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“Tu n’as pas à te sentir coupable d’être”: A Multiversal Approach to Guilt in Gaétan Soucy’s *L’Acquittement*¹

SCOTT M. POWERS

GUILT LIES AT THE HEART of Gaétan Soucy’s fictitious worlds. In his most widely read novel, *La Petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* (1998), the narrator recounts a father’s troubling endeavours to alleviate feelings of guilt vis-à-vis his wife’s accidental death in a house fire. In addition to his quasi-religious rituals of self-flagellation, he offers his three-year-old daughter as a living sacrifice to God by chaining her in a shed indefinitely, and referring to her as “le Juste Châtiment.” Despite such extreme measures to relieve himself of overwhelming grief, the bereaved widower ultimately hangs himself. Although less well known, Soucy’s previous two novels also foreground the theme of guilt. In *L’Immaculée Conception* (1994), a fire that burned to ashes a neighbourhood bar similarly triggers a heightened sense of guilt in multiple characters who must come to terms with the errors of their past. The title of the short novel *L’Acquittement* (1997), which constitutes the second of what can be considered Soucy’s triptych on guilt, plainly announces the recurring theme.² This text has not received the critical attention of *La Petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* or even *L’Immaculée Conception*, due to a complex narrative structure that imposes challenges to interpretation. Nonetheless, it presents the reader with a concise thesis at the foundation of Soucy’s literary imagination of guilt as largely an illusion. The plot is fairly simple: Louis Bapaume, organist at the Montréal Basilica, returns to the village of Saint-Aldor after twenty years in order to seek forgiveness from Julia von Croft — one of the twin sisters to whom he gave private music lessons — for having been too severe towards her. Despite an uncomplicated core storyline, the novel is ambitious in scope and stylistically innovative. As this essay will aim to demonstrate, *L’Acquittement* enlists scientific theories of the multiverse to construct a multi-layered narrative whose

very structure places into question moral responsibility and the individual's obsession with the idea of having done something wrong.

In the wake of the Quiet Revolution, an emerging group of Québécois writers, including Michel Tremblay, Marie-Claire Blais, Gérard Bessette, and Anne Hébert, presented a harsh critique of the Church's role in society. Noted for their sustained anti-Catholic militancy, works by these authors and their contemporaries took a secular turn in overshadowing matters of religion in their depictions of social oppression and the quest for individual freedom. In recent decades, however, a corpus of texts by a new generation of writers such as Jean-François Beauchemin (*Garage Molinari*, 1999; *Le Jour des corneilles*, 2004), Nelly Arcan (*Putain*, 2003), and Monique Proulx (*Ce qu'il reste de moi*, 2015) investigates the nature of a latent religious sentiment that continues to exert its influence in the lives of characters who struggle with internalized Judeo-Christian moral codes and the idea of God. Soucy's novels featuring characters burdened by an abiding sense of sinfulness can be situated within this emerging tradition.

Soucy's approach to guilt also draws on Nietzsche and Freud in rethinking the theological notion of Original Sin. To recall the concept, Christian theology has interpreted Adam and Eve's rebellion in the Garden of Eden as the cause of humanity's fallen state, a guilty condition that requires the ultimate sacrifice of God's only son Christ for redemption, and that is accompanied by a heightened awareness of our unworthiness.³ On the other hand, Nietzsche and Freud, in apprehending the individual's obsession with wrongdoing as an inextricable component of the psyche, reinterpret the Genesis account not as the cause of constant preoccupation with being at fault, but as its symptom.⁴ For both thinkers, a guilt complex developed as a precondition for civilization. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche sees indebtedness as a necessary outcome of the relationships between creditors and debtors at the foundation of societies, established to guarantee reimbursements.⁵ This feeling of indebtedness gradually transformed into an abiding sense of obligation towards ancestors perceived as the bequeathers of one's tribe. It was only a matter of time before the imagination transformed ancestors into gods who incessantly reminded tribal members of their indebtedness. Nietzsche denounced Christianity as the ultimate consequence of this transformation, for it cast "the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness on earth" (526). For Freud, the guilt complex, which was

first made manifest as the fear of discipline by the Father, became more generalized with the advent of large communities as the dread of punishment *tout court*. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud theorized that in order to elude discipline, the superego takes the place of parental and community authority. In this psychoanalytical framework, the psyche, split between a sadistic superego and a masochistic ego, constitutes an inherited trait that profits those who submit to laws and social codes. In sum, the psyche, as a self-regulatory system, responds to feelings of guilt by meting out its own punishment.

In his article “Le Pardon vit aux dépens de celui qui écoute,” published shortly after *L'Acquittement* and which reads as the author's explanation of the novel, Soucy explains his preoccupation with the theme of guilt. His description of the self's persistent feeling of shame closely mirrors Nietzsche's and Freud's portrayals of the individual as guilt-ridden. Soucy understands one's relentless search for forgiveness as anchored in an ontological malaise (103). The novelist describes the human condition as characterized by a paradox, in which “une honte à être” accompanies a “persévérance à être” (103). Largely autobiographical, the article describes the writer's own life as “lourdement hypothéquée par le sentiment qu'il y avait une faute à exister et qu'il fallait expier” (103).⁶ Soucy links this haunting impression with the sense of being in a constant state of debt towards his late father. In reflecting on paternal sacrifices, Soucy notes, “[Mon père] aurait donné la dernière goutte de son sang pour moi, cela crève les yeux. Mais moi, qu'est-ce que je lui ai donné? Il me prend des fantaisies de lui demander pardon d'être” (105).⁷

Nietzsche insisted that the sense of obligation, especially since it has swelled under the weight of Christianity, is illusory: “That someone *feels* ‘guilty’ or ‘sinful’ is no proof that he is right” (*On the Genealogy* 565). Soucy expounds the deceptive nature of guilt in presenting his own father as an illustration. According to Soucy, late in life his father was haunted by a memory that dated back more than thirty years. One evening, upon returning home from work and stricken with fatigue, the father lashes out at a young boy playing ball in the courtyard, yelling: “C'est une cours privée! Va te faire chier le cul ailleurs!” (“Le Pardon” 104).⁸ According to Soucy, “Trente-cinq ans plus tard, papa souffre d'avoir fait subir à cet enfant cette hont[e]” (104).⁹ Convinced that his father's only wrongdoing amounted to a small reprimand, Soucy marvels at the manifestation of a formidable guilt complex that is by no

means proportional to the fault. He concludes his essay by envisioning his father, thirty years later, as having found the man who once was the young boy at play in the courtyard, in order to ask forgiveness. Soucy imagines the man, in sharp contrast, as having entirely forgotten the affair: “Il serait intéressant d’imaginer ce que serait une rencontre entre [mon père] et ce qu’est devenu l’enfant à la balle, qui a très certainement oublié l’anecdote” (106).¹⁰

