniques in representing the past, she thought this was an essential feature of postmodernism, not of modernism, as White claimed. The most important characteristic of postmodernism, which is said to have started in the 1950s and 60s, is, according to Linda Hutcheon, its play with the boundaries between literature and history. In her work *The Poetics of Postmodernism* she introduces the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe this specific genre. She describes it as follows: "[Historiographic metafiction] refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (93). It does this by use of various narrative techniques, such as self-reflexivity, parody, intertextuality, intrusive and sometimes unreliable narrators, and mixing genres. But historiographic metafiction does not only concern itself with history: the critical attitude towards history, caused by the traumas of modernism, is in postmodernism supplemented with issues from the "social, and political world" (Hutcheon ix).

Both historical and social traumas play an important role in *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood and *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, two prime examples of historiographic metafiction.¹ These novels were published in 2000 and 2001, respectively. Coincidentally, they do not only share reflections on the difficulties of regaining access to the past, but also have a similar plot and characters. Looking back from 1999 to the 1930s and 40s, the protagonists Iris and Briony, both descendants of industrial nouveau riche families, try to make sense of the life-changing events in their pasts that still reverberate until their present day. They try to reconstruct what has happened, but learn how limited their point of view is and how various possible truths are always distorted by official historical sources, other people's memories, and their own ways of telling a story.

Both novels contain another novel set within the main narrative. Writing these novels is the way Iris and Briony try to atone for the "crime" they committed in their youth; both girls have wronged their sister in relation to a sexual incident, which caused an estrangement between them and their sisters. In fact, Iris actually writes two stories: one romantic novel, just after her sister's death, and a memoir at the end of her own life. Briony's work can be called a memoir as well, as it relates to her childhood and her days as a training nurse. These stories of private life are set against the background of the turbulent beginning of the

¹ I will elaborate on this in chapter I.

twentieth century, in particular World War I, the Depression, and World War II, juxtaposing personal and historical traumas.

The way Iris and Briony write their novel of redemption is similar, but at the same time fundamentally different: Iris attempts to write a truthful memoir, while Briony presents her work as fiction. To complicate matters, in her memoir Iris refers to a supposedly autobiographical novel written fifty years earlier. Iris tells everything from her own perspective and in the first person, since everybody involved has passed away. Briony, on the other hand, distances herself from her story. She uses an omniscient narrator and multiple points of focalization to avoid making the fatal mistake she once made: looking at things from only one perspective. Showing historical events from different, often marginal, perspectives is what the novels try to do as well.

In this thesis I will explore what these two texts can tell us about the relation between history and fiction. I expect to find that, although it may not be possible to reconstruct past events in a completely truthful way, there are still ways in which we can connect with the past that are valuable and meaningful. The reason literature enables this connection with the past is its ability to combine collective and personal history. Also, as I will explain in chapter II, literature has the ability to reclaim forgotten parts of history. As an affective medium, moreover, it has ways of keeping the past relevant that traditional history does not have. A lot has already been written on both novels, *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement*, individually. What makes them interesting for my research is that they take place during times of war and crisis, but do not focus on that in a way that excludes normal life, taking place at the very same time. A good comparison of the two is hard to find; articles on one of the novels contain no more than allusions to the other.² While some articles touch on the subjects of history and metafiction, they have not been combined in an in-depth analysis.³ This thesis will hopefully do exactly this and answer some of the questions other scholars have left open.

Although I will use some theory from the field of history, I will mainly work with concepts, approaches, and theories from literary studies. I will perform a close reading of the novels and compare those aspects relevant to my overall argument. My main point of reference is the postmodern vision on history and fiction, with works by Linda Hutcheon and

² The only exception to this is James Harold. He uses *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin* to show how a different perspective on narrative imagining can solve certain philosophical problems. His approach is hardly relevant to this study, as he does not look into any historical perspectives, nor the themes of the novels, but mainly argues that their style requires active readership. The article did inspire me, however, to look closer into these two novels.

³ For articles that focus on historical dimensions, see Robinson, Hidalgo, and Bouson. For articles on metafictional elements, see Finney, Staels, Stein, and O'Hara.

Hayden White as theoretical and conceptual basis. I will also refer to more recent theory about literature and history, coming from cultural memory scholars, such as Astrid Erll, Ann Rigney, Birgit Neumann, and Aleida Assmann.

While historiographic metafiction as a concept was very popular during the second half of the twentieth century, its popularity and applicability has since declined. Literary scholar Alan Robinson argues that historiographic metafiction is no longer relevant today, since it would focus too much on the absence of the past: “Criticism of historical novels is still dominated by the model of historiographic metafiction. But, after the heyday of postmodernist self-reflexivity in the 1980s, this is now outdated; it is also inadequately narrow in reducing historiography to epistemological issues and in neglecting the crucial importance of temporality in the interplay between *past present* and *past future* and *present past*” (Robinson, *Narrating* xiii). I argue, however, that it is not the absence of the past that historiographic metafiction is mainly interested in. As Hutcheon writes: “The past really did exist. The question is: *how* can we know the past today—and *what* can we know of it?” (92). In my opinion, historiographic metafiction is perfectly capable of showing relevant relations between the past present and the present past, for example because of its focus on marginalized groups in both past and present, as I will explain in my first chapter. I do agree with Robinson, however, that we should not look at historical fiction through the lens of historiographic metafiction alone, as it can be limiting. Robinson argues that we should “supplement cognitive inquiry” of historiographic metafiction “with empathic understanding” (*Narrating* xiii). Just because we cannot write one True History does not mean we cannot and should not engage with events from the past at all.