It is this fantasized encounter that the author transposes into fictional form in *L’Acquittement*, in which a forty-some year-old man seeks forgiveness for an act committed twenty years earlier on a child who, now a young woman, is at pains to recall any wrongdoing. In a constant state of grief, the protagonist repeatedly self-inflicts mental and physical pain by reinserting into his tender tooth socket a molar that he himself had pulled, and that reminds him of “des semaines entières de torture et de nuits blanches” (39).¹¹ This is one example of how *L’Acquittement* provides a vivid illustration of an adult’s heightened sense of guilt vis-à-vis a wrongdoing that stems from youth — an original sin of sorts — and that the self continues to work through in the present. But it does more. In the novel, not unlike in the undeniably sincere article that he wrote, Soucy seeks to relieve the protagonist *qua* paternal figure of his heavy, irrational burden. And he does this, I will argue, by dramatizing the intersection of multiple universes.

The lack of critical attention devoted to *L’Acquittement* may be explained by certain challenges that the text presents. As the plot unfolds, numerous contradictions arise concerning the protagonist’s past relationships. As we will see below in more detail, during his return to Saint-Aldor, some characters claim to hold a grudge against Bapaume for having caused them wrongdoing, despite Bapaume not recalling ever having met them. In some cases, the characters possess objects proving that they had known and interacted with Bapaume even if, according to the storyline as first established, the protagonist could not have occupied the same point in time (the years Bapaume had lived in the village) and space (Saint-Aldor) as his accusers. As the reader is confronted with opposing subplots, an interpretation of events and relationships between the characters in a given passage would prove incompatible with other events among the same characters elsewhere. Accordingly, in accepting as true one version of events over another, the reader risks triggering a

domino effect that would cause the entire diegetic world of the novel to collapse.

In one of the only articles published on the novel, Nicholas Xanthos renounces the attempt to reconcile the various ostensible contradictions in its plot, and thereby interprets *L'Acquittement* as an illustration of the problematics of hermeneutics. He concludes that in light of “la prolifération des incompatibilités,” it would be wrong to impose coherency where there is none to be found. Therefore, Soucy’s narrative encourages the recognition of fiction as “une création de mondes qui vont entretenir, entre eux . . . des rapports multiples, ambivalents, changeants. Ce que ce roman nous dit surtout, c’est le caractère exagérément réducteur de l’opération qui voudrait imposer à la fiction un principe de cohérence” (78).¹² Such an interpretation that perceives the narrative incoherence of *L'Acquittement* as deliberate has some merit. An incoherent narrative structure, founded on incompatible subject positions, would seem in fact to mirror Soucy’s illustration, in the essay on his father, of guilt as being responsible for the self’s illusory and irrational recollection of the past. In *L'Acquittement*, the unreliability of the characters’ memory of past events transcribes into fiction the discrepancy that Soucy imagines between his father’s conviction of having irreparably wronged a child, and the latter not recalling the matter at all. However, Xanthos’s interpretation does not account for the innate urge to seek forgiveness, which the novelist candidly exhibited in his essay. *L'Acquittement* is, above all, about the relinquishing of guilt.

Most contradictions in the novel stem from implausible coincidences that posit incompatible relationships between the protagonist and the other characters that he encounters during his stay in Saint-Aldor. Through conversations that the protagonist has with various characters during his trip, we learn that in 1926, twenty years prior to the beginning of the story, a young Louis Bapaume lived in the village and was hired by the von Croft family to teach music to Julia and Geneviève, the identical twin “fillettes.” In the opening chapters, a forty-odd-year-old Bapaume, now an organist in Montréal, leaves behind his wife Françoise and his son to return to Saint-Aldor. Upon arrival, Bapaume meets several individuals who appear to share a past with him. However, their version of events cannot be reconciled with what we know to be the timeline of Bapaume’s tenure as a music teacher in Saint-Aldor and the reasons for his departure. These characters include the village station-

master, the sixteen-year-old von Croft son, and the village organist. During his conversation with the stationmaster Jacques Hurtubise, the latter points out three coincidences between his mother and Bapaume's wife: "C'est quand même formidable. Votre épouse et ma mère. Toutes les deux violonistes, toutes les deux parisiennes, et toutes les deux prénommées Françoise!" (38).¹³ The former music teacher replies by adding a fourth coincidence: "Vous auriez pu ajouter toutes les deux juives" (38).¹⁴ If the narrative did not establish that Bapaume has been living with his wife and their only son in Montréal, the reader would be tempted to suppose that Hurtubise's mother is his wife, and the stationmaster his son. Bapaume himself seems to entertain the idea by asking if Hurtubise's father, like Bapaume, was a musician: "Est-ce que votre père était musicien?" (35). The dialogue remains highly suggestive in content and tone to the very end as Hurtubise, in admitting to never knowing his father, does not rule out the possibility (35).

Xanthos explains the coincidences that arise in the narrative by attributing them to a psychological trait in which Bapaume recurrently creates memories by appropriating elements of the present (75). This interpretation, which would underscore the deceptive nature of a guilt complex predicated on faulty memory, proves here to be problematic. For instance, to suggest that Bapaume, upon learning that Hurtubise's mother's name is Françoise, created a memory in which his wife is also named Françoise, does not explain that in the subsequent passage Louis removes from his suitcase a letter written by his wife before he began his journey and *already* signed "Françoise." The same can be said, for instance, of the musical score (discussed below) in which a note printed at the bottom of the page states that Bapaume had composed the piece twenty years earlier.

Another series of coincidences becomes manifest in relation to Maurice, the youngest child of the von Croft family. Only sixteen years old at the time of the story, Maurice had not yet been born when Bapaume lived in Saint-Aldor. While waiting to meet Julia at the von Croft house, the former music teacher finds Maurice studying a score that immediately speaks to Bapaume as he peruses its pages: "Son sang battait plus fort. . . . Qui avait pu composer cela? Louis en avait le souffle coupé. . . . Bapaume dut appuyer son front entre ses mains, saisi de vertige" (64).¹⁵ When he turns to the final page, a written note indicates that he himself is the author, and that it was composed some

twenty years earlier: “*Composé autour de 1927 par M. Louis Bapaume*” (79). Bapaume cannot explain this, as he has never published a musical composition. However, the incident provides him with a glimpse into the career path of composer that he could have pursued. In fact, after admiring the score, Bapaume glances at himself in the mirror as he begins knitting, imagines himself to be Johann Sebastian Bach, but then yields to feelings of frustration: “Il se contempla dans la petite glace qui surmontait le piano. ‘Jean-Sébastien Bach,’ se dit-il avec un ricanement intérieur. Il se fit une grimace. Il se débarrassa du tricot d’un geste plein de frustrations rentrées” (65).¹⁶

As for Maurice himself, Bapaume cannot help but see in the von Croft son a younger version of himself. He even reveals to the adolescent that his own son is also named Maurice (110). Once again, the reader is confronted with suggestions of relationships between characters that are not possible, given the biographical information that the narrative provides. Here, the reader is tempted to wonder whether the von Croft son is Bapaume’s biological child. And yet, the chronology excludes this: Maurice was only sixteen years old whereas the music teacher left Saint-Aldor twenty years ago. Moreover, when Bapaume notices that the walls of Julia’s bedroom are “couverts de photos de Maurice,” the reader is left to wonder whether Julia is not the boy’s sister but his mother (77). Once again, the narrative is deliberately suggestive in presenting Maurice as the avatar of an alternative life story in which Bapaume, enamored by his pupil, pursued an illicit relationship instead of leaving the village. In the novel’s dénouement, during his tête-à-tête with Julia, Bapaume in fact admits to having harboured a strong love for the girl. His admission of love for the young pupil appears obsessive, if not disturbing: “Et je vous aimais, Julia! Mon Dieu que je vous aimais! Saviez-vous cela? Saviez-vous que je venais souvent la nuit, et que je grimpais sur le larmier de la maison pour vous regarder dormir à travers la fenêtre?” (99-100).¹⁷

Among a lengthy series of enigmas that punctuate the narrative, Bapaume’s encounter with Louise, the village church organist, stands out as especially intriguing. In a passage in which Bapaume enters the church, he recognizes the melody being played as another musical score that he wrote long ago but never published. He begs Louise to explain this impossibility: “Comment se fait-il que vous connaissiez cette musique? Elle n’a jamais été publiée! Je l’ai écrite à Paris il y a plus

de vingt ans!" (89).¹⁸ In the same breath, Louise explains to Bapaume that not only had the two of them played the piece together, but that they were in fact lovers: "Nous l'avions jouée à quatre mains, en sortant du lit" (89).¹⁹ Louise then proceeds to accuse Bapaume of leaving her without even saying good-bye. While Bapaume is dumbfounded, she wonders whether he has come to beg her forgiveness: "Il était impossible pour moi que vous me quittiez sans un adieu. Inconcevable. . . . J'ai cru que vous étiez venu jusqu'ici pour moi. Un peu pour moi. Pour me demander pardon" (92).²⁰ And as proof of their relationship, the village organist removes from her purse a prism that Bapaume had apparently left at her place. Emotionally moved, Bapaume takes back the object without remembering a thing, and nonetheless apologizes: "Je constate que vous avez dû souffrir à cause de moi. Je le regrette, croyez-le bien. Pardonnez-moi aussi d'avoir à ce point oublié" (93-94).²¹ In the case of Louise, Soucy's narrative presents the reader with the seemingly impossible task of resolving perhaps irreconcilable subject positions.

Bapaume's past appears to be intimately connected to the station-master, the von Croft son, and the village organist. But to suppose any of these connections, the reader must doubt the protagonist's biographical data already established. In these passages, a complex web of relationships alternately emerges and dissolves, thereby frustrating the reader's attempts to determine what can and cannot be pure coincidence. To exit this interpretive impasse, I suggest that Bapaume, in embarking on a journey from Montréal to the village of Saint-Aldor, enters a "twilight zone" where parallel universes, in intersecting with the protagonist's, enable him to catch a glimpse of other versions of his life. By seeing the unfolding of his destiny along different paths, he gains a new understanding of his responsibility in affecting the lives of others.

My interpretation of *L'Acquittement* as exploiting the notion of parallel universes is supported by the author's interests in cosmology. In addition to having studied physics and mathematics at university, Soucy's master's thesis on the limits and weaknesses of Kantian transcendental philosophy is inspired by theoretical physics. In an effort to argue that such a philosophy is "réfutée par les conditions modernes de la science," Soucy enlists concepts in physics that have fueled cosmological theories of the multiverse (x).²² In the conclusion to his thesis, he declares that "la véritable infirmation du principe transcendantal se trouve, en fait, là où interviennent des principes comme ceux de

l'incertitude de Heisenberg, ou de l'onde associée de De Broglie, et en général de la mécanique quantique; devant de tels principes il n'y a sans aucun doute plus de philosophie transcendante qui tienne" (246).²³ By evoking quantum physics in relation to the unstable and unverifiable behaviour of particles, Soucy's academic work dismisses the foundation of transcendental philosophy.²⁴ The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and De Broglie's Wave, which Soucy enlists to discredit premises of transcendental philosophy, pertain to theories of quantum mechanics that have given rise to the notion of the multiverse. By demonstrating particles' behaviour as waves and by asserting science's inability to determine both their momentum and position, these physical notions laid the foundation for theories of the multiverse in which people, much like particles, can behave like waves and exist in multiple dimensions.

Before considering the theme of parallel universes in the narrative, a brief (and rudimentary) summary of the notion of the multiverse is warranted. Scientific theories of the multiverse have gained considerable ground over the past few decades, as scientists are increasingly abandoning the idea that existence ends at the horizon of what telescopes allow us to see. Rather, they consider it more likely that there exist other universes beyond the edges of our own.²⁵ A compelling reason to believe in the multiverse lies in the unique make-up of the one we know. Physicists have observed that our universe is governed by physical properties curiously ideal for the formation of atoms to create matter.²⁶ They reason that in order to arrive at the probabilities that would conceivably allow a universe such as ours to produce itself by chance, there must exist a multitude of universes. In addition, according to the Infinite Patchwork Model, the universe evolves alongside countless parallel universes, each caused by a Big Bang. This model proposes that since universes begin with a limited number of particles, the number of combinations would be enormous but finite. In such a multiverse all possible events — all possible combinations of particles — do in fact happen. Consequently, as renowned cosmologist Max Tegmark states in "The Truth Behind Parallel Universes," in the Infinite Patchwork multiverse there would exist identical copies of — as well as countless variations on — our universe. This description of the Infinite Patchwork curiously resembles in structure Nietzsche's description in *The Will to Power* of the world as finite in nature and therefore repeatable: "If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as

a certain definite quantity of centers of force . . . it follows that, in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would, at some time or other, be realized; more: it would be realized an infinite number of times" (549).