This is my main reason for combining the concept of historiographic metafiction with the insights and concepts from memory studies. Ann Rigney writes that memory studies enable us to look at the role of historical fiction “without having to fall back into the familiar groove of seeing literature merely as a corrupted form of history or as another world entirely . . . instead [seeing literature] as one mode of remembrance alongside others, yet one that may do distinctive things” (“Fiction” 81). While certain historical novels may show that “collective remembrance is multifaceted and complex,” as historiographic metafiction does, she argues that they can also add to our historical understanding (“Fiction” 91). As Astrid Erll writes: “Literature fills a niche in memory culture, because like arguably no other symbol system, it is characterized by its ability—and indeed tendency—to refer to the forgotten and repressed as well as the unnoticed, unconscious, and unintentional aspects of our dealings

with the past” (*Memory and Culture* 153). We will see that this is indeed what *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* do.

After laying out my theoretical framework, my first chapter will deal with the way *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* use the postmodern techniques Hutcheon describes, questioning if and how we can know the past. I will also explain there why and how historiographic metafiction engages with the marginalized, or ex-centric, as Hutcheon calls them. Chapter II will provide an analysis of how Iris’s and Briony’s memories work against and alongside with “official” history, such as monuments and archives. Additionally, I will argue that *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* can, in their function of cultural memory, represent a counter-history of certain people left out of traditional historical narratives, in this case women and the working class.

A look at the dates of my sources will show that my research topic is not new. Literary representations of the past have been a popular topic of research since the 1970s and probably even before that. That does not mean, however, that it is not relevant anymore. As White argues, and Rigney as well, the inconceivable things that happened during the twentieth century made the past even more difficult to represent than before and changed the way we look at history and literature.⁴ The eyewitnesses of the World Wars are dying out, so it is now more important than ever to keep telling their stories in different ways, to prevent us from reducing the past to one uniform story. But these kinds of events did not stop with the new millennium. From the two World Wars that form the core of White’s argument a blood red line can be drawn to events like the Vietnam War, the Rwandese genocide, 9/11, and the current civil war in Syria, straight into the twenty-first century. Just because there has not been open war in Western Europe over the last seventy years does not mean that indescribable events have not happened. Hopefully, the ways in which we deal with past horrible events, such as those described in *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement*, can teach us something about the ways we can deal with them now.

⁴ Rigney writes that both in the nineteenth and the twentieth century the rise of the historical novel can be seen as a way of “dealing with the experience of rupture” (“Fiction” 84).

Chapter I

Elements of Historiographic Metafiction

Historical Scope

The Blind Assassin and *Atonement* are set against the background of the early twentieth century. They engage with what White called “the modernist event.” He is using this term for the two World Wars and other disturbing events during the same period that reshaped the Western world. *The Blind Assassin* has a wide historical scope, since the novel describes events ranging from 1870 to 1945. The main historical events are World War I, the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II. These events mostly remain in the background, as the setting of the novel is Canada, and hence the wars took place overseas. *Atonement* is set in England, which was more directly involved in and the site of both World Wars. The novel also focuses on a much shorter period, 1935 to 1940, which makes the story more condensed and the war more prevalent than in *The Blind Assassin*. As mentioned before, both protagonists look back on these historical events from the very end of the century. Surprisingly, the reason for that is not because they want to remember the monumental, collective historical events, but rather because of events within the personal sphere.

It is mainly on the level of these personal events that the novels reflect on the balance between their own historicity and fictionality, and the truth claim of official history. In this chapter we will see why exactly *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* qualify as historiographic metafiction, the genre that is characterized by its reflection on historicity. We will first determine the characteristics of historiographic metafiction as laid out by Linda Hutcheon and then will see how these can be found in the two novels. We will also analyse the structure of the novels, in order to get a better general understanding of them, which will be useful for chapter II. Finally we will see how personal events can assume a more universal meaning by looking at them from the position of the ex-centric.

The Characteristics of Historiographic Metafiction

Throughout her *Poetics*, Hutcheon pays attention to several literary elements that she thinks are characteristic for historiographic metafiction. In my opinion, the most important of these are the use of multiple narratives or perspectives, self-reflexivity, and intertextuality, which goes hand in hand with parody. The use of multiple narratives or perspectives is linked to the “postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture” (Hutcheon 108). The ideas of objectivity and a single Truth are contested by showing how particular events can be told in many different ways. Through

self-reflexivity, novels can at the same time establish and undermine history, something that Hutcheon often repeats throughout her work. In “ordinary” metafiction, novels might refer to themselves as being a novel, through their characters or narrators. In historiographic metafiction, this also goes for the historicity of the stories, for example when a character wonders how the events he/she is witnessing will be represented in history books. A final characteristic of historiographic metafiction is intertextuality. Hutcheon writes that historiographic metafiction “cite the intertexts of both the ‘world’ and art and, in so doing, contest the boundaries that many would unquestioningly use to separate the two” (127). As intertexts are often used ironically or as a parody, they are also a form of rebellion against the canon, whether historical or literary, while at the same time upholding it (Hutcheon 130).