According to the Many-Worlds Interpretation, a cosmological theory gaining in popularity, each time that we make a choice to follow one of two paths (often referred to as decision points), a parallel universe is born in which another version of ourselves has taken the alternate route.²⁷ However, it is important to note that what is referred to as a decision is in fact simply a random splitting, interpreted as a decision *a posteriori*. In this optic, the multiverse consists of a vast plane of all possible paths, endlessly forking, each point of bifurcation being the result of a "quantum accident." Based on the supposition that every event that can happen plays out in alternate worlds, a life story is cast not as the outcome of a series of decisions made by a human agent, but forms rather just one among a numerous series of all possible paths that other versions of the self follow. Accordingly, such a theory extracts human agency from the unfolding of history. By drawing on the moral implications of the multiverse, narratives such as Soucy's *L'Acquittement* rethink the notion of guilt.

There has been some effort in literary studies to understand the complex narrative structures of fictitious worlds in terms of the multiverse, including analyses of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Jorge Luís Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (1952), and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006).²⁸ In reading the intricate or repetitive plot structures as juxtapositions of characters' life stories in parallel universes, scholars have demonstrated that multiverse narratives necessarily undermine realist esthetics and classical (Newtonian) paradigms of reality.²⁹ In his description of the implications of a multiversal approach to literary texts, David Baulch states that, "From the many-worlds perspective . . . everything that is probable is real, if not in this reality, then certainly in another. Reality . . . is the dizzying multiplicity of the wave function's probabilities as they are actualized in distinct universes" (61). Baulch explains that by presenting the unfolding of an event in terms of its manifold possible outcomes, narratives inspired by the notion of the multiverse are necessarily counter-Newtonian. In fact, they challenge the ever-greater focus

in literary criticism on direct influence, on the material conditions and ideological forces that shape history, on cultural climate, and periodization (57, 73). Narratives in which events and destinies play out differently along parallel paths undermine the common understanding of an event as the sole consequence of a prior cause. Baulch argues that Borges's *Garden*, in constructing various narrative lines as multiple realities, offers the reader "ontological implications of what it means for an event to take place" (58).

In multiverse narratives, characters who fail to grasp the notion that they live in simply one version of parallel or potential universes remain wedded to an illusion of reality as singular and linear. Donald Spector's interpretation of the two acts of Beckett's *En attendant Godot* as constituting not two days in the same universe but rather "parallel renditions of the same day . . . in two subsequent universes" presents a critique of the character Didi, whose existential angst stems from his inability to imagine existence as other than proceeding in a singular and linear fashion. Unable to perceive of reality as multiple, Didi "obstinately mistakes the multiverse for a series of echoes" (245). Readers of Borges and of Beckett — and we can add, of Soucy — are invited to understand the "now of these texts [as] multivalued" (Baulch 59). Otherwise, the parallel "nows" of such narratives "appear as conflicting realities and inconsistent histories in opposition to readerly expectations as constructed by classical physics" (Baulch 59). If we place Soucy's narrative within the subgenre of the "multiversal," then the apparent contradictions of the plot begin to make sense as alternate stories unfold in different narrative dimensions. Accordingly, the narrator affords Bapaume and the reader a privileged position from which to apprehend these alternate stories simultaneously, as if gazing through a prism whose refracting light rays converge. In the case of *L'Acquittement*, the nature of reality as presented within the framework of the multiverse serves as a springboard for examining what appear to be the causes and consequences of one's actions, and, by extension, the longstanding moral concepts of free will and guilt.

Several elements of *L'Acquittement* indicate that Soucy was inspired specifically by the notion of the multiverse. The novel's introductory pages lead the reader to believe that the protagonist, in making his trip to Saint-Aldor, enters a dream-like state of strange occurrences, a fifth dimension of sorts that enables him to observe his life as if, dur-

ing his stay in the village twenty years earlier, it had taken alternate paths. The first section of the novel, entitled “La Trappe” (which in French can refer both to a trap and to a trapdoor), designates a mysterious zone into which Bapaume has fallen. At the outset, the car taking him from the train station to the village loses control and becomes trapped in the snow. The narrator describes Bapaume as feeling disoriented and as having the impression of being swallowed up: “Une sensation d’engloutissement tira Louis du sommeil. Il ne comprit pas immédiatement où il se trouvait” (13).³⁰ Abruptly awakened by the car accident, Bapaume senses himself travelling from one dream to another, as “simplement sorti d’un rêve pour entrer dans un autre” (16).³¹ To underscore Bapaume’s state of “entrapment,” the narrator recurrently uses the adjective “trapu.” For instance, in taking note of Bapaume’s shadow against the snowy backdrop of the scene, the narrator states: Bapaume “n’aper[çoit] que son ombre *trapue*” (17; emphasis added). Although the word “trapu” refers to the protagonist’s stocky stature, considering the section’s title, “La Trappe,” and the protagonist’s literal entrapment in the snow, repetition of the near homophone “trapu” reminds us that Bapaume has entered, and remains inside, a trap(door). Furthermore, when Bapaume ascends the church staircase to speak with Louise, the organist playing his music and who will speak to him of a time that he does not recall, he must open a trapdoor. Curiously, he remains suspended between the staircase and the organ chamber for a time, as only his head and shoulders peek through: “Louis s’était immobilisé au milieu de l’escalier, seules dépassaient de la trappe sa tête et ses épaules” (88).³² Throughout the novel, the trope of the trapdoor suggests a moment of passage from one dimension to another.

Other elements of the narrative employ vocabulary and imagery from the scientific disciplines of physics, meteorology, and cosmology. Precisely when Bapaume exits the car and takes cognizance of his surroundings, the landscape takes shape as a nascent, expanding universe that fills the surrounding void: “L’immensité du paysage, presque violente, fonçait dans tous les sens, gonflait l’espace comme un ballon” (15).³³ While walking in the snow, Bapaume feels oppressed by “une mauvaise pesanteur” (17). The word “pesanteur,” meaning weight or gravity, when coupled by the polysemic qualifier “mauvaise,” which can be translated as “bad,” “foul,” “wrong,” or “incorrect,” insinuates that Bapaume has departed the comforts of his world and has penetrated an

oppressive atmosphere (17). To develop the text's cosmological backdrop, the narrator constructs a number of otherwise gratuitous comparisons, such as Bapaume's visual perception, likened to "des étoiles [qui] éclataient à la périphérie de ses yeux en de minuscules explosions" (19).³⁴ In another example, the narrator describes the organist's muscle spasms as if triggered by "ondes imprévisibles" or by "des éclairs de chaleur" (22).³⁵ Moreover, in describing the shimmering of the moonlight on the snow-covered tree branches, the narrator makes a highly suggestive comparison to the Milky Way having veered off course: "cela faisait tant d'étoiles que c'était comme si la Voie lactée s'était trompée de chemin" (28).³⁶ In passages such as these, the narrator interprets the protagonist's impressions, feelings, discomfort, and physical surroundings through the lens of astronomy. A multiversal interpretation of Bapaume's journey helps to explain the enigmas that arise in the plot. Seeming contradictions can be accounted for if, not unlike the image of the galaxy gone astray, the protagonist's universe had suddenly changed trajectory and intersected with others.

To consider the treatment of guilt in a narrative predicated on the notion of the multiverse, closer consideration of the core plot of *L'Acquittement* is needed. Bapaume, overwhelmed with guilt, seeks to relieve himself in a tête-à-tête with Julia von Croft by imploring her forgiveness. At first, the latter cannot recall any wrongdoing: "J'ai beau chercher, fit-elle enfin, je vous jure que je ne comprends pas" (98).³⁷ When Bapaume reminds Julia that he spanked her because she was an unruly pupil, Julia laughs and admits that she deserved the spanking, and even opines that it is she who should be asking for forgiveness: "Julia éclata de rire. — Ah ça! Je m'en souviens! . . . Mais je l'avais bien mérité, va. . . . C'est moi qui vous demande pardon" (98, 102; first ellipses in original).³⁸ This climactic conversation, much like Soucy's imagining his father's confrontation with the courtyard boy, provides a striking illustration of the illusory nature of a guilt complex that greatly exaggerates if not outrightly fabricates moral infractions. The two stories lend weight to both the enduring legacy of the Christian sense of guilt and Nietzsche's adage, "That someone *feels* 'guilty' or 'sinful' is no proof that he is right" (565).

Bapaume's heightened sense of guilt is not limited to Julia but extends to his immediate family. In several passages he is depicted as mulling over "what-if" scenarios that demonstrate that he is in a

perpetual state of regret. For instance, we learn late in the novel that Bapaume's son has recently died. Understandably, Bapaume asks himself whether his decisions led to his son's death, and whether alternate decisions would have saved his son's life. He explains to Julia: "La pensée ne me quitte jamais pourtant que, si j'avais accepté voilà cinq ans le poste de professeur qu'on m'offrait . . . Ou si nous avions donné à mon fils des conditions de vie plus saines . . ." (105; original ellipses).³⁹ In this passage, the pair of ellipses denotes alternate outcomes of a story that Bapaume evokes but does not articulate. Such if-clauses provide the reader with a glimpse into Bapaume's mind which, spurred by regret, creates its own parallel universes.

But what is perhaps even more striking is that, in similar but inverted fashion, Bapaume encounters others along his journey who hold him responsible for a fault that he does not recall. The most obvious example is that of Louise, the village organist who claims that Bapaume abruptly ended their love affair without explanation. Other characters also manifest resentment towards the former music teacher, if only by their quips, body language, and silence. When Bapaume first arrives at the von Croft house, Julia's twin sister Geneviève offers a very cold welcome that the narrator repeatedly underscores: "La jeune femme qui se tenait devant Louis était donc Geneviève. Elle esquissa comme un début de révérence, *avec une négligence ostensible*. . . . Geneviève lui renvoyait sans broncher son regard, *avec un sourire dur où il y avait du défi*" (59; emphasis added).⁴⁰ When Geneviève serves him tea, the narrator comments on her ungracious manners: "Geneviève arriva les mains chargées de plats. *Elle les déposa pesamment, avec des mouvements secs, dans l'intention de faire du bruit*" (60; emphasis added).⁴¹ Geneviève's behaviour betrays a lack of sincerity. If she is civil, it is only out of respect for her father: "Ses airs, ses manières, ses intonations laissaient entendre qu'elle ne faisait qu'obéir à des ordres" (63).⁴² In the kitchen, Geneviève deliberately makes loud noises that, as the narrator points out, communicate her mood: "Du fond de sa cuisine, Geneviève manifestait son humeur en faisant claquer les portes de l'armoire, en repoussant les chaises à coups de bassin" (61).⁴³ The narrator interprets her body language in Bapaume's presence as harbouring anger: "Ses gestes raides trahissaient la même colère contenue" (66).⁴⁴

The narrator makes similar observations with respect to Maurice's behaviour. When Bapaume first meets the teenager, the latter dem-

onstrates a lack of cordiality that borders on insolence: “Il murmura à peine bonjour. Il paraissait pressé d’exécuter les ordres” (48).⁴⁵ Maurice evasively turns his back to Bapaume when the latter tries to engage in conversation: “Il aperçut Bapaume. Il déplaça sa chaise de manière à lui présenter le dos” (70).⁴⁶ When Bapaume insists, Maurice responds begrudgingly — “Maurice répondit par une moue” — or remains silent and displays distrust: “Maurice le considéra avec méfiance. Il gardait les mâchoires serrées” (73, 112).⁴⁷ Most impudently, in driving Bapaume to the station, the young von Croft orders him to exit the vehicle one mile away, claiming that he is only following instructions: “C’est ici qu’on m’a dit de vous déposer” (111).⁴⁸ In abandoning Bapaume, Maurice also gestures obscenely to him: “Il lui adressa alors un geste d’une si incroyable obscénité que Bapaume en resta pantois” (113).⁴⁹ In passages such as these, Maurice clearly manifests that he is nursing a grievance against Bapaume.