***The Blind Assassin* as Historiographic Metafiction**

The Blind Assassin has been called a “collage” by Atwood herself (qtd. in Robinson 59). It consists of multiple interwoven strands of narrative, which all present us with their own version of the past and have different claims to the truth. The framing narrative is about eighty-three-year-old Iris, who tells us about her current life and her wanderings about town. Iris establishes herself as being in search of the past from the very beginning of the novel, with various remarks on the writing of history. She reflects critically, for example, on the description of her grandfather in a history book:

He prided himself on the conditions in his factories: he listened to complaints when anyone was brave enough to make them, he regretted injuries when they’d been brought to his notice. . . . Or this is what is said of him in *The Chase Industries: A History*, a book my grandfather commissioned in 1903 and had privately printed. (67-68)

She shows to be aware and critical of her grandfather’s influence on the writing of this history. Iris also describes how she is writing her memoirs, showing that she is aware of the fact that all history we know is a just construction, while making the construction herself at the very same time. Furthermore, she admits that she can have no certain knowledge of the past, for example about the founder of her hometown: “No one knows what Colonel Parkman really looked like, since he left no pictorial evidence of himself and the statue wasn’t erected until 1885, but he looks like this now”(176). Somehow the fictional and constructed representation of Colonel Parkman has become the accepted truth.

Iris takes us back to the first half of the twentieth century to tell us about her childhood and that of her sister Laura. She follows their lives all the way to Laura’s death in 1945. The chapters in which she does this alternate with chapters from a novel called *The Blind*

Assassin.⁵ We are told in the beginning of the frame narrative that this novel was written by Laura and was found after her death. *The Blind Assassin* (LC) is a love story between an upper class woman and a socialist science fiction writer, who tells the woman a story about a blind assassin. As we progress in the book we find more and more details in *The Blind Assassin* (LC) that refer directly to Iris's and Laura's lives. It remains unclear for a long time whether the novel is fictional or perhaps about Laura or Iris. In the end, it turns out that it was Iris who wrote the book and had the relationship with the socialist writer. Nonetheless, the novel shows that there were two possible truths all along.

Apart from chapters of this novel-within-a-novel, we also find articles from various newspapers and magazines.⁶ If we believe Iris, the newspaper articles never tell the complete story and sometimes are downright wrong. The strongest example of this is the article "Society schoolgirl found safe" (314-15). Laura runs away from home and is found again working at an amusement park by Iris and her husband Richard. The newspaper, however, obediently swallows Richard's made-up story that Laura had been staying with family friends. The medium that is supposed to be objective and truthful is shown to be heavily influenced. Through this parodic use of newspaper articles, their truthful image is contested, but because of the dates and references to actual events it also shows how the novel is embedded in a historical context, illustrating that "irony does indeed mark the difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm—textually and hermeneutically—the connection with the past" (Hutcheon 125).

This is only one example of intertextuality and the novel features many. Another interesting one that literary scholar Hilde Staels points out is the mentioning of Herodotus (153). This Greek author can be seen as the first historian, even though his work is shaped like a story and contains fictional elements (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). Herodotus is cited twice: once by Iris to her reader (345) and once by the woman in *The Blind Assassin* (LC) to her lover (421). In both cases they seem to mention Herodotus to prove their knowledge of the past, which is ironic, since they might as well be citing a fictional story of his without knowing it. The woman's lover, in contrast, refers to the factual Code of Hammurabi (21), a set of ancient Babylonian laws (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). A juxtaposition of historical sources takes place here: the historical narrative, reconstructing the events after they have

⁵ From hereon I will refer to this novel within the novel as *The Blind Assassin* (LC), LC standing for Laura Chase.

⁶ The article called "In Search of an Adjective," by J. Herbert Hodgins, is the only article that is mentioned in Atwood's acknowledgements. We can thus conclude that the other articles were made up by Atwood herself. As such, they are not real historical sources.

taken place, and the historical object, bearing direct witness of its time.

Iris ends her memoir with a note to her granddaughter Sabrina: “Since Laura is no longer who you thought she was, you’re no longer who you think you are, either. . . . You’re free to reinvent yourself at will” (627). It is both by knowing the past and by not knowing it that Sabrina will be able to detach herself from her troubled family history. She learns from Iris that she is not the granddaughter of Richard, Iris’s husband and Laura’s rapist, but of Alex, the socialist writer who was Iris’s lover. Because Alex’s past is unknown, she is now free to be whoever she wants to be. The presence and at the same time the absence of history give her that freedom.

***Atonement* as Historiographic Metafiction**

The structure of *Atonement* is less complicated than that of *The Blind Assassin*. It consists of three parts and an epilogue. Part One is about the fateful events that happened in the English countryside during the summer of 1935. This part is told from multiple perspectives, one of the characteristics of historiographic metafiction. Thirteen-year-old Briony falsely accuses Robbie, the son of the cleaning lady, of raping her cousin. Robbie happens to be in love with Briony’s sister Cecilia. Signs of his love convince the naïve Briony that Robbie is a sexual maniac. Briony’s accusations are believed and Robbie is arrested.

This part of the novel is self-reflexive by showing how dangerous it can be to turn real events into stories (and vice versa). Literary scholar David O’Hara argues that “in order to interpret the ambiguous behaviour of the couple,” that is, Cecilia and Robbie, Briony “refers to her own backlog of narrative schematics” (78). She uses plot devices and stereotypical characters from fairy-tales and other children’s stories to describe the world around her. A prime example of this is a scene by the fountain that Briony witnesses from the nursery window. She sees Cecilia and Robbie standing in front of the fountain: “There was something rather formal about the way they stood, feet apart, head held back. A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her” (38). Suddenly, Cecilia takes off her clothes and dives into the fountain: “The sequence was illogical—the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal” (39). When Briony intercepts an erotic letter from Robbie to Cecilia, particularly shocking because he uses the word “cunt,” he becomes the villain in her tale, leading Briony to accuse him of raping her cousin Lola.

In Part Two we read how Robbie becomes a soldier in the British army to get early

release from prison, after having been convicted for rape. It is 1940 and he is stationed in France, desperate to reach Dunkirk for evacuation before the arrival of the Germans. Part Three takes place at the same time, but now we are back with Briony. She is training as a nurse in London, treating wounded men returning from the battlefield. She gets back in touch with Robbie and Cecilia, who are now lovers, and tries to make up for what she has done. Both Part Two and Three are told from a single perspective. They also share a realist style, which does not seem very metafictional, apart from an occasional self-reflexive remark. Briony, for example, mentions a novel she is writing based on the aforementioned scene by the fountain. Robbie doubts whether any historian will ever be able to truthfully capture the battle he is partaking in: “Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for history books? And take the reasonable view and begin to assign the blame? No one would ever know what it was like to be here. Without the details there could be no larger picture” (227). This reflects White’s theory about the Modernist Event, which he thought could not be properly represented by historians.

It is the epilogue that is most obviously metafictional. Here we find out that it has been Briony herself who has written parts One, Two, and Three, which comprise a novel she has been working on since 1940. Briony is now seventy-seven and a famous author. She reveals that most of the events she has described in her novel—the fountain scene, Lola’s rape, Robbie’s trial—actually happened. Not everything we read, however, is factual. Briony describes things she cannot possibly know, such as other people’s thoughts when writing from different perspectives, and events she was not present at, such as Robbie’s time in the army. Her work, therefore, is a combination of eye-witness accounts, historical records retrieved from the War Archive, and completely fictional elements. By combining facts and fiction the novel “puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real” (Hutcheon 92). The story she has written is a product of the past reality and her own imagination, but the two cannot always be easily separated.

In Part Three Briony stretches the truth even further. For the ending of her story Briony has decided to write an alternative history. Robbie was in fact a soldier at Dunkirk, but, contrary to what Briony has written, he died and was not reunited with Cecilia. Briony was in fact a nurse in London, but she never gathered the courage to face Cecilia and apologize for her acts. More important for Briony than telling the truth is providing some sort of “sense of hope or satisfaction” and above all a way to make up for the past, a past that was once real and the entire reason why the novel was written (371). As Briony says: “Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love?” (371). She thinks there

is no reason for telling the truth when you can learn more from fiction and when fiction will make you feel better than the truth will.

The Ex-Centric

By using the literary techniques we have just seen in *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement*—multiple narratives, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and parody—historiographic metafiction “questions the very bases of any certainty (history, subjectivity, reference) and any standards of judgment” (Hutcheon 57). Calling these certainties “the centre,” Hutcheon writes that historiographic metafiction likes to explore what is outside the centre: the ex-centric. This consists often of marginalized people, places, and topics, related to “race, gender, sexual preferences, ethnicity, native status, class” (Hutcheon 61). Conventional history is usually at the service of the centre, legitimizing those in power and contributing to the grand narratives of, for example, the nation.⁷ Michel Foucault has written that power is closely related to knowledge: “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (27). If this is true, then creating an alternative body of historical knowledge might give power to the marginalized. White shows that, just like historiographic metafiction, Foucault is against the idea of a unified story and has an “utter unconcern for the staple of conventional history of ideas: continuities, traditions, influences, causes, comparisons, typologies, and so on. He is interested, he tells us, only in the ‘ruptures,’ ‘discontinuities,’ and ‘disjunctions’ in the history of consciousness” (“Foucault,” White 234). Hutcheon is walking in Foucault’s footsteps when she argues that postmodernism criticizes “any totalizing or homogenizing system” by taking on the perspective of the marginalized through the representation of these ruptures and discontinuities (12).

It may not come as a surprise, therefore, that although *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* take place during major crises, these historical events are pushed to the background and complemented with very different stories. In *The Blind Assassin*, World War II in its entirety is dealt with in two and a half pages. The following quote of Iris is striking: “I no longer went to the newsreels—the speeches, the battles, the bombings and the devastation, the victories, even the invasions. Stirring times, or so we were told, but I’d lost interest” (587). Iris is preoccupied with food rations, her troublesome marriage, and Laura’s disappearance, instead of with the grand story of battles, bombs, and mass death. *Atonement* is a little different in this respect, since Part Two does take place in a battle situation.

⁷ See Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983).

Nevertheless, it is the failure of the British army we witness in these chapters, a retreat, not a heroic victory. Additionally, we spend a lot of time in Robbie's head, when he is thinking back to his time in prison, his reunion with Cecilia, and their future together. In addition to being a horrible event on its own, the war functions here as an obstacle in the way of their relationship. *The Blind Assassin* follows the same pattern: Iris's parents' marriage is ruined by the First World War, and the Depression, traumatic in a different way, forces Iris into an abusive marriage. It is also striking that the Holocaust is never mentioned in either of the novels, although it has almost become a synonym for World War II and plays a role in most novels about this period.

Instead, the novels try to tell those parts of the story that have not been told yet. We will see in chapter II that this includes stories related to gender and class. The novels also reflect on how we can make sure that these stories stay within the public consciousness by looking critically at traditional methods of remembering and exploring new ones. I will argue that the "other" stories also require "other" kinds of memorials, and that the novels are able to take on that role.