In a neat inversion of sorts, whereas the turning point in *L’Acquittement* questions the validity of Bapaume’s feeling of indebtedness towards Julia, the narrative quite transparently establishes that Bapaume has caused others to suffer, despite his remaining entirely unaware. In the cases of Louise, Geneviève, and Maurice, Bapaume seems to have affected their lives in alternate life stories that run parallel to his own. The novel’s patent juxtaposition of a central action in which the protagonist’s sense of guilt is revealed to be fueled by an illusion, and other actions in which the protagonist remains unaware of having caused enduring harm to others, conveys the message that the feeling of regret is unreliable, if not meaningless. The presence or absence of a sense of guilt in Bapaume appears arbitrary with respect to the real harm that he has or has not manifestly caused others. Through the lens of the multiverse, it would appear that the misdeeds that Bapaume wishes to undo would only be replaced by others: each path that forks from a decision point only leads to misfortune. The many people visibly hurt by Bapaume represent potential alternative outcomes that play out in hypothetical dimensions or parallel universes. In what amounts to a reaffirmation of the sinful nature of humankind, to avoid a “sin,” to have chosen another path, would simply mean committing potentially more serious wrongdoings.

The recurrent theme of twinship in Soucy’s fiction, which the author develops in *L’Acquittement* in identical twins Julia and Geneviève, devel-

ops the concept of parallelism at the core of a multi-world theory, since the topos of identical twins provides an illustration of variant life stories (or outcomes) proceeding from a single (biological, spatial, temporal, and social) origin.⁵⁰ Geneviève, by virtue of being Julia's twin, represents a more lamentable outcome in an alternate universe. The reader is left to wonder whether Geneviève represents an acrimonious version of Julia in a world in which Bapaume had acted upon his desires. In addition to Geneviève, Bapaume's failed relationships with Louise (as her lover) and Maurice (as his father) in two parallel life stories represent other lamentable outcomes. In the end, the structure of the narrative as the intersection of parallel life stories, each haunted by regret, undermines the protagonist's very mission to seek atonement. A key phrase that Bapaume's wife writes in a letter to him, which he takes on his journey and reads in Saint-Aldor, reinforces the futility of seeking forgiveness. She questions the very premise of his journey to the village by rhetorically asking how the face of the universe will have changed: "Et au terme de tout cela, mon amour, en quoi la face de l'univers sera-t-elle changée?" (41).⁵¹

Of course, Bapaume is not initially persuaded by his wife's reasoning. He must embark on a journey during which he is able to decipher enigmas only in the dénouement. En route back to the train station, Bapaume bequeaths to Maurice a lesson in self-forgiveness that he himself has learned during his brief visit: "Quoi que tu aies fait, ou croies avoir fait, Maurice, tu as le droit de respirer. Ni plus ni moins qu'un autre. Tu n'as pas à te sentir coupable d'être, tu n'as pas à avoir honte. . . . On reçoit la vie sans la demander, et quand on voudrait la donner, on ne peut pas. *Rien ne nous appartient*. Personne ne sait pourquoi. Mais c'est comme ça" (112).⁵² With this statement Bapaume, as a father figure driven by a new conviction, relieves Maurice of the burden of existence. This scene recalls Soucy's own desire to seek his father's forgiveness for having been born. Bapaume's lesson of the illusory nature of one's responsibility in which we do not in effect own our life story and that life is simply received, hangs on a new understanding of existence that resonates with the fatalist undertones of the Multi-World Interpretation.

In the novel's striking final image, Bapaume appears to bask in a state of grace. In an example of diegetic framing, Hurtubise apprehends the spectacle of Bapaume through the window panes of the train station, near the tracks, on his knees, arms raised in the shape of a cross,

and head raised to the heavens (126). Momentarily distracted by his assistant, when the stationmaster returns to the window the organist has vanished. No explanation is offered for Bapaume's disappearance, as the train bound for Montréal has not yet arrived and as there are no footprints in the snow. What's more, Hurtubise discerns a melody originating from the adjacent mountains: "Louis Bapaume avait disparu. Et puis, soudain, qu'est-ce que c'était? On aurait dit une très vague musique, qui venait de quelque part dans les montagnes" (124).⁵³ Bapaume's mysterious departure complements the narrative's suggestive descriptions of the protagonist's arrival as an entry into another dimension. On the track ballast, Hurtubise finds the prism that Louise had returned to Bapaume. As he examines the prism through moon rays, Hurtubise admires its "structure complexe, constituée d'une multitude de faces internes s'entre-coupant" (126).⁵⁴ This description of the prism's complex internal structure of manifold intersecting planes and of endlessly refracting light offers a fitting metaphor for a narrative traversed by multiple versions of a life story.⁵⁵ By rotating the prism in the moonlight, the stationmaster makes out a string of words that, under the right angle, forms the following sentence: "Aucune catastrophe ne peut m'atteindre, puisque rien n'est réel" (126).⁵⁶ Such an aphorism not only undoes conventional notions of guilt and punishment, but also summarizes the state of guiltlessness that Bapaume achieves by simply changing his perspective on what constitutes reality. This state is further enhanced by the image of the abandoned tooth that Hurtubise discovers near the prism, on a cross tie, and which the reader recognizes as Bapaume's molar, an instrument of self-harm that the organist never failed to carry with him.

With *L'Acquittement*, Soucy proposes a way out of the human dilemma that he evoked in his article, that of feeling guilty for existing ("une honte à être"), accompanied by a drive to continue living ("une persévérance à être"). Given the profound compassion that Soucy expressed towards a father burdened by an irrational and overwhelming guilt, a dramatization of the multiverse serves precisely to exonerate the father. But in doing so, it also provides a sense of relief for the son who, in the face of the father's sufferings, feels an abiding sense of indebtedness. And most importantly, at the end of his journey Bapaume formulates a new message of guiltlessness. An understanding of Bapaume as a messianic figure representing new hope for living free of guilt informs the

final image of the organist as “les bras en croix, le visage levé au ciel” (126).⁵⁷

Soucy's novel constitutes a vivid illustration of the self's obsession with guilt. One could further interpret the notion of parallel universes in fiction as a metaphor of the endless fabrication and multiplication of “what-if” scenarios that the human mind, under the existential angst of a perceived, inherent guilt, incessantly imagines. Soucy offers the reader a tragic portrait of a self haunted by its myriad transgressions, whether real or potential. But above all, by weaving into the plot the intersection of multiple outcomes of a single life story, *L'Acquittement* stages an act of exoneration that ultimately relieves the masochistic ego of its self-torture. In perceiving alternate paths of one's life as equally marked by suffering and loss, Bapaume recognizes the impossibility of evading the tragic consequences of one's actions.