Chapter II

Memorials in novels, novels as memorials

Remembering plays a significant role in *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement*. They engage with different kinds of remembering and its importance. The novels provide us with examples of traditional kinds of commemoration, such as monuments, memorial prizes, museums, and archives and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. We are also shown that novels themselves might be a kind of memorial in a non-traditional sense, especially when the subject of memory is not traditional either. The manner in which cultural objects can function as bearers of memory has been studied by scholars of cultural memory such as Astrid Erll, Aleida Assmann, and Ann Rigney. In this chapter we will see how *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* reflect on different types of commemoration and to what extent they themselves might function as objects of cultural memory. Because of their function as cultural memory they can represent the ex-centric, in particular women and the working class, and create a gender- and class-related alternative to the traditional historical narratives of the 1930s and 40s.

“Lest We Forget”: Traditional Memorials in *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement*

The narrative of eighty-three-year-old Iris in *The Blind Assassin* starts with a memorial: the Laura Chase Memorial Prize, which she will award at the local high school. The prize was instituted by her sister-in-law Winifred, who never liked Laura and was partly responsible for locking her up in a mental asylum and forcing her to have an abortion. Iris says about the prize: “I suppose the old bitch pictured the whole thing when she made her bequest, stingy as she is . . . she wanted me writhing in the town’s harsh gaze while her own munificence was lauded. . . . I hated to give her the satisfaction, but I couldn’t shirk it without seeming frightened, guilty, or else indifferent. Worse: forgetful” (48). Clearly, Iris is not in favour of the memorial prize at all. Winifred tries to construct a public history of her relation with Laura that overwrites the actual events: Laura’s suffering at her hands. Nonetheless, Iris attends the event, out of the fear of seeming forgetful and because she is unable to publically present a counter-history. Writing a novel is her way of setting Winifred’s lies straight. A few chapters later Iris describes a statue that was put up in Port Ticonderoga in commemoration of the First World War. There is a lot of criticism from the townspeople on the statue Iris’s father Norval has commissioned:

Some people in the town thought the Weary Soldier statue was too dejected-looking, and also too slovenly: they objected to the unbuttoned shirt. They wanted something

more triumphant, like the Goddess of Victory on the memorial two towns over . . . They also wanted ‘For Those Who Willingly Made the Supreme Sacrifice’ to be written on the front. Father refused to back down on the sculpture, saying they should consider themselves lucky the Weary Soldier had two arms and two legs, not to mention a head, and that if they didn’t watch out he’d go in for bare-naked realism all the way and the statue would be made of rotting body fragments . . . As for the inscription, there was nothing willing about the sacrifice, as it had not been the intention of the dead to get themselves blown to Kingdom come. He himself favoured ‘Lest We Forget,’ . . . He said a damn sight too many people had been a damn sight too forgetful. (180)

What Norval Chase wants to do is show the horrible reality of the war, with innocent people blown to bits, for no reason whatsoever. By showing that there is no redeeming quality to war, nor heroism, he hopes that that will prevent it from ever happening again. The townspeople, on the other hand, most of whom probably did not take part in the war, want to emphasise the victory of the Allied Powers and the heroism of the soldiers, who died for a higher goal, presenting themselves as the “good guys.” This is similar to Winifred’s strategy, who wants to look like a selfless benefactor by instituting a memorial prize. Being hijacked by master narratives of glory, national pride, and benevolence is a recurrent danger for monuments and memorials of which Iris shows herself to be aware. All she wants to do is remember, but the traditional attempts at it are false and empty.

In *Atonement* the most prevalent object of memory is the vase that Cecilia and Robbie break during the fountain scene. This vase had belonged to Uncle Clam, World War I soldier, and was given to him as thanks for evacuating a French town. The fragile vase survived the war, but Uncle Clam did not. By using the vase his family hopes to keep his memory alive: “Even though it was reckoned to be worth more than the other pieces in the Tallis home, which were mostly junk collected by Cecilia’s grandfather, Jack Tallis wanted the vase in use, in honour of his brother’s memory. It was not to be imprisoned behind a glass case. If it had survived the war, the reasoning went, then it could survive the Tallises” (24). The fact that it is only revealed years later, when World War II has begun, that the vase has been broken, might symbolize that the memory of the victims of World War I will now have to make place for a new wave of traumatic losses.

Only a short part of *Atonement* takes place after the Second World War. Therefore there is not much attention for official war monuments. The only kind of “monument” we find is the Imperial War Museum, which also functions as a war archive. This is the place where

Briony has done the research for her novel. She has also donated to the museum the letters of Cecilia and Robbie and the letters she has received from veterans about the Battle of Dunkirk. For Briony this gives a very personal and private dimension to the War Archive, but at the same time it is probable that the letters will disappear in the immensity of the archive and will not be of use to anyone. Uncle Clam's vase is a personal monument as well. These personal dimensions might explain why Briony does appreciate these ways of remembering the past, unlike Iris does with the memorials she encounters. But exactly because these objects of memory are so personal, there is a risk that they will not reach many other people and the bigger goal of remembering World War I and II in all their facets will be missed. That is why Briony attempts to create a different kind of memorial, personal but still effective, by writing her novel.

Cultural Memory

A balance needs to be found between the public and the personal dimensions of remembering in order for events to be inscribed in cultural memory. Cultural memory is a term coined by Jan Assmann, who defined it as “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive frame-work of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (126). As this quote shows, and as Erll remarks, cultural memory is “a term often used in an ambiguous and vague way” (“Cultural Memory Studies” 1). In her introduction to *Cultural Memory Studies* she gives the broad definition of “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (2). Assmann himself makes a further distinction between memories that are transmitted through a social context, which he calls collective memory, and memories transmitted through “objectivized culture”, which is cultural memory (128). In short, we might say that cultural memory is the way cultural products represent the past and keep it alive in social contexts. The “objects” that constitute cultural memory range from statues, literature, and music, to rituals and commemorative services. I want to argue that *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* could function as examples of cultural memory.

Erll writes that literature has a special position within cultural memory because of “its similarities *and* differences to processes of remembering and forgetting” (*Memory in Culture* 145). Some of the similarities are the condensation of meaning, narration, and the use of different genres (145). Important differences are “fictional privileges and restrictions, interdiscursivity, polyvalence, production/reflexion of memory” (149). Literature is similar enough to individual memory (which also works in the form of a narrative) to be a medium of

cultural memory, but it also has some functions that individual memory does not have. One of these functions is representing those parts of the past that have stayed outside of the mainstream view of the past. According to Rigney “[i]t is possible to read the history of the historical novel as an ongoing exploration of what has ‘been beyond the grasp’ of historians” (“Fiction” 88). Not only does literature bring new historical topics into circulation, it also keeps already established ones relevant: “It is because (freebooting) artists and (disciplined) historians are constantly pulling away from each other that certain topics remain ‘alive’ and feed into public discussions” (Rigney, “All This Happened” 22).

There are different narrative forms in which memory can be represented in literature. Erll gives a few examples of this, of which the “experiential mode” and the “reflexive mode” relate directly to *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* (*Memory in Culture* 158-59). The experiential mode “represent[s] the past as lived-through experience” (158). Typical for the experiential mode is the use of “the ‘personal voice’ generated by first-person narration,” which can clearly be found in *The Blind Assassin*, where Iris tells the main part of the novel in first person. Characteristic as well are “lengthy passages focalised by an ‘experiencing I’ in order to convey embodied, seemingly immediate experience,” which we find a lot in *Atonement* (158). Literature written in the reflexive mode “gives us the illusion of glimpsing the past and is, often simultaneously, a major medium of critical reflection upon such processes of representation” (159). How this critical reflection takes place in *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* we have discussed in chapter I. It is also not without reason that Erll writes that “[m]ost of present-day historiographic metafiction features strong reflexive modes” (159).

Birgit Neumann explores in more detail the narrative techniques used in literature that functions as cultural memory, or, as she calls these works, “fictions of memory” (334). Some of these techniques are the same as those used in historiographic metafiction, which have been discussed in chapter I. In that chapter we already saw the following of Neumann’s characteristics: self-reflexion; possible versions of an event; multiple perspectives; and intertextuality (337-40). To this list Neumann adds retrospection and tension between the remembering and the remembered I (335-36). Both *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* are written by older women looking back on their youth and are therefore examples of retrospection. Tension between the remembering and the remembered I is also prevalent, as it is the remembering I that tries to atone for things the remembered I has done. Briony is very critical of her own behaviour in the past. She presents herself as a naïve and overconfident child. The tension that Iris experiences is voiced in this passage: “I and the girl in the picture

have ceased to be the same person. I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, is she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember” (292). We can safely say that stylistically *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* have all the qualifications to be read as fictions of memory. But what do they actually want us to remember?

Counter-History

Like historiographic metafiction, cultural memory engages with the ex-centric or marginal, representing those parts of history that have not (yet) been acknowledged by “official” history. According to cultural memory scholars Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith the stories that are told by “official” history and those that are not “are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender” and other themes of exclusion like race and class (6). Aleida Assmann, who divides cultural memory into the canon (active memory) and the archive (passive memory), argues that parts of the past related to “an alien culture” or “a persecuted minority” are more vulnerable to being forgotten. The reason is that the canon and the archive are shaped by the dominant majority and “institutions of power” (Assmann 102). The canon specifically is “built on the principle of exclusion,” Assmann writes, because its function is creating a unified cultural identity (106). But the archive might still contain traces of the marginal “that can tell a counter-history to the one propagated by the rulers” (Assmann 99). *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* tell a counter-history by showing the marginal positions of women and the working class in the 1930s and 40s.

While both *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* are critical about gender and class, gender is more prevalent in *The Blind Assassin* and class in *Atonement*. Gender is a recurrent theme in Atwood’s novels, with *The Handmaid’s Tale* as the most famous example. It is not surprising, therefore, that *The Blind Assassin* has been read as a feminist Gothic novel (Stein) and a feminist memoir (Bouson). Literary scholar Gayle Greene has written that historiographic metafiction “is a powerful tool of feminist critique, for to draw attention to the structures of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behaviour” (293). Although Greene does not mention class, I think we can say that the same is true for class critique, since it is related to power and repression in a similar way. In these kinds of situations, we “especially need to remember because forgetting is a major obstacle to change” (Greene 298). This change can happen, according to Hirsch and Smith, when the representation of the marginalized is done well. It can then contest traditional history: “The individual story, whether told through oral narrative, fiction, film, testimony, or

performance, also serves as a challenge and a counter-memory to official hegemonic history” (7). We will now see some of the instances of critique on notions of gender and class in the two novels and see how they create a counter-history. Starting with *The Blind Assassin*, I will be drawing on the two aforementioned feminist readings of the novel by gender scholar Karen F. Stein and literary scholar J. Brooks Bouson.

“Her own life! Just think what she’d do with it!”