L'Acquittement responds to the challenge of our secular and post-modern age to liberate the self from the shackles of a guilt complex still rooted in enduring religious notions such as Original Sin. Instead of the Christian solution of undeserving grace, Soucy's novel recasts guilt as at times an illusion, at times inevitable. But this narrative feat poses new problems. In depicting guilt not as a legitimate human state resulting from the consequences of one's actions but rather as an unfortunate and undeserved form of self-punishment, the conclusion risks emptying the human of its moral value. And in depicting existence in terms of a multiverse, the narrative yields to an underlying fatalism that dismisses human agency and the related notions of responsibility and guilt. Discussion among scientific theorists of human activity as the outcome of likely or inevitable combinations of a finite number of particles further contributes to the portrait of the decentered (or fragmented) self traversed and fashioned by multiple (psychological, social, economic) forces. In co-opting science to construct a new world view, writers of the multiverse risk jettisoning ethical notions hitherto perceived as universal. Bapaume's radical conversion in the final pages from a state of agonizing remorse to one marked by jovial insouciance appears to dismiss all notion of human responsibility. The reader cannot help but ask whether in embracing the vision that “rien n'est réel,” Bapaume has simply traded one illusion for another. The challenge that contemporary writers continue to face is to formulate a nuanced, post-

Christian understanding of human responsibility and its relationship to guilt. Soucy's novel raises such a challenge.

NOTES

¹ "You don't have to feel guilty for existing" (*Atonement* 91). Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of Gaétan Soucy's *L'Acquittement* come from Sheila Fischman's translation, *Atonement*. All translations from other sources are mine.

² In *Music-Hall!*, Soucy's fourth and final novel, guilt is neither a primary nor a secondary theme.

³ Chapter Five of the book of *Romans* sets the stage for the Christian message of redemption through undeserved kindness (grace) by presenting Original Sin as a universal human condition: "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12, New International Version).

⁴ For an overview of secular approaches to Original Sin and guilt, see Christopher Hamilton's article "Guilt and Original Sin."

⁵ See especially the Second Essay, Section 4, of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (498-99).

⁶ "(A life) lived primarily with the feeling that simply existing was a fault that needed to be atoned for."

⁷ "Without a doubt, my father would have given his last drop of blood for me. But as for me, what have I given him? I often fantasize about asking him forgiveness for existing."

⁸ "This is a private courtyard! Go be bloody annoying elsewhere!"

⁹ "Thirty-five years later, Daddy still suffers from having caused this child such shame."

¹⁰ "It would be interesting to imagine a meeting between [my father] and the child from the courtyard, who, as an adult, undoubtedly forgot the incident."

¹¹ "Weeks of torture and sleepless nights" (26).

¹² "Multiple relationships that are ambivalent and ever changing. Above all, this novel reveals the extremely reductive character of an interpretation that seeks to impose a level of coherency where none is to be found." In a Master's thesis directed by Nicholas Xanthos, Viviane Asselin draws similar conclusions: Soucy's novel manifests "une volonté de subvertir son propre récit pour signaler l'illusion romanesque et l'absence de tout référent" (104) ("a desire to subvert its own narrative in order to reveal the illusion at the foundation of novels and the absence of all points of reference therein").

¹³ "It really is amazing. Your wife and my mother. Both violinists, both from Paris — and named Françoise!" (25).

¹⁴ "You could have added that both were Jewish" (25).

¹⁵ "His heart beat faster. . . . Who could have composed it? It took Louis's breath away. . . . Bapaume suddenly felt light-headed and had to rest his head on his hands" (48).

¹⁶ "He gazed at his reflection in the little mirror above the piano. 'Johann Sebastian Bach,' he thought, snickering to himself. He made a face at his reflection. Then, in a movement full of suppressed frustration, he threw off the knitting" (49). Although organist at the Montréal Basilica, the plot establishes that Bapaume has tried unsuccessfully to complete the composition of an oratorio.

¹⁷ "And I loved you, Julia! Dear God, how I loved you! Did you realize that? Did you know that I'd come at night and climb up onto the roof so I could watch you through your window as you slept?" (80).

¹⁸ "How do you know that music? I wrote it over twenty years ago, in Paris!" (70).

¹⁹ "We played it as a duet, when we got out of bed" (71).

²⁰ "I simply couldn't imagine that you'd leave without saying good-bye. . . . I thought you came back because of me. A little, anyway. To ask my forgiveness" (73).

²¹ "I realize that you must have suffered because of me. I do regret it, believe me. Forgive me too for having completely forgotten" (74).

²² In addition to various on-line sources attesting that Soucy studied physics, philosophy, and Japanese at the Université de Montréal and at the Université du Québec à Montréal, see the biographical notice in Soucy's posthumous *N'oublie pas, s'il te plaît, que je t'aime* (7).

²³ "The real problem with transcendentalism arises when one considers the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle or De Broglie's Wave, and quantum mechanics in general. No transcendental philosophy can withstand such principles."

²⁴ In *Music-Hall!*, Soucy makes direct reference to the conclusions that he draws in his Master's thesis. Xavier's singing frog, in a moment of delirium, torments the protagonist by pronouncing an interminable lecture on the Theory of General Relativity. Most notably, the frog argues against Soucy's thesis, proclaiming that "la thèse d'Einstein n'était pas métaphysiquement incompatible avec les principes transcendants du criticisme kantien" (378) ("Einstein's thesis was not metaphysically incompatible with the transcendental principles of Kantian thought").

²⁵ In "The Truth Behind Parallel Universes," Max Tegmark observes that there is no evidence that space ends at the edge of what one sees and therefore rejects the notion that all existence fits within the observable universe.

²⁶ In support of the Fine-Tuned Universe proposition, theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking has noted in *A Brief History of Time* that "the laws of science, as we know them at present, contain many fundamental numbers, like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the masses of the proton and the electron. . . . The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life" (7, 125).