When Iris looks back upon her childhood she exposes the patriarchal society of the early twentieth century. She and her sister are subsequently subjected to the father, the teacher and the husband. Norval, their father, insists that they “must be neat, obedient, silent, and show no overt signs of sexuality” (256). Their teacher, Mr. Erskine, terrorizes the girls, beats them, and molests Laura. Laura is victimized yet again when Iris has married Richard. He repeatedly rapes Laura, has her declared mad when she becomes pregnant, and forces an abortion on her. Iris in turn is humiliated and physically abused by Richard. Richard controls her life and does not care for her, except when she is in bed with him: “My job was to open my legs and shut my mouth. If that sounds brutal, it was. But it wasn’t out of the ordinary” (407). It is considered normal that women comply to men and have their lives completely dictated by them.

Women with jobs and their own lives are frowned upon. In Iris’s experience, only poor women work, like Reenie the housekeeper, or the governess Miss Violet Goreham, who is pitied for being an old maid. The idea of a woman being independent and being happy with it is inconceivable and not seen as an option for the Chase girls: “‘Maybe [Laura] just wants to lead her own life,’ I said. ‘Her own life!’ said Winifred. ‘Just think what she’d do with it!’” (518). Winifred is proven wrong by the part of the novel that takes place in the present. Iris has managed to strike back in the end by leaving Richard and writing her novel and her memoir. She has set up an antique shop, although she had never expected to work, “transform[ing] herself from a sedate domestic object into an active participant in the world of work” (Stein 151). Laura never gets to enjoy this freedom (unless you see a self-inflicted death as freedom). Nevertheless, she lives on as the semi-fictional author-persona of the controversial novel *The Blind Assassin* (actually written by Iris). The novel even enables her to take revenge on Richard, who is found dead (possibly by suicide) with a copy of the novel next to him. The alternating chapters thus present us with two different views on womanhood and show how these have changed in the course of the twentieth century.

Critical about gender and class as well is the story about the blind assassin that Alex

tells to Iris in *The Blind Assassin* (LC). This metafictional story within a story within a story can be read as “an allegory of the economic injustice, the intrigue and betrayal rampant in the social world of Toronto during the Depression” (Stein 149). An example of this is the class division of the Sakiel-Norn society into “the Snilfards, who are wealthy aristocrats, and the Ygniroids, who are smallholders, serfs, and slaves” (Bouson 260). The Snilfards, “inventors of ingenious mechanical devices,” indulging in “court intrigues,” “magnificent feasts,” and “one another’s wives” stand for the rich industrialists and politicians, such as Norval Chase and Richard Griffen (Atwood 20). The Ygniroids represent the working class. They are treated badly by the Snilfards, it is nearly impossible for them to become Snilfards themselves and therefore they stage revolts now and again (Atwood 21). The story also figures a virgin who is sacrificed to the gods by the decadent priests of the Snilfards. This represents Iris’s sacrifice of marrying Richard to save her father’s business, and Laura’s sacrifice of letting Richard rape her so that God will spare Alex’s life when he is fighting—for the Republicans of course—in the Spanish Civil War. In Alex’s tale, the sacrificial virgin is saved by the blind assassin. Iris, on the other hand, eventually saves herself.

All of this supports Stein’s conclusion that *The Blind Assassin* is “a social critique of the hypocrisy, injustice, classism, and sexism of the twentieth century” (136). Atwood does not only criticize, but also makes sure the sexism and classism are remembered, by placing these problems of the private sphere alongside the big events that have taken centre stage in the first half of the twentieth century. Because of this, the novel is not only a critique, but also “a kind of artistic reparation” and a “novelistic memorial” to “lost voices and buried lives” (Bouson 268).

“That’s our cleaning lady’s son”

Since *Atonement* is told from multiple perspectives, it also presents us with a number of female voices. Briony, Cecilia, and Emily, their mother, provide us with different views on womanhood in the 1930s and 40s. Emily is a housewife with recurring migraine attacks, whose husband is often away in London, both for work and a suspected love affair. We would expect her to be unhappy because of this, but it does not seem bother her very much:

She had sources of contentment in her life—the house, the park, above all, the children—and she intended to preserve them by not challenging Jack. . . . Even being lied to constantly, though hardly like love, was sustained attention; he must care about her to fabricate so elaborately and over such a long stretch of time. (148)

Emily is passive and apathetic. She does not have any special hopes or plans for herself, nor for her daughters. Marriage and motherhood will be good enough for them (64-65). In the beginning of the novel, Cecilia seems to have a similar outlook on life. Having studied English at Cambridge, she has no intentions of doing anything with her degree.⁸ Instead she finds it “easy to slip back into the old roles” as head of the housekeeping, obedient daughter, and surrogate mother for Briony (103).

This can all be read as a critique from Briony on the traditional role of women, since she is the author of the thoughts that are presented as those of her mother and sister. By portraying them as traditional, complying women she can create a break with this at the start of the Second World War. The war gives both Cecilia and Briony a good excuse to leave the paternal home—without a husband—to move to London and become nurses. We have seen that in *The Blind Assassin*, taking place during the same time in a similar social environment, it was inconceivable that Iris and Laura would ever be independent working women, but in *Atonement* it is not that extraordinary. The girls end most contact with their parents. Briony lives in the hospital, since she is still in training, but Cecilia has found a room of her own and does not let herself be tyrannized by her rude landlady (334). In the epilogue, Briony, like Iris, has found herself a place in the world as a successful author, living on her own after the death of her husband. The family estate has been sold, however, indicating the decay of the class system.