²⁷ Derived from Hugh Everett's renowned double-slit experiment, the Many-Worlds Interpretation proposes that quantum particles act like waves and can exist in several places at the same time. And yet, when a scientist in fact observes the trajectory of a projected particle, this observation in fact affects the behavior of the particle, causing it to occupy a single position in space. This experiment has led to two conclusions: (1) particles act like waves such that a particle can be located in several places in space at the same time, and (2) when a measurement is taken, it affects the electron so that it acts like a particle by existing in a definite state. This enigma has led to the hypothesis that when a particle is observed, it in fact continues to occupy more than one space (it continues to behave like a wave), but in different dimensions. The implications of Everett's experiment have led to a more general theory of the multiverse according to which each time a decision is made, the universe bisects, whereby the decision-maker occupies a definitive space in the universe while another version of the self occupies another space in a parallel universe. For a comprehensive description of the Multi-Worlds Interpretation of the multiverse, see Chapter Six of Mary-Jane Rubenstein's *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse*, "Ascending to the Ultimate Multiverse."

²⁸ In the section entitled "Virtual Multiverse Modeling and Free Will" of *The Hidden Pattern: A Patternist Philosophy of Mind*, Ben Goertzel interprets Borges's depiction of the world as a series of endlessly forking paths approximating the structure of the multiverse (125-28). Baugh similarly reads Borges's short story as conveying "a sense of multiple realities offered as fleeting glimpses of branching narrative lines," and as such, "can be seen as [a] many-worlds narrative" (58). In "Distinguishing the Multiverse from an Echo," Donald Spector interprets the two structurally similar acts of Beckett's *En attendant Godot*

to represent parallel universes. In "Is there a Multiverse in *Finnegans Wake*," Strother B. Purdy utilizes the term of the multiverse in a general way to refer to what he observes to be a "multiplication of the world" in Joyce's novel. Jeeshan Gazi's "Mapping the Metaphysics of the Multiverse in Pynchon's *Against the Day*" differs somewhat in that it encourages a multiversal interpretation of Pynchon's fictitious world (as an intersection of various worlds inhabiting different spatial planes) based on textual symbols and images apprehended as direct references to scientific theory on the multiverse.

²⁹ See for instance Baulch's "Time, Narrative, and the Multiverse," which interprets Borges's short story of parallel narratives (i.e., parallel universes) as challenging the Newtonian perception of reality that has dominated literature and literary criticism.

³⁰ "The feeling of being swallowed drew Louis from his sleep. Not realizing right away where he was, he asked the driver to tell him" (3).

³¹ "Perhaps he'd emerged from one dream only to enter another" (6).

³² "Louis stopped in the middle of the staircase with only his head and shoulders protruding from the trapdoor" (70).

³³ "The immensity of the landscape, almost violent, charged off in every direction, inflating the space like a balloon" (5).

³⁴ "Stars were bursting in tiny explosions on the periphery of his vision" (8).

³⁵ "Unpredictable waves, like sheets of heat lightning" (11).

³⁶ "Creating so many stars it was as if the Milky Way had taken a wrong turn" (16).

It is also noteworthy that the story takes place on December 22, the date of the Winter solstice (20). Not unlike references to the Milky Way veering off course, or to an oppressive gravity, the Winter solstice evokes a potentially troubling astronomical occurrence. As the day of the year in which the period of daylight is the shortest, the sun would appear to be forsaking the earth, abandoning it to darkness.

³⁷ "'Try as I may,' she said finally, 'I swear I don't understand'" (78).

³⁸ "Julia burst out laughing. 'Oh, that! I remember! But I deserved it, for heaven's sake. . . . I'm the one who should be asking your forgiveness'" (79, 82).

³⁹ "Yet I never stop thinking that if I'd taken the teacher's job I was offered five years ago . . . or if we'd given my son living conditions that were, let's say, more reasonable, healthier . . ." (85).

⁴⁰ "[T]he young woman standing in front of Louis was Geneviève. She made the beginning of a curtsy, ostentatiously casual. . . . Geneviève met his gaze without flinching, with a hard smile that contained defiance" (44).

⁴¹ "Geneviève arrived, her hands full of dishes. She plunked them down hard, obviously intending to make a noise" (45).

⁴² "Her airs, her manners, her intonations all showed that she was just obeying orders" (47).

⁴³ "From the kitchen, Geneviève displayed her mood by slamming cupboard doors and shoving chairs" (46).

⁴⁴ "Her stiff movements betrayed the same suppressed anger as earlier" (50).

⁴⁵ "He barely murmured 'good day.' He seemed anxious to carry out his orders" (33).

⁴⁶ "He spied Bapaume. The boy moved his chair so that his back was turned" (53).

⁴⁷ "Maurice responded with a grimace. . . . Maurice looked at him warily. He kept his jaws clenched" (56, 90).

⁴⁸ "This is where they told me to let you off" (90).

⁴⁹ "He then made a gesture so unbelievably obscene that it left Bapaume speechless, incapable of saying a word" (91).

⁵⁰ The narrative also presents Bapaume and the village organist as twins of sorts. In addition to the two having the same profession, their first names are almost identical. At the end of the section in which Louis meets the village organist, the narrator reveals that

the female organist's name is Louise, and points out that if Bapaume had thought to ask her name, she would have replied "Louise, un peu comme vous" (94). A twinship such as this invites the reader to consider Louise as a female version of Bapaume who would have decided to remain — unhappily and full of regret — in the village, and as village organist. Soucy would pursue the notion of twins in *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes*, in which the female narrator is revealed to be the twin sister of the eponymous character.

⁵¹ "And when it's all over, my love, how will the face of the universe have been changed?" (28).

⁵² "Whatever you've done or think you've done, Maurice, you have the right to breathe. No more and no less than anyone else. You don't have to feel guilty for existing, you don't have to be ashamed. . . . We are given life without our asking for it and then, when we'd like to bestow it, we can't. *Nothing belongs to us*. No one knows why. But that's the way it is" (91).

⁵³ "Louis Bapaume had disappeared. Then, suddenly, what was it? Some vague music coming from somewhere in the mountains" (101).

⁵⁴ "He admired its complex structure, which consisted of a multitude of intersecting facets" (103).

⁵⁵ Not unlike the object of the prism in *L'Acquittement*, Gazi interprets the double refraction of Iceland spar, a recurring image in Pynchon's *Against the Day*, as the novel's primary symbol of parallel worlds (82-83, 85).

⁵⁶ "No disaster can touch me because nothing is real" (103).

⁵⁷ "Arms outstretched, face lifted up to heaven" (103).

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