If we want to find out more about the representation of the class system in *Atonement*, a logical thing to do is to look at Robbie’s role. He is an interesting figure in this respect since he tries to place himself outside of the class system. When his father, a gardener, disappears, his mother becomes a cleaning lady at the Tallises and raises Robbie on her own. This would place him among the lower classes. But instead he finds a patron in Jack Tallis, who welcomes him into his wealthy family and pays his grammar school and university tuition, giving him access to the elite world of Cambridge. However, he is never truly accepted, neither in the family nor at Cambridge. Emily looks down upon him, seeing him as “a hobby of Jack’s, living proof of some levelling principle he had pursued through the years” (151). Cecilia seems to find his presence at Cambridge awkward: “That’s our cleaning lady’s son, she might have been whispering” (79), and so do others: “At a dinner table in Cambridge once, during a sudden silence round the table, someone who disliked Robbie asked loudly about his parents. Robbie held the man’s eye and answered pleasantly . . . then ended by

⁸ This is an unofficial degree. The University of Cambridge did not award proper academic degrees to women until 1947, although the first female students were admitted in 1869 (“Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”).

asking politely about the parents of the other fellow” (86). Robbie’s own social ease and his big dreams for the future become ironic when everyone drops him like a stone after he is accused of rape. The word of an upper-class thirteen-year-old girl is taken over Robbie’s. Only Cecilia believes him, but even she is guilty of class prejudice, blaming Danny Hardman, the son of the new gardener, for the rape.

Conclusion

Statues are not the only way to remember the past. *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* show that novels can be memorials as well, not just for Laura and for Cecilia and Robbie, to whom the novels are dedicated explicitly, but also in general for the women and working class people that lived during 1930-1945. We read how women led lives restricted by men, to the point of being driven to suicide, and how people from non-affluent backgrounds had to struggle against class prejudice, to the point of being wrongly convicted of rape. These two marginalized groups are united in the loving relationship that Briony creates for Cecilia and Robbie. By ending the story of Robbie’s suffering, caused by classism, on a hopeful note, Briony tries to atone for her false accusations of rape. The fact that this hopeful future is a fiction, since Robbie died in Dunkirk, does not prevent it from being meaningful. Iris does something similar in *The Blind Assassin*, breaking free of the chains that strangled Laura and telling their story in attempt to make up for looking away all those years. Both novels, as fictions of memory, tell us a story that can be positioned alongside the canonical war stories we all know, of soldiers, strategists, and persecuted. In this function of counter-history they try to bring gender and class into a discourse that is not commonly associated with these issues. These stories, although fictional, represent problems of the past that still have consequences today and should therefore not be forgotten.

Conclusion

The past is not easily caught within a narrative. So much is clear when we look at all the metafictional ways in which *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* show us that there are always multiple sides to a story. That does not mean that we should leave the past for what it is. Issues that were, according to *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement*, pressing in the 1930s and 40s, like gender discrimination and classism, are still relevant today, both in times of peace and in times of war and crisis. It is important, therefore, that stories that present those problems become engraved in cultural memory. Examples of historiographic metafiction, like the two novels in this study, are particularly suited for this, since they usually engage with the marginalized and share many characteristics with fictions of memory. This proves Robinson wrong in his argument that historiographic metafiction would no longer be relevant. Historiographic metafiction can play an important role in bringing forgotten pasts back to the public consciousness.

This thesis leaves open several topics for further study. New research could look into the reasons why historical (meta)fiction is so popular these days. This could possibly be explained by a need to make sense of the present, with its political and economic unrest on a global scale, through reading about the past. Also open for discussion are the ways in which *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* do not fit in the model of historiographic metafiction. Large parts of *Atonement*, for example, are written in a classic realist style. The limited space of this thesis has forced me to focus on those aspects of the novels that do correspond with historiographic metafiction. That does not mean, however, that they are always textbook examples of this genre. Furthermore, the novels' relation to cultural memory might be a point of more extensive research, since Erll writes that literature can only function as memory when it is in a social context and it is actively read (*Memory in Culture* 155). We have seen that *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* have the potential to fulfil this function, but to what extent are they really part of cultural memory? *Atonement* is quite well known, partially because of its adaptation to film in 2007. Atwood is a popular author overall, but *The Blind Assassin* seems to be one of her less known works. Answering this question would require a different research method than those used in this thesis, namely a reception analysis approach.

Iris and Briony try to give their sisters a place in history through their novels of atonement. They do not only tell us about the past, but also express a feeling of profound regret about it. In a similar way, *The Blind Assassin* and *Atonement* try to claim a space for feminism and class criticism in history, expressing sorrow and reproach about the way

ordinary women and working class people used to be treated in the early twentieth century, a time frame usually reserved for other events. This is not to say that these events were not terrible: both protagonists lose loved ones to war and the novels pay attention to different ways in which war victims are remembered. The novels want us to remember that the language of victims, survivors, perpetrators, and perpetrated is not reserved for war, but can also be used in contexts of gender and class. This counter-history is not presented as a singular truth, but rather as one of the many stories that can be told, also leaving room for possible future stories about the past.

Wars are still raging. Writing and reading about them might help us realize that the wars of yesterday and today share not only victims of bombs and guns, but also victims of marginalization. We know the Iraq War, for example, mainly from the perspective of the Americans and the other Western nations involved. In the representations and reconstructions of the war that are now being made, the stories of the Iraqis themselves are alarmingly rare. News about the Syrian civil war focuses on the men with the guns, but neglects to tell what it is like to live in Aleppo or Raqqa. Yet these are the stories that will be most valuable in a hundred years, since they tell about universal human experiences of loss and suffering and maybe also of love and hope for the future.

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